



BETWEEN YOU AND ME

A Program Guide for Exploring Identity, Relationships,
and Community

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Session 27

In Community

SEL FOCUS: RELATIONSHIP SKILLS / SOCIAL AWARENESS

Story: “Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names” by Josiah

Story Summary: Josiah has studied the history of White violence against Black people for several years. He sees opportunity for change and learns of the importance in being an active member in your community.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Identifying what it means to be advocate for change in their communities
- Describing the importance of being an active member in their communities and the world
- Discussing their role in creating change within their communities and schools

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing informally about their opinions
- Speaking ideas clearly and actively listening during collaborative discussions
- Responding thoughtfully to, and seeking to understand, diverse perspectives

Materials

- Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- Between You and Me* anthologies, one for each group member
- Scrap paper, pencils, and a large waste basket, box, or bin
- Journals and notebook paper, colored pencils, and markers

Preparation

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Write the Toss One, Take One prompt (**in bold**) on chart paper.
- Write the prompt for the Draw It activity (**in bold**) on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: In Community

- Review Group Agreements
- Opening Activity: Toss One, Take One
- Read and Discuss: "Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names" by Josiah
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Draw It
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — TOSS ONE, TAKE ONE

(12 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell the group that they are going to do an activity that gathers everyone's ideas and allows them to hear multiple viewpoints.
2. Pass out pieces of scrap paper. Tell group members not to write their names on the papers. This is an anonymous activity.
3. Ask them to finish the following sentence, which you have written on chart paper:
 - **When there is a problem in my community, I can create change by...**
4. Give group members three minutes to think and then write their responses.
5. After group members have written their responses, tell them to crumple them into paper balls and toss them into the waste basket, box, or bin in the middle of the circle.
6. Then tell each of them to retrieve an anonymous response from the container and return to their seats. As an alternative, walk around the circle with the container and have each group member blindly pick a paper ball. (If a group member happens to choose their own response, it's OK because no one will know.)

7. Before having the group read their responses aloud, invite them to listen for similarities, differences, or personal connections.
8. Either by going around in a circle or asking for volunteers, each group member reads the response on their paper.
9. After all responses have been read, facilitate a brief discussion about the group members' responses to what they heard.
10. Thank the group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young person who learns about injustices in society and finds ways to be an activist in his community.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 159 in their anthologies. (See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.



Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names

By Josiah

“Hey Emmett!” a White kid yelled at me as we were playing dodgeball during my 6th grade gym class. I didn’t think much of it. I didn’t even know what the insult meant, but some kids on the other side of the court started snickering and repeated it. They also made jokes about my whistling. Our gym teacher didn’t hear what was going on, so it continued until the period ended.

Later that day when I arrived home, I looked up “whistling and Emmett” and learned about the Emmett Till lynching in 1955. I was obviously aware that Black Americans faced a history of racism, but not entirely aware of how it affected people today. My own experience made that racism real, and it shocked me.

I live in a culturally diverse neighborhood in Queens and have gone to predominantly Black schools, so this was my first racist experience. To think that kids thought it was OK to make fun of the lynching of Emmett felt awful to me.

Following this incident, I looked up Black figures like Nanny of the Maroons, Marcus Garvey, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. MLK is a man I greatly respect due to his calm demeanor and his goal for Americans of all races to be at peace. Through him, I learned about the civil rights movement, which then led me to learn more about America’s criminal justice system.

I was shocked to read statistics like this one from the NAACP that states Black men are incarcerated at a rate of five times that of White men. In several states the disparity is more than 10 to 1. Then I read about the tragedy of Kalief Browder, a 16-year-old boy from the Bronx who was accused of stealing a backpack. He was jailed on Rikers Island for three years because he didn’t have enough money for bail—mostly in solitary confinement.

Knowing that someone that young—close to my own age—had such a terrible experience made me reflect somberly as I began relating to his story. Watching this young boy have one violent fight after another on the jail’s surveillance video frightened me, because it was too close to home. I know men in my neighborhood who have served time and returned with a defeated, almost lifeless look in their eyes.

[“How has taking an interest in history and current events helped Josiah be better informed about his community?”]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

It’s tempting to look away. But Bryan Stevenson, an activist and lawyer who has become an inspiration to me over the years, says to get proximate—close enough to those that are suffering—instead of seeing ourselves as separate and different. That someone so young could spend three years in jail without being convicted of a crime is, I believe, at the heart of what is wrong with our criminal justice system.

Bryan says that the opposite of poverty is justice, and the true measure of our character as a nation is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned. Kalief would not have spent so many years in prison if he were from a wealthy family who could afford bail and had access to lawyers who saw him as someone worthy of representation.

In Stevenson’s book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, I read about Walter McMillian, who was falsely accused of a crime and sentenced to die. It made me think more critically about what it means to not just be Black in this country, but poor too. Walter McMillian, Kalief Browder, and Emmett Till were more than Black males, they were males without economic privilege.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement began in 2013 after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the murder of Trayvon Martin. BLM has pushed many across America to face the systemic oppression of Black people via police brutality and the setup of the criminal justice system. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and most notably George Floyd have become symbols of this oppression.

Although the death of George Floyd took place 65 years after the murder of Emmett Till, I see a similarity. Till was brutalized, but his mother left her son’s coffin open to show what racism not did to her son, and as a symbol of what other Black people in America experience. The same could be said about the video of George Floyd’s death. Both incidents forced many people to see the racist horrors taking place in their raw forms. One difference may be that the national outrage seen for George Floyd’s death feels to me as if America is awakening now to the extent of police brutality.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["What is Josiah learning? How is it pushing him to want to do something in his community?"]

While racism and discrimination may not be solved overnight, the first thing I can do to prevent it is to help work toward reform. I am a chapter leader of My Brother's Keeper, an organization dedicated to helping young men of color gain access to the resources and mentors necessary to thrive. Our goal is to keep young men in school and build a brotherhood, and so far we've been successful.

For example, before schools were closed this year, I was mentoring a Black sophomore in my school, showing him the ropes around certain classes and tutoring him in Algebra II. Although the school year was cut short, we developed a wholesome bond and I still help him and talk to him. My Brother's Keeper helped establish a healthy environment for young men in my school.

I am also a mentor and student with Youth Justice Court, a program which allows teens to rule on petty cases and provide an alternative response to youth crime in their community. My Brother's Keeper and the Youth Justice Court help young people of color reach their full potential by supporting them and making them feel valued and heard.

By working for both of these organizations, I hope to assist other young people of color to dream big, meet those expectations, and even exceed them. That's my goal, to encourage and nurture, in a way that fosters creativity and growth, one person at a time. By empowering myself and other young Black men, I want to help create a world where people like Emmett Till, Michael Brown, and George Floyd will never again be murdered with impunity.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["Why was it important to Josiah to take an active part his community? How does he benefit from taking action? How does his community benefit?"]

Josiah was a high school senior when he wrote this story.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DRAW IT

(15 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “In the beginning of the class, we brainstormed different ways that we can create change in our own communities. Now that we’ve read the story, we are going to do an activity where we create mission statements on the values we want to hold in our communities.”
2. Say to the group:
 - “A mission statement is a summary of the values of a person. Remember that values are the personal beliefs we hold that guide our actions and help us determine what is right and wrong.”
3. Read aloud the Draw It prompt from the chart paper you prepared:
 - **Make a poster with your mission statement written in the center. Include your two most important values.**
 - **Decorate the poster with things that represent what you’ve written.**
 - **Begin your statement with “I believe that...”**
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper, colored pencils, and markers.
5. Give group members 10 minutes to complete their drawings. Move around the room offering support and encouragement.
6. Time permitting, group members can share their drawings. As an alternative, you can lay them out on a table (or hang them up on the wall) and have group members get up and walk around to look at them.
7. Then, invite group members to reflect on what stood out to them and share with the group.
8. Thank the group for sharing.

CLOSING CIRCLE (3 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Josiah's story, 'Emmett. Kalief. Josiah. More Than Just Names,' and our activities today?"
2. Finish this sentence: "I can be an active member in my community by..."

SUPPLEMENTAL**WRITING EXTENSION**

Use the prompt below as an extra writing assignment. This extension gives group members the opportunity to share their point of view and provides additional literacy practice.

Write a proposal to your principal about making a change in your school. Your proposal could be about adding more anti-racist policies in school, addressing sexism, or changing the school dress code. Give examples from the story you read today to highlight the importance of advocating for change. Convince your reader that this change is important and necessary for the school to thrive. Include what you think the current problem is, a thorough description of your suggested solution, and the effect your proposal will have.

LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- Today's session was about creating change in our communities. What did you learn about group members' desire for change and how they see themselves as active members of their communities? What did some of their mission statements reflect?
- How are you an active member in the community and how do you role model advocating for change? Is your community important to you? How can you encourage group members to get involved in their communities?