

Building Bridges Within Our Communities

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Purpose

The purposes of this lesson are to:

1. Allow a participant to become more aware of their personal stereotypes and reduce use of stereotypes involving people who have different backgrounds;
2. Finding ways for people with different backgrounds to live harmoniously.

Presenting the Information

The leader should try to foster an atmosphere of free exchange where participants can share opinions and ideas without fear of criticism or judgment. Some people may object to the focus on stereotypes, believing it emphasizes what divides, rather than what unites people. After all, commonalities among groups often are greater than the differences. However, the goal is to bring people together, knowing that a society's culture influences ideas about people or groups different than their own.

Teaching Tip:

Read through this entire teaching guide before you present the lesson. Prepare yourself for each activity by mentally thinking about people's answers and how you will respond. For Activity 3, prepare individual cards ahead of time to hand out for small group discussions.

The Lesson

We are a people composed of many nationalities and races. Unity in diversity has been our strength from the beginning, and our national motto, *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one), expresses this ideal. The handout from *Kansas!* focuses on the ethnic and racial diversity in the state of Kansas. This article speaks to the rich history of persons from

many different backgrounds who are living together in communities throughout our state.

Activity 1: Roll Call

(Have each participant name her/his country(s) of origin. After the roll call, ask the group these questions, thinking about their own history and environment.)

- When did your ancestors come to this part of the world?
- Why did they come?
- Were they affiliated with a particular group when they came?
- Where did they work and/or worship once they arrived?
- How often did relatives and people from the same background get together?
- How did they help each other?
- What traditions do you still practice that relate to your ethnic background?
- Has your family ever experienced discrimination? If so, describe a way in which the discrimination occurred. How did you learn about these family experiences?

Many persons and families living in the United States today experience bias, prejudice, and discrimination within their communities. Since bias, prejudice, and discrimination usually are based on stereotypes, questioning our assumptions about individuals and groups becomes an important learning process. Furthermore, stereotypes play a role in making it difficult to achieve the ideal of *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one) and building bridges in our communities.

What are stereotypes? (Allow the group time to give some responses to this question.)

A stereotype is a belief that we have about

Leader's Guide

It is never
too late
to give
up your
prejudices.
— Henry
David Thoreau

people of a certain group, believing that all people in that group will be the same and behave the same. Stereotypes can be learned innocently. We hear them as children. We see them used on television, in the movies, and in advertisements. Consequently, our stereotypes influence how we interact with each other in our communities — consciously or unconsciously.

- Have you ever felt stereotyped?
- Did you ever feel that someone saw you, not as an individual, but in terms of what they know about a group with which they identify you? How were you being stereotyped?
- Would you like to tell us about this time?
- How did it feel to be labeled?

What does it mean to use stereotypes?

Stereotypes are over-simplified generalizations that become fixed in our minds. They are mental pictures we have of a group of people, which we then apply to all individuals within that group, and we interact with them on the basis of that perception. So, we can say that stereotypes distort our ability to perceive people as they are. They are expectations of what a person is like, based on assumptions rather than fact.

Stereotypes ignore the fact that people within groups are unique individuals, are different from one another, and may have totally different situations and family histories. Sometimes stereotypes are partially true or have some historical validity. Stereotypes can be accurate or inaccurate, complimentary or derogatory.

Activity No. 2: Gender Stereotypes

Let's read a list of gender stereotypes that you have probably all heard. Respond if you know the answer.

Big boys don't _____. (cry)

A woman's place is in the _____. (home)

Boys don't play with _____. (dolls)

Sugar and spice and everything nice, that's what little _____ (girls) are _____. (made of)

Someday you'll meet Prince _____.

(Charming)

Nice girls know how to keep their mouths _____. (shut)

You should learn to take it like a _____. (man)

Nice guys finish _____. (last)

Boys don't like smart _____. (girls)

Despite our different backgrounds and families, and the different places or neighborhoods where we have grown up, we have all learned similar gender stereotypes of what boys and girls are "supposed" to be like. How do these stereotypes affect girls and boys, as well as women and men, in their everyday lives? (Encourage group discussion.)

Activity No. 3: Other Stereotypes

Having stereotypes does not mean a person is bad. We can have stereotypes when we have not had much direct contact with people who are different from us. What we think we "know" about others might only be inaccurate information that we hear and accept as true. Remember the North American Indian saying: "Never judge another man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins."

Let's count off and divide into groups of two (or three) people. Each group will be given a card that gives a characteristic of people who may be living in our communities. Generate a list of stereotypes – both positive and negative – of what people think or say about the people who belong to this group. You have five minutes to make your list.

(Give each group one card with one of the following printed on the card:

People with mental, physical, and emotional challenges

People of color (African American or Black; Latino/Hispanic, Native American, Asian, Arab, mixed)

People who do not have an athletic physical appearance

People who have never married

Poor people

People who practice religions besides Christianity, such as Jews, Muslims, etc.



People who cannot speak English fluently
People who do not have a high school education
People who do not own their own homes
After five minutes, ask for some examples of the stereotypes from each group. Allow time for group discussion.)

What were some feelings you had about the negative stereotypes when you heard them? How about the positive ones? Most people usually are associated with more than one group. How did you feel when people shared their stereotypes of a group to which you belong? Did you get defensive or feel hurt? Do you feel the stereotypes used to describe groups to which you belong are accurate, partially accurate or completely inaccurate?

Why is it necessary to become more aware of our stereotypes?

- Stereotypes can lead us to being unfairly biased in favor of or against something or someone.
- Having a bias can lead to prejudice. What is prejudice? It is a pre-judgment, an irrational belief and conviction. When someone is prejudiced against a group of people, the victims of the prejudicial thinking often are perceived as objects and not as persons. Stereotypes are often given as specific evidence to support and reinforce this type of thought process. For example, someone may think, “People who can’t speak English are not smart.” That statement reflects irrational, prejudicial thinking.
- What is discrimination? It is about behavior. We discriminate when we show unequal and unfair treatment of a group or individual because of identification with a certain group of people. When people act on the basis of their stereotypes, biases, and prejudices, they are guilty of discrimination. Prejudice is an attitude while discrimination is the action that results from it. For example, children from poor families might be purposely excluded from games on the school playground by children from more affluent families.

Activity No. 4: First Steps

Let’s start thinking about what we individually can do in our communities, even in very small ways, to build bridges with others who are different from ourselves.

1. How can we respond when talking to someone who tells a demeaning joke or voices a prejudice against a group of people in our community? How can we introduce conversation in ways that will build bridges rather than break them down?

(Encourage the group to think about using such phrases as, “We have a problem when we talk about others in negative ways,” ... rather than, “You are wrong for saying that.” Starting with a “You” statement most likely will build conflict rather than bridges. Use the following remarks to conclude this discussion.)

Margaret Wheatley, an author on community leadership, has said, “Conversation is the natural way we humans think together.” It helps us understand each other and to learn from each other, but before we can have a conversation that makes a difference, Wheatley (2002) suggested the following:

- **We acknowledge one another** as equals (even if we do not agree).
- **We try to stay curious about each other** (even if we do not agree).
- **We recognize that we need each other’s help** to become better listeners (even if we do not agree).
- **We slow down** so we have time to think and reflect (even if we do not agree).
- **We expect it to be messy at times** (when we do not agree).

2. What can we do as a group to build bridges in our communities with others who may be different from ourselves? (Encourage discussion, such as creating an event of diverse groups to share food and talk with each other; volunteer to help with an ethnic event in the community, such as Martin Luther King Day, Cinco de Mayo, etc.; sponsor a scholarship for a person to be the first from his/her family to attend college; invite a person from a different cultural group to give a program on their holiday/religious traditions; take part in

Whoever seeks to set one race against another seeks to enslave all races.

— Franklin D. Roosevelt

Be aware,
as long as
you live,
of judging
people by
appearance.
— La Fontaine

intergenerational activities that are available in the community, etc.)

Summary

As we think about building bridges in our communities, we need to:

1. Recognize that we are all part of many groups, none of which can ever totally explain or define who we are.
2. Be aware of stereotypes and recognize them for what they are and how they interfere with our ability to perceive and interact with people as they are.
3. Focus on recognizing people as individuals to be valued and worthy of respect.
4. Remember that there are more differences within groups than between groups.
5. Learn to look at things from the other's point of view.
6. Be willing to check out the accuracy of our assumptions about others before making judgments.
7. Be willing to learn more about the cultures and backgrounds of people different from ourselves.

This is an ongoing process. As you become more aware of your own stereotypes and reduce their use, you may find more friends and learn more about people than you ever thought you would. You also will help others to do the same.

[Adapted from *Discover Diversity*, an Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Teaching Guide written by Marilyn B. Corbin and Carol H. Young, Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service. Lesson Source: "Many Faces, One People: A Multicultural Training Guide" by Phyllis Scaringe, National 4-H Council and Virginia Dien, Rutgers Cooperative Extension.]

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