



No Place for Hate® Back to School Kickoff with Jonathan Van Ness*

Exploring and Embracing My Authentic Self and Acting as an Ally to Others

The following learning activities are for upper elementary, middle and high school students. They can be used in preparation for and as a follow-up to the No Place for Hate Back-to-School Kickoff with Jonathan Van Ness that takes place on October 12, 2023.

Key Words and Definitions

For definitions of anti-bias words and terminology used in the following activities, see ADL’s online [Education Glossary Terms](#). Note that many of the words include definitions differentiated specifically for elementary age students.

Get To Know Jonathan Van Ness

Share with students some or all of the following biographical information about Jonathan Van Ness.

Short Bio

Jonathan Van Ness is an Emmy-nominated television personality, two-time *New York Times* best-selling author, LGBTQ+ advocate, comedian, award-winning podcaster, and founder of JVN Hair. He brings a signature message of warmth, positivity, and self-love to celebrate the joys of being true to yourself.

Longer Bio

Jonathan Van Ness, commonly referred to as “JVN,” was born in 1987 and raised in Quincy, Illinois. He comes “from a family of journalists,” and is the sixth generation of his family-owned newspaper. JVN has been openly gay throughout most of his life and was a target of bullying when he was in school. In response to the bullying, he used humor as a coping mechanism and relied on a small group of close friends for support. JVN was the first male cheerleader at Quincy Senior High School and continued cheerleading in college at the University of Arizona, where he majored in political science. He identifies as gender non-conforming and non-binary.

Always a storyteller, Jonathan first stepped in front of the camera in 2013, while doing his friend, actress and director Erin Gibson's hair. An impromptu recap of the television show *Game of Thrones* sparked the idea for what soon became the hit web series *Gay of Thrones* for web comedy outlet *Funny or Die*. The series went on to be nominated three times for Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Short Form Variety Series. In 2015, Van Ness took his constant curiosities about the world and turned them into a podcast, *Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness*, which now has over 250 episodes covering topics ranging from oceanography, hair science and the environment to comedy, the Olympics and more. It has also won multiple awards.

In 2018, Jonathan became a member of the new Fab Five in Netflix's reboot of *Queer Eye* as the show's grooming expert. *Queer Eye* has won Outstanding Structured Reality Program at the Primetime Emmy Awards four years in a row, been twice nominated for Outstanding Host of a Reality or Competition show, and premiered its sixth season in 2021. Also in 2021, Jonathan took his lifetime of beauty expertise and launched his brand, JVN. The brand introduces a sustainable, cruelty-free line of haircare products with a non-gendered approach, designed for every person and all hair types, expanding on JVN's platform of acceptance and inclusivity. In January, 2022, Jonathan began hosting his first solo network series, *Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness* on Netflix, for which he is also the executive producer.

These days, Jonathan Van Ness spends his time performing his sold-out stand-up comedy on tour, being an award-winning television personality, developing his sustainable haircare brand, being a New York Times best-selling author, practicing his gymnastics & figure skating skills, and hosting a podcast. He also has a garden, chickens, cats, and dogs that he takes care of with his husband Mark, whom he married in 2020.

Learn More

In order for students to learn more about JVN before or after the event, invite them to check out his [website](#), conduct online research about him and read his posts on social media:

Instagram: [@jvn](#)

TikTok: [@jvn_official](#)

Facebook [facebook.com/jonathan.vanness](https://www.facebook.com/jonathan.vanness)

YouTube: [youtube.com/@jvn](https://www.youtube.com/@jvn)

Pre-Event Discussion and Quotes: Exploring and Embracing Our Authentic Selves

1. Engage students in a conversation about what it means to explore and embrace our authentic selves. Authenticity is an overarching theme of much of JVN's work. Authentic means "knowing, acting and being comfortable with your true self." You can also explain it (for younger students) as "to be what you really seem to be, being real" or (for older students) "being true to one's own personality, spirit, or character." Elicit from students other ideas they have about what authentic means to them. Being authentic is closely tied to one's identity. Talk with students about how sometimes it may not be easy, comfortable or even safe to express our authentic selves, who we really are—especially if we are part of marginalized identity groups, whether they are visible or not visible identities. This is because others may hold stereotypes about those identity groups or target people in those identity groups with bullying and bias. While it is so important to be able to explore, be and express our authentic selves, we also want to make sure it is safe and that there is a community who will support and embrace the different parts of our identity and authentic self.
2. Engage students in a discussion of the JVN quotes below that relate to being authentic. For younger (elementary) students, place quotes around room and have students move to the quote they connect with and talk with each other about what the quote means to them and why. For older (middle/high school) students, have students read all of the quotes and then choose the one they find meaningful, impactful or important, explaining why they chose it and what the message means to them. You could also have students write their thoughts and feelings about the quote.

- "I had to fight, a lot of years, to be really proud of the person I see in the mirror and really love this person."
- "I want people to fall in love with themselves and to be really proud and full of joy for the space they take up. If someone else appreciates the space you take up, then that's icing on the cake."
- "Imperfection is beautiful. To anyone who has ever felt broken beyond repair, this is for you. If you've ever been excluded, or told you were not enough, know that you are enough, and beautifully complete."
- "I obviously love to do hair. And I love to do transformation sometimes. But I feel like my passion, and my role, is more about accepting who we are and embracing who we are. I'm a lot of times more of, like, the anti-transformation beauty expert. I really want people to celebrate themselves, and that's always what I'm trying to do."

Pre-Event Discussion Questions

Before attending the No Place for Hate Back-to-School event on October 12, share with students the biographical information about Jonathan Van Ness (see above). Then engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions. Depending on the age of the students, this discussion can take place in a large or small groups. The questions can also serve as writing prompts.

- Do you know who Jonathan Van Ness is? What do you already know about him?
- What did you learn so far about JVN that you didn't know before?
- What is your biggest takeaway from what you learned about JVN?
- What is interesting, inspiring or memorable to you about JVN?
- If you could ask JVN a question, what would you ask him?
- In what ways can you relate or connect to JVN?
- Based on what you know about JVN, how are the themes of identity/ authenticity, allyship, and bias major parts of who JVN is?
- What does it mean to bring your authentic self to school? To what extent is that possible? Please explain.
- How can teachers and other school staff members help students bring their authentic selves to school? What kind of environment needs to be created for that to happen?
- What's challenging about acting as an ally when you see or witness bias or bullying? What can be done to make allyship easier and more effective for students?

Post-Event Discussion Questions

After watching the No Place for Hate Back-to-School event with Jonathan Van Ness, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:

- What thoughts and feelings came up for you as you watched the event?
- What did you learn about Jonathan Van Ness?
- What did you learn from the students' questions?
- What questions do you still have about JVN?
- What's something that JVN said that will stay with you?
- After watching, what other thoughts and feelings do you have about identity and being our authentic selves? What thoughts do you have about acting as an ally?
- How can you help to make your school No Place for Hate this year?

Post-Event: Think/Reflect

Talk Create Share

After watching the video, engage students in a process of learning more and digging deeper into the themes of identity/authenticity, allyship and addressing bias in the following ways:

Think/Reflect

Provide an opportunity for students to reflect on what they watched, what they learned and actions they want to take. You can play some music (or keep it silent, if that works better) and invite students to sit quietly to think to themselves; you can also allow them to jot notes, doodle or draw if that helps them focus. Ask: *What was said that was powerful, meaningful, unforgettable or compelling? Do you have any thoughts about identity, allyship or addressing bias? How can you act as an ally this year in small and large ways?*

Talk

Next, have students turn and talk with someone sitting nearby. Have each student take 2 minutes to share their reflections (and notes, doodling or drawing—if they choose) with their talking partner. Remind students that when one person is sharing for their 2 minutes, the other person should be silent and listen actively. After one student shares, they should be invited to move onto the other student. You can provide a few additional minutes for the pairs to talk among themselves back-and-forth about other thoughts, feelings and connections. You can use the same questions as above if the students would like a conversation prompt: *What was said that was powerful, meaningful, unforgettable or compelling? Do you have any thoughts about identity, allyship or addressing bias? How can you act as an ally this year in small and large ways? How can your school as a community promote allyship, equity and justice in school?*

(Remind students to share only what they feel comfortable sharing.)

Create

This is the time for students to create something. They should reflect on the large group discussion, their individual reflections, and their conversations with their partner. Engage students in a process where they can create something that (1) represents their identity and their authentic selves (e.g., create a self-portrait for elementary, a culture box for MS/HS), (2) shares something about what allyship means to them—what it looks like, feels like, sounds like (e.g., a storyboard/cartoon for elementary, a video for MS/HS) or (3) reflects how and why they think it is important to address bias and bullying when they see or witness it (e.g., letters for elementary, poetry or essays for MS/HS). Overall, their creations can be drawings, paintings, collages, essays, poetry, verse, spoken word, sculpture, photographs, slogans/messages with drawing, videos or other creative works.

Share

As part of the NPFH activity, it is important that the whole school community shares their creative work with each other. After all the projects are completed, either create an art gallery for all in the school to view, use the hallway bulletin boards to display some of the work, create a video of all the students' work, or post an online gallery of the students' creations. Share these with all members of the school community including educators, administrators, students and families. Share, celebrate and inspire!

Additional Resources For Educators

Elementary

- [Identity, Hair and Seeing Myself](#) (Elementary Lesson Plan)
- [Identity-Based Bullying](#) (Elementary/Middle School Lesson Plan)
- [Identity: What We Can See and Not See](#) (No Place for Hate Activity Library/Elementary)
- [Who Am I? Identity Poems](#) (Elementary Lesson Plan)
- Children's Books about Gender Expression, Gender Non-Conforming and Non-binary Identity and Pronouns: [I Can Be... Me!](#), [Julián Is a Mermaid](#), [Sparkle Boy](#) and [Henry Holton Takes the Ice](#)
- [11 Ways Schools Can Help Students Feel Safe in Challenging Times](#) (Tools and Strategies/All Grades)

Middle/High School

- [The Identity Iceberg and Me](#) (No Place for Hate Activity Library/ Middle and High School)
- [Centering Youth Voices: Addressing Identity-Based Bullying](#) (No Place for Hate Activity Library/Middle and High School)
- [Emojis and Me](#) (Middle School Lesson Plan)
- [Identity and Diversity in My Generation](#) (High School Lesson Plan)
- [Let's Get It Right: Using Correct Pronouns and Names](#) (Tools and Strategies/All Grades)
- [Understanding Heterosexism and How to Be an Ally](#) (Middle/High School Lesson Plan)

Additional Resources For Parents And Families

- [Books Matter: Children's and Young Adult Literature](#) (Collection of 700+ books that explore identity, diversity, bias and social justice)
- [Diversity in Media and Why Visibility Matters](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)
- [What Bullying Is and Is Not](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)
- [What is Heterosexism and What Can I Do About It?](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)
- [What is the CROWN Act?](#) (Table Talk parent/family discussion guide)

*This resource is offered as general guidance only. Please review the materials and inquire with your own legal counsel as to the appropriateness of a resource, to ensure compliance with state or local laws.