

Classroom Toolkit: Understanding Stigma for Grades 7-9



Teacher Overview

Stigma shows up strongly in middle school through labels, jokes, rumours, social media, and assumptions. This toolkit focuses on **awareness, language, and bystander-to-upstander skills** without singling students out.

Student-friendly definition:

Stigma is when people are judged, labelled, or treated unfairly because of one part of who they are — or because of assumptions others make about them.

Learning Goals:

Students will:

- Understand what stigma is and why it happens
- Recognize stigma in school, online, and social settings
- Learn stigma-free and person-first 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 (50–60 minutes)

What Is Stigma & Why Does It Matter?



Warm-Up: Quick Think (10 minutes)



Teacher says:

“Think about a time when someone was judged, labelled, or misunderstood — maybe you, maybe someone else, maybe something you’ve seen online.”



Student task:

Students respond silently on paper or digitally:

- What happened?
- How did it affect the person?

Optional discussion:

Students can share general examples (no names, no details).



Teacher tip:

Emphasize safety and respect. Sharing is optional.



Mini Lesson: What Is Stigma? (10 minutes)



Teacher explains:

Stigma can show up as:

- Labels (“That kid is lazy,” “She’s dramatic”)
- Jokes or comments
- Exclusion
- Assumptions
- Online posts, memes, or rumours



Key idea:
Stigma often comes from **fear, misunderstanding, or stereotypes** — not facts.



Write on the board:

- Stereotype = assumption about a group
- Stigma = acting on that assumption

💡 Activity: Labels vs. Lived Experience (15 minutes)

👤 Teacher does:

Post or project these labels:

- “Attention-seeking”
- “Problem student”
- “Weird”
- “Too sensitive”
- “Lazy”

 **Key message:**
Labels simplify people
— reality is more complex.

💬 Class discussion:

- What might be happening *underneath* these labels?
- What gets missed when we label people?

👤 Student task (pairs or small groups):

Rewrite each label using **person-first or neutral language**, for example:

- “A student who is struggling emotionally”
- “A student with unmet needs”
- “Someone who experiences things differently”

📝 Reflection (5 minutes)

👤 Student task:

Complete one (private or shareable):

- “A label I’ve heard at school that can be harmful is...”
- “One thing labels don’t show about people is...”

📘 Mini Lesson: What Is Stigma? (10 minutes)

👤 Teacher says:

Before we talk about stigma, we need to talk about **labels** and how language can shape the way we see people.

A **label** is a short word or phrase people use to describe someone — often based on one behaviour, struggle, or difference.

 **Examples of labels:**

- “Troublemaker”
- “Lazy”
- “Weird”
- “Attention-seeking”

 **Teacher explains:**

Labels can be harmful because they:

- Reduce a person to one trait
- Ignore what's happening underneath
- Stick, even when people change

This is where **stigma** often begins.

 **Teaching the Concept: Person-First Language** **Teacher says:**

Person-first language means talking about someone as a **person first**, not a problem or label.

It reminds us that:

- A person is not their struggle
- One part of someone's life does not define them



Simple formula to write on the board:

Person + “who” or “with” + situation or experience

 **Examples:**

-  “A lazy student”
 “A student who is having a hard time”
-  “A problem kid”
 “A student who needs more support”
-  “An addict”
 “A person with a substance use issue”

 **Important note to say aloud:**

Some people choose identity-first language for themselves. The key is **respect** and letting people decide how they want to be described.



Guided Practice: From Labels to People (15 minutes)



Teacher does:

Display the following labels:

- “Attention-seeking”
- “Too sensitive”
- “Lazy”
- “Problem student”

Example to model first:

Label: “Attention-seeking”

Rewrite: “A student who is trying to get their needs noticed”



Student task (pairs or small groups):

For each label:

1. What might be happening underneath this label?
2. Rewrite it using **person-first or neutral language**



Groups share one example with the class.



Key message to reinforce:

Changing language doesn't excuse harmful behaviour — it helps us respond more fairly and effectively.



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)

Using Language to Reduce Stigma & Be an Upstander



Warm-Up: Quick Review (5 minutes)



Teacher says:

“Yesterday we talked about labels, stigma, and person-first language.”



Ask the class:

- ★ What is stigma?
- ★ What does person-first language mean?
- ★ Why can labels be harmful?



Clarify if needed:

Person-first language focuses on the **person before the problem**, and leaves room for their full story.



Activity: Helpful, Harmful, or Depends? (10 minutes)



Teacher explains:

Not all language is clearly good or bad — sometimes it **depends on context and how it's received**.



Teacher reads aloud statements.

Students decide: Helpful / Harmful / Depends

- “Just calm down.”
- “That sounds really overwhelming.”
- “Everyone goes through this.”
- “Do you want advice or just someone to listen?”



Class discussion:

- ★ Why might “depends” matter?
- ★ How can the same words affect people differently?



Key point:

Intent matters — but **impact matters more**.

Mini Lesson: Stigma-Free Language in Action (10 minutes)

Teacher says:

Stigma-free language:

- Avoids blame
- Avoids assumptions
- Focuses on what someone is experiencing, not who they are

 **Connect to Lesson 1:**
Person-first language is one way we reduce stigma.

Side-by-side examples (post or project):

Stigmatizing Language	Stigma-Free / Person-First
“That kid is lazy”	“That student is struggling to get work done”
“She’s crazy”	“She seems overwhelmed”
“He’s an addict”	“He’s a person dealing with substance use”
“They’re just dramatic”	“They’re having a strong emotional reaction”

Important reminder:

Using better language doesn’t excuse harmful behaviour — it helps us respond more fairly.

Group Activity: Rewrite the Moment (15 minutes)

Teacher does:

Divide students into small groups. Give each group one scenario.

Student task:

For each scenario:

1. Identify the stigma or label
2. Rewrite the language using person-first or neutral wording

Example Scenarios:

A student is constantly being sent out of class for acting out

Someone is mocked online for their emotions

A classmate is excluded because they “act weird”

A student is excluded from a group because he was open about a mental health struggle

Groups share one rewritten example.

💡 Skill Practice: Being an Upstander (10 minutes)

👩‍🏫 Teacher explains:

An **upstander** uses words and actions to reduce harm — without making things worse.

🧑‍💻 Student task:

Practice or brainstorm responses such as:

- “We don’t know what they’re dealing with.”
- “Let’s not label people.”
- “That joke isn’t okay.”
- “Everyone deserves respect.”
- “Let’s include them.”

 Use the scenarios from the last activity for students to practice being an upstander.

⭐ Teacher tip:

Not all upstanding is public. Checking in privately or reporting concerns is also valid.

✍️ Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

🧑‍💻 Student choice (private or shareable):

- “One phrase I want to stop using is...”
- “One stigma-free phrase I can use instead is...”
- “One way I can be more aware of my language is...”

⭐ Teacher Note

You are not expected to correct every comment. Modeling curiosity, respect, and better language consistently makes a difference.

❤️ Key Takeaways for Students

- ★ Language shapes how we treat people
- ★ Labels simplify — people are complex
- ★ Person-first language builds understanding
- ★ Small changes in words can reduce harm

Thank-you for engaging with this toolkit.



Give us your feedback!

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