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# Building positive self-concept

How we feel about ourselves is a foundation for everything we do. At the source, all of the activities in education are potential self-concept builders, for to teach a student to subtract in a culture that uses subtraction is to give that student a skill that carries with it a positive feeling about the self. In this chapter, however, we approach the self directly. We explore who we are and how we feel about ourselves, not through the medium of a cognitive skill but through our bodies and our movement.

The self-concept is as inevitably rooted in our bodies as it is in our minds. For this reason, these activities can be quite powerful. We encourage plenty of reflection and discussion time when you do these experiments.

## MOVING THROUGH LIFE

**TO THE LEADER** In this experiment, participants can see themselves in new ways and perhaps see themselves as they are seen. They could make active changes in self-concept toward a more positive and realistic self-image. This experiment can be done in small or large groups, or one-to-one.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP** Take a moment to stretch yourself up to standing position . . . meander to a place in the room where you'd like to begin. This experiment has three parts. It seems to work best to let your moving come "off the top," with no rehearsing. Any thing you do is just right.

I'd like you to move through the room *the way you see yourself moving through your life right now*. Let your body move like that until I ask you to pause.

*(Continue for 1-2 minutes, depending on degree of involvement.)*

Pause now and notice yourself in stillness. Notice how you feel inside right now, how your breath moves, where you feel most lively.

Now begin moving through the room *the way others see you moving through your life right now*. Others can be "them" or one other person or several different people in a row. Go ahead and begin moving. You may notice this part feels and looks different from the first. I'll signal you when to pause.

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*(Continue for 1–2 minutes, then pause.)*

Great . . . now pause and focus inside yourself again. Notice any differences in the way you feel now.

Now let your body carry you through the room *the way you'd like to be moving through your life*. Go inside to the place that knows what you *really* like, and let your body move that way through the room. Go ahead.

*(Continue for 2 minutes.)*

Fine . . . let your moving take you back to your seat. Take out a piece of paper and write or draw something you learned about yourself.

**VARIATION** This experiment can be done in pairs, with one partner watching and giving feedback about what new things he or she sees in the other partner, or whether the way they see themselves is consistent with the way others see them or they want to be seen.

**COMMENT** Discussion of this experiment can be an opportunity for developing active listening skills. The emphasis is on reflection of the mover's activity rather than the watcher's opinions.

## DISAPPEARING AND APPEARING

**TO THE LEADER** This experiment is designed to give participants sensory feedback about how much of their bodies they experience and what creates a sense of safety for them. Noticing the times and circumstances in which we tend to

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disappear can make us more aware, draw our attention to parts of us that are neglected, and give us more choice in our pace of moving through life.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP** We're going to play an exaggeration game. How can you be here and *not* be here at the same time? You could go to sleep, or let your mind drift off into a memory of a fun time while your body stays in the room. For now, let's experiment with having different parts of us go away for a moment while the rest of us moves around as always.

Try on some different ways of hiding your mouth. You can cover it in lots of ways . . . hold it tightly, making a "stiff upper lip." . . . Play with different ways of making your mouth disappear. Let yourself exaggerate each part that you are hiding. Notice how making part of you disappear affects the rest of you. Good . . . now hide your stomach. Experiment with ways you can make your belly disappear . . . sucking it in . . . folding your arms across it. Find your own way of hiding your belly and make it really obvious. Great, now let's try hiding our hands. Our feet. Good.

Now let's go back to those parts we made disappear and see what happens when we breathe into them. Close your eyes and breathe warmth and space into your mouth and stomach and hands and feet. Take a moment to love them for helping you in all the ways they do, for being part of you.

**COMMENT** Peripheral parts of the body (hands, feet, head) are easier to begin with in this experiment. As stu-

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dents become more familiar with hiding and reclaiming parts of themselves you may gradually add more central parts such as shoulders, chest, and hips. These areas tend to be more emotionally charged, that is, people become more anxious when they move the torso, the largest repository of unexpressed feeling, so pace your instructions to the comfort level of the students.

## DRAW YOURSELF

**TO THE LEADER** Self-image is like an iceberg: Most of our ideas and internal images of ourselves are under the surface of our awareness. This activity seems to draw out hidden aspects of the way we see ourselves, and can be useful in helping participants claim more of themselves.

You'll need fairly large paper and oil pastels or crayons. You'll also need space to draw and space to move.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP** Come on over, get a sheet of paper, and pick one color crayon that especially appeals to you. Then take them back to your seat (*or to a place on the floor*).

Now, with your *eyes closed*, draw yourself. Don't open your eyes until you're finished. Don't cheat, you'll have more fun if you can surprise yourself.

*(Students will finish at different times, and will have different exclamations over their creations.)*

Okay, is everybody finished? What do you notice about

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your drawing? Is it what you thought you were drawing? Does it look the way you see yourself, or different?

*(Take several minutes for sharing, emphasizing that there is no right or wrong way of doing this activity.)*

Now I'd like you to experiment with your drawing. Find a place in the room where you'd like to be, and look at your drawing in a special way. Notice the qualities and textures of your drawing. What pops out at you? Is it sharp, or fuzzy, or huge? Is some part of you tiny, or not where it is on your body? What is it like?

Look at your drawing until some part of it comes to your attention. Then let your body move that quality in the space around you until it feels a part of you. Then go back to your drawing again and notice something else, and then move your body in that way. Go back and forth several times.

*(Continue for 2-3 minutes.)*

Now let's do one more thing with our drawings. Pick up your paper and hold it in front of your chest. Walk through the room and greet other people you pass, being the character on your paper . . . meeting and greeting. Feel free to make sounds, too, but no words.

*(1-2 minutes.)*

Great. Let's go back to our seats.

COMMENT Small or large group discussion may uncover the messages students have incorporated about themselves: I'm too big, too tall; my feet are pigeon-toed; I have an

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ugly this or that. This experiment is designed to assist in owning all the parts of ourselves. Developing an accurate and positive self-image is the basis for enlivening encounters with the world and successful learning experiences.

## MEETINGS AND GREETINGS

**TO THE LEADER** This activity can be structured in pairs or by dividing the number of students and having them line up across from each other. (The second variation is described below.) It is designed to help develop satisfying ways of making contact with others, and to give students the opportunity to notice their preferences.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP** Let's have half the students line up over on this side of the room and the other half over there. Face each other and get lined up opposite a partner.

Half of you are going to act and half of you are going to respond.

*(Designate this division.)*

Responders, here are your choices: When your partner comes to greet you, you can respond (1) positively and enthusiastically, or (2) negatively, as though you don't want contact, or (3) completely neutrally, stone-faced, with no visible response. I'd like you to decide each time *before* your partner approaches how you'll respond, although don't say how out loud. Any questions?



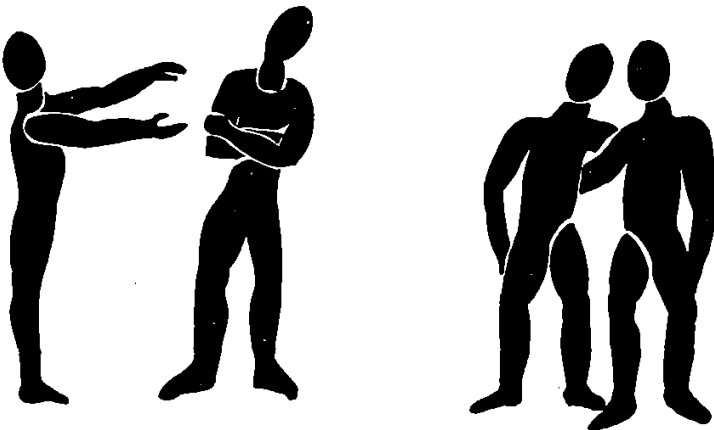
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Now, Approachers, we're going to take several turns all going at once over to our partners and greeting them. We'll experiment with different ways of doing that and see what seems to work and how different approaches feel.

First, let's go over shyly. Approach your partner very hesitantly, maybe remembering some time when you felt a little uncomfortable, maybe excited but not sure, and exaggerate your movements. Okay, come back over to this side. Let's try being super loud and brash. Bowl over your partner. Okay, this time approach your partner at a different level, higher or lower in space.

VARIATIONS Other ways of making contact include:

- with eyes closed
- backwards
- the way you *don't* like to be contacted



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- sidling up
- looking everywhere but at your partner
- looking the way you do when you *have* to meet someone you like but you're not sure that person likes you
- pretending you're not really trying to meet the person even though you'd like to meet.

Pick a few each time, or choose variations that students suggest. Have the students switch roles after a few variations.

COMMENT There will probably be lively comments as you move through this experiment. Time for talking can be integrated, and we recommend small group or partner sharing after this activity.

## HORSE AND WAGON

TO THE LEADER Sparking a sense of responsibility in students seems to be a critical and long-term goal of the educational process. If we understand our preferences more clearly and have the chance to try on different responses, we can increase our range of response-ability. This activity focuses on the choices we make about leading and following. Ideally, we want to be able to choose to follow when that's appropriate and lead when initiative is needed. Participants get to experience both modes in this activity.

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**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP** Find a partner, someone you don't know very well. Without speaking, decide who will be Partner One and who will be Partner Two. Good. Now, Partner Two, your job is to lead your partner around the room in as many ways as you can think of. It's okay to touch or not touch; see what works best. Partner One, I want you to really follow wherever your partner wants to take you. Notice whether you like or dislike different ways of being led. You can use sounds but no words. Okay, lead 'em out.

*(Do this for 2-3 minutes.)*

Now, Partner One, begin to let yourself not want to go along. Don't be so helpful. See if you can discover your favorite way of saying, no, I don't want to go.

*(Stop this section after 1-2 minutes while there's still plenty of energy, giving participants a brief taste of not going along.)*

Great . . . rest a moment and share with your partner what you enjoyed and what you didn't like.

Now let's switch roles. Partner One, you get to lead. Partner Two, you follow along. Be really cooperative until I signal you that it's time to not go along so easily.

**COMMENT** Group discussion of this activity can uncover beliefs students have about appropriate role behavior and power issues. In the cognitive area, this activity can be used to illustrate sequences, as the title *horse and wagon* illustrates.

## BOYS AND GIRLS

**TO THE LEADER** Cultural and peer shaping of our behavior seems to blossom in the third and fourth grades, so that wondering how we'll be seen takes on great power. This activity is designed to filter and separate messages we've received about who we should be from the truth of our own experience. It is grounded in the recognition that we all have aspects of male and female within us, and works toward a satisfying balance of this fundamental polarity.

**INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP** Let's all move together for a while, exploring *opposites*. Our world has so many opposites: night and day, cold and hot, wet and dry, good and bad. Right now let's try on each word as though it were a piece of clothing. See how it fits you.

Let's start with *huge*. Let your body and movements be as big as you can.

*(Continue for 30 seconds.)*

Now let your body and your moving get *tiny*, as small as you can.

*(30 seconds.)*

Let your movements all be straight lines now, making your joints into angles.

*(30 seconds.)*

And now make curved lines in the space around you.

*(30 seconds.)*

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Can your movements themselves be very loud?

*(30 seconds.)*

And now totally silent?

*(30 seconds.)*

Great, now move through the center of the room taking up lots of space, lots of elbow room.

*(30 seconds.)*

Now take up as little room as possible, making yourself into a beanpole.

*(30 seconds.)*

Now, each of you explore moving like a boy. How do boys act?

*(Do this for 1 minute.)*

Switch now, trying on moving as a girl does.

*(1 minute.)*

Notice for yourself whether your boy and girl movements were different or similar.

Pick a partner now, someone near you. Here's the rule of this game. When one of you is up toward the ceiling, the other must move down near the floor. It's as though you were two flags on two flagpoles, and if one is up the other must be down to be balanced. When either partner moves, the other must respond. If one moves down, the other must move up. All right, let's play one up, one down.

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*(Continue for 2-3 minutes.)*

With the same partner, try a different experiment. When one of you advances, moves forward, the other must retreat, back up. Or if one of you retreats, the other must come forward.

*(You might want to line up partners in the same direction if space is limited. Continue this for 2-3 minutes.)*

Now take a few minutes to share discoveries with your partner.

**VARIATION** Bring in pictures from different cultures that show the different ways men and women, boys and girls dress and interact. Have students try on these different modes in movement. You could also use paint dropcloths or pieces of material as costumes in this activity.

**COMMENT** Other polarities can be added to the initial exploration: strong and weak, graceful and awkward, smart and dumb, balanced and off balance, cool and not cool. This exploration reveals that the experience of "I'm strong *and* sometimes I'm weak" leads toward more growth and integration; compare it, for example, with "I'm *either* real strong *or* a wipeout." The synthesis of experiential polarities is a major development task and useful tool.