

Starting the Year:

Youth Voice & Social Emotional Learning

SEL FOCUS: SOCIAL AWARENESS

Story Title: "Fighting Words" by Margarita Martinez

Story Summary: Margarita unintentionally offends a classmate. After the two girls cool down and talk, they find friendship.

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Explaining what's to be gained from understanding others' points of view
- Establishing group norms about acceptable behavior
- Discussing the reasons for having norms and the values behind them
- Evaluating their strengths and weaknesses with the behaviors on the Group Agreements

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal insights
- Speaking ideas clearly and listening during collaborative discussions

Important Vocabulary

- Slang: Informal language used by a specific group of people
- Gaze: A steady look; stare
- Sincere: Having real feelings
- Entitled: Believing oneself deserving special treatment
- *Gandules*: Spanish for pigeon peas, a type of small bean

Materials

- Chart paper and markers
- Journals or notebook paper, pencils
- Sticky notes (about five for each group member)

Preparation

- Read through the lesson plan and story ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda
- Clear a space in the room for the Opinion Continuum activity.
- Post "Agree" and "Disagree" signs, on opposite ends of the room.
- Make copies of "Fighting Words," (pp. 6-8) one for each student.
- Write and post "Values" and "Actions" chart paper for the Group Agreements.
- Print out the "Using the Group Agreements All Year to Teach Social and Emotional Learning Skills" (p. 9) to post near your desk or another location where you can reference it.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone to the class. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: Starting the Year With Student Voice and Social Emotional Learning

- **Opening Activity: Opinion Continuum**
- **Read and Discuss: "Fighting Words" by Margarita Martinez**
- **Explore the Ideas: Creating Group Agreements**
- **Closing Circle**

OPENING ACTIVITY — OPINION CONTINUUM

(10 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 class that they are going to do an activity where they listen to, see, and respect where others stand.
2. While the students are still seated, review the directions. Tell them:
 - "On either side of the room, there are signs that read 'Agree' and 'Disagree.'"
 - "I will read a statement and then you will decide whether it's true for you (agree) or not (disagree). You will move toward the sign that reflects your opinion. If you're unsure, you should stand somewhere in the middle."
 - "Once everyone has moved, I will invite volunteers to share where they are and why."
3. Next, ask the class to stand up and move to the center of the room.
4. Read the first statement and ask students to move to a spot between the two signs:
 - "Getting into conflicts with others is always bad."
5. Once all students have moved, ask them to notice where others are standing. (You can support minority positions by moving closer to someone who is alone at one end of the continuum.)
6. Ask for volunteers to share why they are standing where they are. Ask at least one group member from each side of the

continuum. Tell students they may change their position if they are influenced by another student's opinion.

7. After each question, have everyone return to the middle.
8. Repeat for each of the following statements:
 - "People who disagree with each other can never learn to see each other's perspectives."
 - "It's possible to work successfully with people you don't like."
 - "Students are responsible for how well a class runs."
9. Thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (15 minutes)

By practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing as a group, students build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the class that you are going to read a story by a young writer who makes a friend with someone she had a conflict with. Pass out student copies of the story (pp. 6-9).
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Students will take turns reading aloud as much or as little as they would like, and they should be given the option of passing when it is their turn. Decide as a group how they will respond when someone stumbles over a word. As a group leader, you may stop periodically to discuss or check in on active reading by asking students to share their responses to the story.
3. **Reading for a purpose:** Ask students to identify when they have a connection to something in the story. When this occurs, they should write a "C" in the margin.
4. **Read the story aloud together:** Stop to discuss periodically, supporting peer-to-peer talk and nonjudgmental listening. To do this, ask for volunteers to share they wrote a "C" next to and why. Alternatively, you can pose an open-ended question such as "What stands out to you in this section and why?"
5. **Story discussion:** When you finish the story, ask the group to discuss their reactions to the story, including the connections they made.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — CREATING GROUP AGREEMENTS (15 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, students will build understanding and rehearse positive behaviors by creating Group Agreements.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the class:
 - “Margarita and Ashley learn to get along, and even become friends, after talking, listening, and getting to know one another. It’s easier to get along with others when you agree on how best to communicate. We’re going to continue to help our class form by setting some guidelines for our time together. These are called ‘Group Agreements.’”
2. Refer to the flip chart paper that has one side labeled “Values” and the other side labeled “Actions.” Tell students that our actions often come from the values we hold.
3. Ask the class to define values. [Values are the personal beliefs we hold that guide our actions and help us determine what is right and wrong.] Take notes on a blank piece of chart paper. Then, write a definition based on the class’s ideas. It can be as simple as “Our ideas about right and wrong.”
4. After the class has come up with a successful definition, ask them to give examples of values they hold. [Some possible values are honesty, reliability, truthfulness, creativity, gratitude, kindness, loyalty, and open-mindedness.] Take notes on the chart paper. These examples will become useful later in the activity when students have to think about values they want the class to have.
5. Explain that, as a class, they will come up with the values they want the group to hold and decide what actions will show those values. Give the following example:
 - “A lot of times, people in groups value ‘respect,’ but we want to be clear about what actions are associated with that value.”
6. Write “Respect” under the “Values” column on the flip chart paper.
7. Ask: “If we had a microphone in the room, what would ‘Respect’ *sound* like?”
8. Record students’ responses under the “Actions” column, making sure the responses are specific. They might say “Only one person talking at a time,” or “Use respectful language.”

9. Next, ask: "If we had a video camera in the room, what would 'Respect' look like?"
10. Record students' responses under the "Actions" column, making sure the responses are specific. Students might say "Make eye contact when someone is talking," or "Stay in the circle."
11. After they have given enough examples for "Respect," put students into pairs.
12. Give students sticky notes. Tell them they will write down a value on one sticky note and then the actions associated with that value (i.e., what that value looks and sounds like in the class) on another sticky note.
13. Remind pairs that actions should focus on what students should *do* as opposed to *not do*. Pairs will do this for as many values and activities as they would like to list.
14. While students write values and actions on their sticky notes, circulate and give encouragement. When students are finished, have them stick the notes on the flip chart paper under the appropriate column.
15. Once each pair has posted their sticky notes, review the values and actions with the class, probing for more information and detail as necessary. Make sure the actions are positive and as specific as possible.
16. Thank the students for sharing their thoughts on how to make the class productive and safe for everyone.

Note to leader: Before the next lesson, on a piece of chart paper, rewrite the brainstormed list of agreed-upon actions by combining the ones that were most important to the class. Write the values around the border of the chart paper.

CLOSING CIRCLE (5 minutes)

In Closing Circle, students share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to this prompt:

- "What will be easy for you to do from the Group Agreements? What will be challenging?"

Fighting Words

By Margarita Martinez

I sat in my third period math class, spacing out as the teacher explained the assignment. I was distracted by two girls who were talking behind me. I kept hearing one of them, a black girl named Ashley, using the word *titi*, which means “aunt” in Spanish slang.

“My *titi* was saying...” Ashley said.

Every time she said it, I felt myself get more and more annoyed. I’m not sure why, but it bothered me to hear her say a word that didn’t seem to belong to her. I’m Puerto Rican and I considered Spanish the language of my people—not hers. When I heard her say *titi* again, I turned around and said, “Don’t say *titi* because you’re not Spanish.”

Without realizing it, I’d started a big problem. Ashley got out of her chair and began screaming at me.

“What? Who are you to tell me what I can and can’t say?” she yelled. I was shocked. I hadn’t anticipated that she would be so upset. It was too late to say I was playing around, so I got up and said in a calm, low voice, “You heard me. Don’t say that word because you’re not Spanish.” Our verbal argument almost got physical, and we were sent to the dean’s office.

I slumped down in the uncomfortable chair while I tried to explain myself. Ashley sat with her arms crossed as she stared coldly at me. I knew I had no business telling her what she could or could not say. Instead of meeting her gaze, I told the dean, “I didn’t mean to offend or disrespect her in any way. I was only playing.”

The dean told me to apologize to her. I felt bad that she’d gotten so offended, so I told her I was sorry in a very sincere way. I could see that Ashley was still upset, but she accepted my apology. The dean let us go, and as we walked back to class I apologized again and asked why she had wanted to fight over such a small comment.

“I guess it was a quick reaction,” she said, and explained that she took it personally because I wasn’t the first Hispanic girl to question her use of a

Hispanic word. It still wasn't clear to me why she was using a Spanish word in the first place, but I figured she was entitled to say what she wanted. I apologized one last time before entering the classroom.

After our altercation, I started to get to know Ashley, and we gradually became close. Ashley had always seemed like a happy and friendly person, and when I realized she wasn't the type to hold a grudge, I started talking to her more. We hung out at school and talked about almost everything—boys we crushed on, teachers who got on our nerves, and family matters. We even started hanging out outside of school and found that we shared similar hobbies, such as writing poetry and shopping. Ashley was not like I expected her to be. She was kind-hearted, and she wasn't judgmental.

The first time I went over to Ashley's house and met her family, I was surprised to realize that we shared a cultural background. Ashley was half black and half Puerto Rican. Finding out about Ashley's Puerto Rican side explained a lot. I now understood why she had gotten so upset when I told her not to use a Spanish word. I realized I was ignorant to think that just because she was black, she couldn't also be Puerto Rican or mixed with another race.

We got into a discussion about race, and I explained to Ashley that I'd been called so many names and picked on by black girls so much that I assumed no black girl would be nice to me. I had a lot of prejudices about black girls, but Ashley knew where I was coming from. I was surprised to hear that she had her prejudices about Hispanic girls, as well.

She said she couldn't relate to them, even though she was half Puerto Rican and ate some of the same foods, like rice and gandules and roast pork. "I always felt that Spanish girls are all conceited and they only like their own kind," she told me. But after talking to me, Ashley realized that I was quiet because I was a little shy and had a hard time trusting people, not because I was conceited.

This became one of the bigger connections we shared, since we both knew what it felt like to be unwanted, or like we didn't fit in. And we realized that we'd disproved each other's prejudices. Ashley was proof that my stereotype of black girls was incorrect, and I was proof that her prejudices about Hispanic girls were wrong. We laughed about our stereotypes, deciding that they were petty and naïve. We knew that it was really wrong to judge someone before getting to know him or her.

From this experience with Ashley, I've learned to see people as individuals and not place them in categories. I know that everyone is different and that people shouldn't buy into stereotypes. Ashley's friendship has helped me connect with people and trust them more.

These days, I have plenty of friends of different races and backgrounds. I've learned so many new and amazing things about other cultures. For example, a friend from Africa taught me some of the dances that they do during celebrations. The dancing is done freely and passionately, and I've enjoyed that feeling while I'm doing the dance, as well. I also met a Chinese girl named Shirley who loves candy as much as I do. She introduced me to some delicious candies of her culture. Those experiences are all thanks to my friendship with Ashley.

Margarita was 18 when she wrote this story. She graduated high school and went on to the College of Staten Island.

Use the Group Agreements to Teach Social and Emotional Learning Skills

Every class...

- Review the Group Agreements at the beginning.
- Consider doing one of the following:
 - * **At the beginning of the period**, ask students which behavior on the Group Agreements the class is upholding the best or which the class needs to improve.
 - * **At the end**, have students write a reflection on how well they did with behaviors on the Group Agreement, especially if the group is working specifically on one of them.

Once a semester or marking period...

- As a group, reassess the Group Agreements and determine if they need to be **clarified or revised**.
- Have students reflect—in writing or discussion—how well they are personally doing with the agreements. Have them **set a goal for improvement**.

When problems arise...

- Be careful not to use the Group Agreements as a means to punish or scold.
- When an agreement is not being fulfilled, facilitate a discussion that:
 - * **Involves students** talking to one another and problem solving together.
 - * Reviews or clarifies the purpose of the agreement.
 - * Results in students setting a goal for improvement with action steps for everyone to take. (The focus should be on everyone **working together** to solve a problem, rather blaming or shaming particular students.)