

*Fair doesn't mean giving every child the same thing,
it means giving every child what they need.*

—Rick Lavoie



EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Mindfulness-Based Social & Emotional Learning

Fair vs Equal: Celebrating Differences

Level: Lower Elementary (K-3)

Timeframe: 20-30 minutes

Concepts:

- Diversity
- Equality
- Fairness
- Privilege



Big Ideas For This Lesson

A common refrain in elementary school classrooms is, “That’s not fair!” Whether in response to sharing of materials, games at recess, or how much time a teacher spends with each student, students’ attachment to **fairness** can present a significant obstacle when classroom teachers are not equipped to coach students through the nuances of fairness and **equality**. Further, developing a deeper understanding of fairness goes hand-in-hand with increasing students’ tolerance and appreciation for diverse learners and an understanding of **privilege**.^{1,2,3} This week’s lesson will provide students with a new understanding of “fair” and will be a fun game for the students too!

Teaching Note: Timing this lesson with a national event like [Autism Awareness Week](#) provides great context for students to understand the concepts of fairness, equality, and neurodiversity.



Essential Vocabulary

Equal and Equality
Fair and Fairness
Privilege
Treatment
Velcro

Materials

- Board or chart paper
- Band-Aids* - one per student.
- Fair vs Equal Themed Read-Alouds (Optional):
 - [It's Not Fair!](#) by Amy Krouse Rosenthal
 - [Looking after Louis](#) by Lesley Ely
 - [Mine!](#) by Kevin Luthardt
 - [Not Fair, Won't Share](#) by Sue Graves
 - [Ron's Big Mission](#) by Rose Blue & Corinne Naden
 - [Share with Brother](#) by Steven Layne
 - [Squirrel's New Year's Resolution](#) by Pat Miller

* Since unwrapping each Band-Aid can be time consuming and expensive; a sheet of stickers and a little imagination can be a much more cost effective and easy to use alternative.



Preparation

1. Purchase stickers or Band-Aids.
2. Reflect on situations in your classroom that students complain are “unfair” and how they align with the definition of fairness offered in this lesson.



Teaching Script

BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE & CONCEPT MODELING (I DO)

Begin by asking students to share their definition of the word fair. Create a bubble/word map: one big circle with the word ‘fair’ in it. Then draw connected bubbles off the main bubble with students’ answers written in. Accept all answers for now; it should not be long before someone says something like, “fairness means everyone is treated equal.”

When you hear this answer, tell students:

Most people think that fair means equal. I want you to remember this definition because we are going to challenge it today. Let's see if your definition of fair changes.

We are going to play a fun acting game today. All of you are going to pretend you have some sort of injury - maybe you have a little scrape on your arm or maybe you have a broken leg!

Teaching Note: Be playful here - students will be excited about the chance to pretend to be injured, so let them have some fun with off-the-wall injuries like being run over by a dump truck, turning into a zombie, or anything else they come up with!

Take a moment to think of your injury, but don't act it out just yet. Did everyone think of an injury? Good! I am going to be the doctor. Everyone stay in your spot and I am going to come around to heal you.

Teaching Note: If you have a teaching assistant or another adult in the classroom, it will be much easier for both of you to act as “doctors.” If you do not have another adult, select 1-2 students to play the role of doctor and instruct them to treat every injury with a Band-Aid. If you are using stickers, explain to the students that the stickers represent Band-Aids.



GUIDED PRACTICE (WE DO)

Ready, set, act!

Teaching Note: Be prepared for this exercise to get loud and playful. Rather than discourage students from being noisy here, embrace their playfulness and join them in having fun! Exaggerate your responses (e.g., “Oh no! I can’t believe your arm fell off!”).

As students act out their injuries, move around the room asking each student,

What’s your injury?

Once they share, give every student the same treatment - a “Band-Aid.”

Continue moving around the room until every student has received a “Band-Aid,” regardless of the nature of their “injury.”

When all students have been given “treatment,” call them back to the circle or their original spots. Students will be excited to share their make-believe injuries with their classmates, so allow some time for sharing. Ask several students:

What was your injury? And what treatment did you get?

Wow - we had lots of different injuries! Some people actually just had little cuts, so the Band-Aid would have worked for them. But some people had broken bones or worse; would the Band-Aid have worked for them? NO!

Let’s think about how this relates to our original definition of fairness - that fair means equal. Everyone got the same treatment here, so everyone was equal. Was that fair?

Pause to allow student responses.

*No, that was not fair because **people had different needs**. In this case, fair would have meant giving people different treatments because they had different injuries. Would you ever go to a doctor who treated everyone the same no matter what was wrong with them?*

No! In the same way, you would not want a teacher who treats everyone the same.



REINFORCING LESSON CONCEPTS (YOU DO)

Fairness means treating people according to their needs. This does not always mean it will be equal.

Write this definition into the bubble map on the board.

Let's think of some examples that we see in the classroom.

Use the following examples to facilitate a class discussion. These examples are just a starting point; you are encouraged to create your own and have students do the same.

- *If one student was really good at math and didn't need help and another student needed a lot of help, would it be fair or unfair for the teacher to spend the same amount of time with both of them?*
- *If one student has a learning disability that means they have a hard time writing, would it be fair or unfair to allow them to use a computer to help them write while everyone else in the class uses paper and pencil?*
- *If one student needs more time to read, would it be fair or unfair for the student to have more time to complete their tests?*
- *If one student has a difficult home life and unique emotional needs, would it be fair or unfair to allow them extra break times to use coping skills and cool down strategies?*

What are some other examples of different needs people have that could mean they need different treatment?

Coach students through several examples here, including needs like:

- **Neurodiversity** (autism, learning disabilities, dyslexia, ADHD, gifted, etc.)
- Physical disabilities (requiring a wheel chair, crutches, etc.)
- Emotional Disabilities (depression, anger, trauma, grief, attachment disorders, etc.)

So, we can see that fair does not mean equal. Instead fair means treating people according to their..."

Pause to allow students to respond. Repeat this call and response several times to emphasize that **fair means treating people according to their needs**.

As your teacher, I will do my best to be fair, but this will not always look equal. I may spend more time with some students than others and I may treat some students differently than others depending on their needs at the time. I will always do my best to meet everyone's needs. If you feel like your needs are not being met, rather than saying 'that's not fair!' just let me know what your needs are and I will try to meet them.



EVIDENCE OF CONCEPT ATTAINMENT

Reflect on it

- *How did your definition of fairness change?*
- *How are fair and equal different?*
- *What is a special need that you have that means you get treated differently? Do you know anyone else with different needs?*

Journal it

Have students complete the Fair vs Equal - Celebrating Diversity: SEL Journal Page.



EXTENSIONS

Classroom

- Promote empathy in conflicts by asking students to consider “How are your needs different?”
- Recognize and celebrate diverse learners. Encourage empathy and acceptance by providing space for students, or even parents, to share their unique learning needs and challenges with the class.
- Create a “**Fair vs. Equal**” Poster with the following key points:
 - **Equal** means the same. I will not be treating you all the same way.
 - Being **fair** means that I will do my best to give each student what he or she needs to be successful.
 - What you need and what someone else needs may be very different.
 - I will always try to be **fair**, but this means things won’t always feel **equal**.

School-wide

- Refer back to this lesson as needed in restorative/discipline proceedings with students.
- Consider how “zero-tolerance” policies and “one size fits all” discipline procedures do not take into account diverse needs. How can your school consider the needs of each individual student, promote equitable treatment, and still hold students accountable for their actions?
- Promote a culture of equity by encouraging acceptance and celebration of diverse learning needs.
- Participate in national events like “[Light it up Blue](#).”



REFERENCES

*Note: The “Band-Aid Lesson” is used widely to teach about the concepts of fairness and equity. The citation for the original author of this lesson was unknown at the time of this writing.

1. Cooper, C. R. (2009). Myth 18: It is fair to teach all children the same way. *The Gifted Child Quarterly*, 53(4), 283.
2. Curwin, R. (2012, October 23). Fair Isn't Equal: Seven Classroom Tips. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/fair-isnt-equal-richard-curwin>
3. Lavoie, R. (n.d.). Fairness: To Each According To His Needs. Retrieved November 6, 2015, from <http://www.ricklavoie.com/fairnessart.html>