

Different and Beautiful - a Story of Caring and Wisdom

This lesson can be presented over 1-2 sessions. Instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- Become more knowledgeable and aware of learning disabilities and differences
- Have greater empathy for those who have learning disabilities that make it more difficult for them to learn using conventional approaches
- See the value of simple and deeper gestures of solidarity in helping others to overcome challenges and to build unity among people from different backgrounds
- Become more open to others who are different
- Appreciate the beauty and value of people who are different from us
- Appreciate how we can live with wisdom in using our own experiences and understanding to effectively engage challenges and problems for ourselves and others

Highlighted Virtues / Character Traits

Caring: to help others; a caring person lives with:

- *empathy* in trying to understand another person's situation, entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation

- *compassion* in feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

- *generosity* in giving freely of our own possessions, time and/or talent

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously despite obstacles and difficulties

Solidarity: unity from a shared common purpose and / or interest; active loyalty within a group; mutual support within a group; being present with others

Wisdom: ability to apply knowledge, experience, and understanding in ways that are effective and good. The ability to discern or judge what is true, right, or lasting

Leader Introduction:

Today we're going to learn about a young man, David Flink, who has two learning disabilities, dyslexia and ADHD. At first, David was not doing well at school as he struggled to learn. Dyslexia makes it more difficult to read and to interpret words, but people with dyslexia aren't less smart than those without dyslexia. Famous people who had and have dyslexia are the inventor Thomas Edison and the movie director Stephen Spielberg. Students with ADHD often have a hard time remaining focused, remaining still in the classroom and are often more impulsive. Fortunately, with the help of others and different strategies for learning, David figured out how to work with his dyslexia and ADHD and began to excel in a school. David didn't stop with only learning how to succeed for himself. In this film clip from the CNN Heroes series, we will see how David is now working to make a difference for thousands of children with disabilities.

Lesson Video:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/18/us/learning-disabilities-education-dyslexia-adhd-mentorship-cnheroes/index.html>

Leader Summary:

Fortunately, David's life has shown us how people with learning differences like dyslexia and ADHD can still excel in school and in life, but this requires identifying their unique learning differences and then learning and living out the strategies that will help them to learn. David's journey is also an incredible story of perseverance, kindness and wisdom in using his own experiences and knowledge to help others. Let's discuss how David's story speaks to our lives.

Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)*

Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions, found in the online lesson as a separate document.

1. What were David's first experiences in school, and how did he choose to react to his learning disabilities?
(David at first loved school but then in first or second grade realized he was not able to learn in his classroom. Out of frustration he then thought he could either be the dumb kid in the class or the bad kid in the class, so he decided to act out and disrupt the class.)

Let's practice some empathy and place ourselves in David's position. Do you think it would be tempting to respond to the frustration of not being able to learn the way David did?

How did David's teacher respond to his misbehavior? (moved his desk to the hallway). What do you think were the teacher's potential good motivations to do this, and also why it may not have been the right response?

2. What unexpected positive experience did David have while being in the hallway?
(The janitor became his friend by spending time with him and playing chess.)

What virtues did the janitor live out in his outreach to David?
(**caring** in likely feeling sympathy for David's situation and being generous in spending time with David; **solidarity** in being present with David and offering him emotional support)

How did David say the janitor's actions affected him?
(He said it was the most human experience he had at that time in his life and said, "it saved me.")

What does David's response to the janitor and the reality of how it affected him tell us about the importance and power of simple acts of **caring** and **solidarity**?

Let's share some stories of simple acts of caring and solidarity that others have done for us or that we have done and have made a big difference. *This is also a journal writing option below.*

3. Once David learned about his learning differences and strategies to help him learn, what was he able to accomplish in school?
(He did so well in grade school and high school that he earned admission to two of the best universities in America: Brown and Columbia.)

In addition to the janitor, David gave credit in a written interview to his parents and a special school that helped him to learn how to learn with his disabilities.

4. David is striving for his goal of “making school better for kids” by creating the Eye to Eye mentoring program. We saw in the video how the program is having a powerful and positive impact on the lives of kids with learning disabilities.

Thinking back on some of the things the younger students said who participate in Eye to Eye, what are some of the most powerful ways the program is affecting them?
(greater self-confidence; accepting their learning disability; hope that they can learn how to work with their disability; having a friendship with a mentor who understands them; seeing themselves as beautiful and unique)

What do you think are some of the aspects of the program that make it successful?
Looking at the list of virtues related to this story may help generate some ideas, and let's state the virtue related to each part of the program that you think makes it successful.

(-Mentors truly **care** about the students, spend time with them and develop a friendship with them.

- Mentors create a bond of **solidarity** with the students in sharing their experience of having a learning disability.

- A sense of community and **solidarity** is built by bringing students into a larger group where they can feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and struggles.

- Art is used as a fun way for students to express themselves, both to express their struggles and solutions.)

5. How is David living out the virtue of **wisdom**? (He is using his own life experiences in creating and building a program that is effective in helping other students learn how to work with and to succeed with their learning differences.)
6. The girl who was first interviewed for the video said, “People think I can't talk right and I'm dumb, but no I'm just unique in my own ways, and everybody is unique in their own ways if you think about it.” At the end of the video the same girl stated “I'm outgoing, I'm funny, I never give up.”

I'm going to read the girl's statements again. Do think she's right that we often view people who are different than us in a negative way?

What can we do within ourselves, and among our friends to positively change our views of others who are different from us? *This is also an extended activity team project below.*

(commit within ourselves to be aware of negative thoughts we have towards others that are different and to commit that when these thoughts arise to counter them with positive thoughts about others who are different; when we are part of a group and someone is saying something negative about another person who is different, counter that negativity with positive statements about that person and / or statements that we are all different in some way)

7. Having seen David's story, what would have been a better way for David to respond to his first sense of frustration when he realized "he could either be the dumb kid or the bad kid" then choosing to be the bad kid?
(He could have spoken with his parents and / or teacher about his difficulty learning and asked for help.)

In a CNN written interview about Eye to Eye

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/18/us/learning-disabilities-education-dyslexia-adhd-mentor-ship-cnnheroes/index.html>

it states that an estimated 1 of 5 American children have a learning disability. Given this, it's really important that if any of you think you may have a learning disability please speak with your parents and a teacher about it because there are many positive ways to work with a learning disability to help students learn to succeed in school and in life.

8. David stated, "When I hear that because they were in Eye to Eye, they now understand somebody else's experience better who's different than them - this is what we need in America," Flink said. "We have to love each other across our differences." Do you agree with David that we need to better understand, love and respect each other across our differences? How can we do this in our daily lives?
(spend time and become friends with people in our school and community who are different from us; work to change our own internal biases toward people who are different from us)

Journal Writing Options

1. Write about a simple act of caring and solidarity that someone did for you or that you have done for someone else that made a big difference.
2. Write about a negative internal bias you have toward other people who are different in some way, and how you want to replace those negative thoughts with positive thoughts and actions to reach out to someone who is different.

Extended Activity:

Organize students into teams and ask each team to create a skit where a fictional person is being made fun of, or looked down upon, because they are different. Each skit should then include a person within the group saying something and / or taking action to counter the negative that affirms and reaches out to that person in a positive way.

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