

## LESSON PLAN

# Words that Can Hurt, Help and Heal

*Compelling Question: How can words have the power to hurt, help and heal?*

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-1	2-5	60-90 minutes	Reading, Speaking and Listening, Language
4-7	9-12		



## Web Related Connections

### Other Resources:

[6 Ways to Act an Ally](#)

[11 Ways Schools Can Help Students Feel Safe in Challenging Times](#)

[A Guide for Responding to School-Based Bias Incidents](#)

[Moving from Safe Classrooms to Brave Classrooms](#)

[What Bullying Is and Is Not](#)

[When it Comes to Bias, We Must Prioritize Impact Over Intent](#)

## Key Words

ally  
 bias  
 bullying  
 identity  
 name-calling  
 prejudice  
 stereotype

## Key Words from the Reading

aback  
 environment  
 hijab

## LESSON OVERVIEW

Words have power. We see biased words and language all around us—on the street, in our classrooms, online, in workplaces, on walls and buildings, in the media and among celebrities and politicians. Biased words, even when unintended, can cause hurt, pain and harm to young people and can also lead to more consequential impacts like bullying and other acts of bias and discrimination. Therefore, it is important to address this language with students, helping them explore what biased language looks like, its impact and how to address it when faced with or witnessing it.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to explore biased language, reflect on the reasons why people use it, and consider how they can address and challenge biased words and language.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand that there are different ways we convey biased language.
- Students will reflect on examples of biased language.
- Students will explore why people use biased language.
- Students will consider the impact of biased language and what they can do about it.

## MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [The Lie](#) (Video: 2 min., 42 sec.)  
And embedded in *The Washington Post* article, "[Ten-year-olds tackle 'The Lie' of demeaning stereotypes in video](#)" by Donna St. George.
- Reading Activity: [Stories from What Does Hate Look Like?](#) (one copy for each student)

**Note to Teacher:** Because this lesson plan helps students explore biased language including slurs, it is important to consider the level of trust and maturity among your students to discuss this sensitive topic. Before proceeding, assess your students' ability to participate in this lesson in a productive way. If you haven't had discussions in your classroom about identity and bias before, please consider addressing some of those foundational topics and skills before teaching this lesson. Before teaching the lesson, review your classroom guidelines or rules if you have already created them. If not, take 15–20 minutes to establish classroom guidelines or use ADL's [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#) or [Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#). Throughout the lesson, remind your students that the goal of discussing biased language is to understand its impact and explore ways to address biased language like slurs and others. During the lesson plan, do not put students in the position of having to explain their identity or the biased language directed at their identity group.

**It is critically important that you emphasize to students that they should never use any of the biased words, including slurs, during the lesson as it can cause harm to students.** When explaining this to students, you can use language to this effect: "We will not use slurs or other biased language in the classroom. It causes harm to those targeted by it and can cause a great deal of harm to hear it out loud or see it in writing, even when that's not the intention. For example, we will never use the actual N-word or the F-word in this classroom and only use 'N-word' or 'F-word' or 'racist slur,' or 'heterosexist slur' when referring to it."

### Key Words from the Reading (continue)

incident  
instinct  
oppressors  
parliamentary  
representing  
scuffle  
swastika  
threatened  
visibly

### Optional Opening: Read a Picture Book

If you have access to one of these books or a book that explores biased language, start the lesson by reading and discussing one or more of these books. All of these books below have accompanying ADL discussion guides with discussion questions and extension activities.

- [Areli is a Dreamer](#) by Areli Morales
- [Big](#) by Vashti Harrison
- [Each Kindness](#) by Jacqueline Woodson
- [I Talk Like a River](#) by Jordan Scott
- [Jacob's New Dress](#) by Ian and Sarah Hoffman
- [Stacey's Extraordinary Words](#) by Stacey Abrams
- [The Smallest Girl in the Smallest Grade](#) by Justin Roberts

### Watch video: *The Lie*

1. Begin the lesson plan by showing the video, [The Lie](#) (or alternatively, use the embedded video in this link: [Ten-year-olds tackle 'The Lie' of demeaning stereotypes in video.](#))

Before showing the video, explain that the video, "The Lie," shows fourth grade students talking about the negative words and ideas they have heard about themselves or other people based on their religion, race, ethnicity or gender. What you will hear are their own thoughts expressed in their own words. After that, you hear them speak

about what they believe is true about their identity group. The video shows the students sharing words from poems they wrote in class. The film was made by the school principal's son, Kevin Pastor of Untitled Productions.

2. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking:
  - What happens in the video?
  - What are the children saying?
  - How did you feel while watching the students talk about their identity?
  - Could you relate to something that was said? Please explain.
  - If a video like "The Lie" were made in our school, how would it be similar or different?
  - Why do you think the video is called "The Lie?"
  - What is the message of the video?
3. Explain or elicit from students that sometimes talking about the biased words directed towards us helps us to feel better or heal (heal means to make or become better) and that may have happened with some of the students in the video. We will talk about words that help and heal later in the lesson.



### Defining terms

Explain to students that we are going to talk about biased language including slurs, name-calling and other biased words and language. Elicit and explain the following definitions that will be used throughout the lesson. Elicit and provide examples as necessary.

- **Ally:** Someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of bias.
- **Bias:** A preference, either for or against an individual or group, that affects fair judgment.
- **Bullying:** When a person or a group behaves in ways—on purpose and over and over—that make someone feel hurt, afraid or embarrassed.
- **Name-calling:** Using words to hurt or be mean to someone or a group.
- **Slur:** An insulting remark or comment about someone, usually based on an aspect of their identity like race, gender, religion, etc.
- **Stereotype:** The false idea that all members of a group are the same and think and behave in the same way.

### Reading Activity: Stories of Biased Language

1. Distribute a copy of the Reading Activity: [Stories from \*What Does Hate Look Like?\*](#) handout. Explain to students that these are quotes by young people about their experiences with biased language that are in the book, *What Does Hate Look Like?* Have students read it silently or read aloud together, with students taking turns.

**Note to Teacher:** As you are reading aloud or if students are reading on their own, point out words they may not know and when you come across something like "n\*\*\*\*\*," read it that way and do not say the slur aloud. Explain that these are slurs and you won't say the words aloud because they cause hurt and harm.

2. Invite students to pick one of the quotes that they find important, meaningful, relatable or memorable. Then divide students into groups of three and have each student share the quote they chose and their responses to the following questions. Provide 8-10 minutes for this.
  - What is the quote about?
  - Why did you choose the quote?
  - How did you feel while reading it?
  - What do you think the impact of this happening was on the person who shared their experience?
3. Reconvene the class and ask a few students to share the quote they chose and to explain why they felt it was important, meaningful, relatable or memorable. Remind students to only share their own and not that of others in their triad.

- Engage students in whole class discussion by asking: *How did you feel reading all of these quotes? What did you learn about biased words and language? What is your biggest takeaway?*

### Four Corners: Biased Language

- Divide students into four equal-sized groups and have each group move to one corner of the classroom. Explain that each of the groups is going to discuss one aspect of biased words and language. The groups are as follows:
  - Group 1:** Without using specific examples, how would you describe biased words? (e.g., “name calling” instead of the actual names or “slurs” instead of the actual slurs) Where have you heard biased words or language?
  - Group 2:** Why do you think people use biased language?
  - Group 3:** What is the impact of biased language on those targeted? What is the impact on others?
  - Group 4:** How can we respond to or challenge biased language?
- Explain to each group that they should answer the question/prompt, take notes and assign a reporter to share back with the whole class. Provide 5-10 minutes for this process. Remind students, especially in Group 1, that they should not say aloud and put in their notes actual biased words.
- Invite the reporter from each group to share with the whole class what their group discussed. Below are possible additional responses if they are not already suggested.
  - Group 1: What are biased words?**  
Additional responses to share if not suggested: slurs (like n-word, f-word), making fun of someone’s name, “trash talk,” identity-based name calling and bullying, saying things like “go back to where you came from,” put-downs, biased questions like: “Why do you talk like that?” “Why does your lunch smell so bad?” calling a group of people a specific ethnicity (e.g., “Dominicans”) whether they are a member of that ethnic group or not, using words/language with stereotypes.
  - Group 2: Why do people use biased language?**  
Additional responses to share if not suggested: To feel powerful, to hurt someone, to show off, to feel superior, to connect with others, to express anger or sadness, because I didn’t know it’s biased.
  - Group 3: What is the impact on others?**  
Additional responses to share if not suggested: Feeling sad, scared, excluded, bad about myself, unwelcome, like I don’t belong.
  - Group 4: How to respond or address it?**  
Additional responses to share if not suggested: Act as an ally to the person targeted, say it’s not okay, say how it made me feel, walk away, fight back, ask the person how they’d feel if I said that to them, explain what the word means to me and why it’s biased.

### Fishbowl Activity: When I Experienced Biased Language

- Explain to students that they will be doing a fishbowl activity that delves more deeply into the impact of biased language. Start by asking: *What is a fishbowl?* Explain that this activity is like a fishbowl in that we will make a circle and some students will be inside the circle (i.e., in a fishbowl) and the rest of the students will be observers outside of the fishbowl, looking in.

Ask for 3–5 volunteers who are willing to sit inside the circle and talk about their experiences with biased language, either as someone who experienced or witnessed it.

**Note to Teacher:** Due to the sensitive nature of these discussions about biased language, you may choose to do this fishbowl activity in a variety of ways. You can have students who are inside the fishbowl talk about their own experience with biased language or talk about biased language that they witnessed or observed. If you don't think there is the maturity and emotional safety to have students speak directly about their experiences, another option is to have students write about their experiences anonymously on notecards and then have students share some of the thoughts on the notecards—not their own—in the fishbowl for students to discuss.

2. Create a small circle with chairs for those sitting inside the circle. Arrange the other chairs to sit outside this smaller circle. Before discussing the specific ground rules for the fishbowl, review your classroom guidelines as past experiences and strong feelings may emerge from the fishbowl.
3. Explain the ground rules for the fishbowl:
  - The observers are not allowed to speak. Their task is to listen and learn from the students in the fishbowl. The observers will have an opportunity to discuss any issues that emerge later. Explain to students the reason for this. Share that when we listen only to understand and not to respond, like we did when we watched the video, we give ourselves more time to understand and think about what someone is saying and consider what we can learn from the situation, rather than just trying to participate right away.
  - You (the teacher) will facilitate the fishbowl discussion and you will make sure everyone has the opportunity to talk.
  - (*Optional*) Once the fishbowl discussion has happened for at least 10 minutes and you sense that others want to speak, you can allow a time where if someone in the observer groups wants to join the fishbowl, they can take the place of someone in the fishbowl. Use this step at your discretion.
4. Use the following questions to guide the fishbowl discussion and at the same time, allow it to move in the natural direction the conversation is moving.
  - Have you ever been the target of name-calling or biased language? What happened? How did you feel?
  - What, if anything, did you do?
  - Have you ever seen or witnessed biased words directed at someone else? How did you feel?
  - What, if anything, did you do?
  - In the situations you described, did anyone do anything to help? What happened?
  - Have you ever tried to help when you've seen this happen? If so, what happened? How did you feel?
5. After the fishbowl, engage the whole class in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - To the observers, what did you learn by listening to the students in the fishbowl? Was it difficult to not respond to the comments made during the fishbowl? Why?
  - To the students in the fishbowl, how did it feel to share your feelings about biased words and language?
  - Did you hear anything from the fishbowl that surprised you?
  - What did you learn from the experience?
  - What kinds of words help or heal (heal: to make or become better)?
  - What might you do differently in the future when you experience or hear biased words or language?



#### **Intent and Impact (Optional: based on time available and interest/need)**

1. Ask students: *Have you ever said something and you didn't realize that the words were biased, or you didn't mean it in that way?* Have students share their thoughts and examples. Explain that this is sometimes known as "Intent vs. Impact."
2. Elicit/explain that:

- **Intent** is what the person wanted or meant to say.
  - **Impact** is how that person's words impacted the other person, how they heard or felt what you said.
3. Explain that one way to illustrate intent and impact is the following: You are sitting at your desk and you have your leg out. Someone walks by and trips over your leg. That person thinks you did it on purpose to be mean or to make fun of them when they fell. But in reality, you were just stretching your leg. Whatever your intent (what you meant), they fell and it hurt.

Another example you could share is if a student is eating their lunch in the cafeteria. It's a lunch the student brought from home, made by their parent, and it's from their home country (don't be specific here). A student walks by and says, "Your lunch smells really different. What is it?" While the student who made the comment wants to convey interest and curiosity about the food, the person who is eating the food heard it as a put-down and a biased question. It turns out that other kids have made fun of their lunch in the past and that question reminded them of those biased questions.

4. Explain that sometimes when we use biased language, we don't intend to cause hurt or harm. However, there are also many instances where students are intending to cause hurt and harm.

### Words that Hurt, Help or Heal

1. Create a chart like the one below, keeping it blank before engaging students in the activity. Starting with the first column ("Words that Hurt"), invite students to provide some examples from the "What are biased

Words that Hurt	Impact/How it feels	Words that Can Help or Heal
Name-calling	Hurt Scared it's going to continue or get worse and become bullying.	"They shouldn't have said that." "That's not cool." "How would you feel if that was said to you?" "That hurts."

words?" group or additional examples, and put them in the first column. Remind students not to use the actual biased words or language but focus on the categories or type of language.

2. After providing examples in the first column, then ask students, for each of examples, what impact they think those words/language have on the target. See below for a few examples.
3. After naming the potential impact, then invite students to suggest possible words or phrases that can either help or heal (heal: to make or become better) in the situation.
4. After completing the chart for at least 3-5 words, read the chart aloud and have students take the information in. Ask: *What do you notice? What do you wonder? What can we learn here about the power of words to hurt, help and heal?*

### Closing

Recap the lesson by sharing that words have the power to hurt, help or heal. Invite students to share their biggest takeaway from the lesson.

### Additional Reading and Resources

- [A Powerful Lesson About Hurtful Words](#) (Edutopia, March 14, 2022)
- [Fans told Lizzo a word in her song was offensive. She changed the lyrics.](#) (Washington Post, June 14, 2022)
- [Negative words impact children's negative opinions of others, study finds](#) (CNN, March 24, 2021)
- [What Does Hate Look Like?](#) by Sameea Jimenez, Corinne Promislow and Larry Swartz, Second Story Press, 2023

## Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
<p>R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</p> <p>R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</p> <p>R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.</p>
Speaking and Listening
<p>SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</p> <p>SL3: Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.</p>
Language
<p>L3: Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.</p> <p>L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.</p> <p>L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</p>

## CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.



## Reading Activity: Stories from *What Does Hate Looks Like?*

1. "It happened in Grade 8 French class. The teacher left the room and three boys stood up and did the Hitler salute to our teacher. One yelled 'Heil Hitler' when she came back into the room. The teacher was so shocked and tears welled up in her eyes. She is an older lady who is Jewish. Someone told us later that her parents survived the Holocaust. I really liked her, she was a great teacher, and it made me angry and sad that these boys did this and made her feel this way. No one deserves that."
2. "So, I was hanging out with my friends at the mall one day. We were just chilling and having fun. Then a bunch of white girls come by and start getting in our business. We told them to leave us alone. Then one of the girls shouts, 'Shut up N\*\*\*\*\*'. I started to cry but held my tears so she couldn't see that she hurt me, but it hurt so much and I kinda didn't even know why. I don't know why she was that angry, but no one should ever be called that word, ever. I never understood the power of hate behind that word until that moment. I will never forget the first time I was called the N-word sadly knowing it would not be the last."
3. "It started in third grade. I was and still am a victim of skin shaming. I was friends with this group of girls. There was one girl who hated me. She always made fun of me because my skin was darker than hers. I started to hate the color of my skin and kept saying to myself every day that I hate my skin color. I felt like I was less desirable and less lovable because my skin is darker. I know it's not true, but the pain and embarrassment of hearing her hateful words haunt me to this day."
4. "I remember very vividly the first time I was called a homophobic name. I was in my apartment watching YouTube when I heard a knock on the door. Since I was home alone, I went to the door to open it. There was no one there. I closed the door, but before it fully closed a little yellow sticky fell to the ground. On the sticky were the words 'die' and an anti-gay slur written in black marker. I stopped and stared for a moment and didn't know what to do. There was no one in the hallway. I looked up and down several times as tears stung my eyes. Then I heard snickering as the elevator doors closed, and I shut my door and sat on the floor. I sat there for a very long time. The pain was unbearable. I thought people in my building were my friends. I walked to school with them every day. They knew I was gay, and no one had ever made fun of me before. I was devastated. I didn't know how to react. Whoever did that never realized how much those words hurt me. That day changed me forever because a little part of me will never feel good enough again."
5. "I was waiting outside the mosque with my family to go to Friday prayer. A man pulled up in his car, yelling and calling us all terrorists. We ran inside because, just the week before, a mosque had been bombed, and people had died. We heard him yelling for a while. My mom held me close and cried. The fear was overpowering. My mom was so traumatized, she didn't speak the rest of the day. I still get anxious when we walk to the mosque. I will never understand why people want me to die because of my religion. My mom has never been the same since that day. She just always seems a little sadder than she was before."



6. "One day, I was walking down a main city street and this man looked at me and said, 'Go back to China.' I walked toward the nearby park, and he kept following me. I started to run, and he yelled, 'Don't eat my dog!' and kept following me. I ran through the park to a nearby store and tried to lose him, but I couldn't. My feet started to feel heavy, and my heart was pounding so fast. I was afraid. He was a big man and very intimidating. I finally found a lady to walk next to on the street and pretended I was related to her just so he would leave me alone. She saw the fear on my face and the tears in my eyes and asked if I wanted to call my mom. I called her and could barely speak. When I finally got the story out through sobs, my mom was on her way to pick me up. It was so stressful; I still cry when I think about it."
  
7. "I always enjoyed going to the community center. I have muscular dystrophy (MD) and my legs don't work as well as others. I can use crutches sometimes, but mostly I am in a wheelchair. At the community center, they are all really nice to me. But one day, there was a new person supervising in the gym. The community center gym is on the second floor, so I had to walk up the stairs using my crutches and have someone carry my wheelchair for me. Usually it's no problem, but that day was a big problem. When I got to the gym, the kids were picking teams for basketball. I love basketball. This is the reason I go to the community center—so I can play. The supervisor told me that I was in the wrong place. He told me to go away. He said that 'crippled' kids should not be in the gym because we could get hurt and he could get in trouble. I was so upset. I couldn't get the words out because my anger was building up inside me. I wanted to scream. Calling me crippled was so painful. It hurt me so much because I can't change the fact that I have MD. I couldn't even move to leave the gym. One of the boys I know came over to me. I pushed him away because I was so mad. I have never been so humiliated and angry in my whole life. I finally wheeled to the middle of the gym and told the supervisor to go to hell. I picked up a basketball, scored a shot from the three-point line, and wheeled away. I have never gone back because I never want to experience that pain again."