

Classroom Toolkit: Understanding Stigma for Grades 4-6



Teacher Overview

What is stigma (kid-friendly definition):

Stigma is when someone is treated unfairly, judged, or left out because of something about them — even when they can't control it.

Big idea for students:

Words, assumptions, and labels can hurt — but kindness, curiosity, and inclusion can help.

Learning Goals:

Students will:

- Understand what stigma is
- Recognize how stigma shows up at school and in everyday life
- Practice using kind, stigma-free language
- Learn how to respond when they see stigma happening

Toolkit Icons Guide:

-  **Teacher says / teacher script**
-  **Student task**
-  **Discussion**
-  **Activity / game**
-  **Reflection / writing**
-  **Teacher tip**

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LESSON 1 (45–60 minutes)

What Is Stigma & How Does It Show Up?



Warm-Up: Spot the Feeling (10 minutes)



Teacher says:

“I’m going to read a few short situations. Think about how the person might feel.”



Teacher reads:

- Someone laughs when a student needs extra help.
- A kid is called “weird” for liking something different.
- A student is told, “Just try harder,” when they’re struggling.
- Someone is left out because of how they look or act.

Teacher tip:
Focus on empathy — there are no wrong answers here.



Class discussion:

- How might that person feel?
- Would those words help or hurt?



Mini Lesson: What Is Stigma? (10 minutes)



Teacher says:

“Stigma is when someone is judged, teased, ignored, or treated unfairly because of something about them — like how they learn, how they feel, how they look, or what they’re going through.”

Sometimes people don’t mean to be unkind — but their words or actions can still hurt.



Write on the board:

- Stigma = judging or treating someone unfairly
- Kindness = trying to understand and include

 **Activity: Label vs Person (15 minutes)** **Teacher does:**

Write these labels on the board:

- “The troublemaker”
- “The shy kid”
- “The weird one”
- “The lazy kid”

Key message:
People are
more than one
label.

 **Ask the class:**

- How would it feel if this was how people talked about you?
- How could we rephrase the first one? What might be going on for this person?

 **Student task:**

Help rewrite the labels in kinder, person-first ways:

- “A student who is having a hard time”
- “A student who needs quiet”
- “A student who likes different things”
- “A student who is struggling”

 **Reflection (5 minutes)** **Student task:**

Complete one sentence (written or spoken):

- “I feel left out when...”
- “One way I can make school feel safer is...”



LESSON 2 (45–60 minutes)

How Our Words Can Help or Hurt



Warm-Up Game: Thumbs Up or Down (10 minutes)

**Teacher says:**

"I'll read a sentence. Show if it helps or if it hurts."

**Read aloud:**

- "That sounds really hard."
- "Everyone feels that way."
- "I'm glad you told me."
- "Just ignore it, you're fine."
- "Do you want help or just someone to listen?"

**Quick discussion:**

Why do some words help more than others?



Mini Lesson: Stigma-Free Language (10 minutes)

**Teacher says:**

Stigma-free language means using words that are kind, respectful, and don't blame or label people.

**Simple rule for students:**

Talk to people the way you'd want to be talked to on a hard day.

 **Group Activity: What Could You Say Instead? (15 minutes)** **Teacher does:**

Divide students into small groups.

 **Student task:**

Each group gets one situation (box on the right) and answers:

1. What would *not* be helpful to say?
2. What *would* be kind or stigma-free?

 **Groups share** their ideas with the class.

 **Example situations:**

1. A classmate is crying at recess
2. A student gets angry easily
3. Someone needs extra time for work
4. A student keeps leaving the classroom

 **Role Play: Be an Upstander (10 minutes)** **Teacher explains:**

An **upstander** is someone who helps when they see someone being treated unfairly.

 **Student task:**

Practice saying:

- “That’s not kind.”
- “Everyone learns differently.”
- “Let’s include them.”
- “We don’t know their whole story.”

 Students can practice in pairs or small groups. **Closing Reflection (5 minutes)** **Student choice:**

- Draw a picture showing inclusion
- Write one sentence:

“One thing I will try to do to reduce stigma is...”

★ Optional Extensions

- Create a **class kindness pledge**
- Design posters: “*Words That Help*”
- Write short stories about inclusion
- Connect to literacy by discussing characters who face stigma

★ Teacher Tip

You don’t need to fix everything.

Modeling respectful language and gently correcting harmful phrases makes a powerful difference.



Key Messages to Display

- Everyone has struggles you can’t see
 - Labels don’t tell the whole story
 - Words matter
 - Kindness is powerful

Thank-you for engaging with this toolkit.



Give us your feedback!

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