Classroom Activity

The Happiness Advantage

Time
45–60 minutes

Overview
Some evolutionary theories suggest that kindness and generosity make species vulnerable. But, could it be that these prosocial behaviors actually help species thrive?

In his book Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life, Dacher Keltner argues that sympathy, wonder, and altruism are signs of a highly evolved species. We usually think about evolution in terms of "survival of the fittest," but according to Keltner, a more accurate evolutionary framework is "survival of the kindest."

In this activity, students learn how prosocial behaviors like unselfishness and conscientiousness give a distinct advantage to communities and species. Students are given a problem-solving simulation and are instructed to solve the problem on their own without asking for help. Students are then divided into teams and asked to solve the same problem and experience how working as a team makes the problem easier to solve. Finally, students discuss how this concept relates to evolution and why it would have been biologically beneficial for early humans to display positive emotions.

Objectives
Students will be able to:

- Understand the evolutionary advantage of prosocial behaviors
- Apply their own skills in kindness to a group simulation
- Evaluate how positive emotions and interpersonal connections make it easier to solve the problems we face

Materials
- Paper and pencils for reflection questions
- A computer with access to the internet
- A projector and screen or interactive whiteboard
- Selected article "The Compassionate Species" by Dacher Keltner (can be projected onscreen or printed and distributed)
- **The Happiness Advantage: Hampering Hunger** prompt (one per student)
- Large-format poster paper (one piece per student group)
- Markers or writing utensils (a selection of a few per student group)

Procedure
1. Engage students in a critical thinking activity by asking the questions below in one of three following ways:

- Pose to the class and facilitate a wider discussion.
- Divide students into pairs and instruct them to devise answers together and report to the class.
- Allow students time to reflect on the questions individually and write down their responses.

Critical Questions:

1. **What traits do you associate with evolutionary advantage?**
2. **Does kindness equal weakness? Why or why not?**
3. **Is being selfish a good thing? Why or why not?**
4. **What are some ways that you rely on others in your day-to-day life?**

Students will return to these critical questions in the activity reflection.

2. Once you have completed the Engage, either navigate to "The Compassionate Species" by Dacher Keltner via digital means or distribute copies of the article to students.
    - Depending on the approach, you may choose to:
        - Popcorn read the article aloud in class
        - Provide students with time to read the article on their own
        - Optionally, ask students to read interactively and record the key idea, along with any questions that arise from their reading
3. When students have finished reading the article, ask the following questions:
    a. According to Keltner, why are humans "the caregiver species?"
    b. Why do we react when we see other humans suffering?
    c. Keltner says humans are "wired for compassion." What is one biological piece of evidence that supports this claim?
    d. Why do you think so many survey respondents said compassion was an important quality in a mate?
4. Explain to students that they are about to participate in an activity that will highlight several advantageous evolutionary traits.
5. Distribute one copy of the **Happiness Advantage: Hampering Hunger** prompt to each student. Set the scene by telling students to imagine what life may have been like for homo sapiens 50,000 years ago. How would they ensure their own survival? What problems/risks/challenges might they encounter? Give students 2–3 minutes to quietly read over the prompt.
6. When students have finished reading, check for understanding by asking if there are any questions about the prompt's central question (ensuring enough food supply to last throughout the year).

7. Ask each student to take out a blank sheet of paper. Provide students with 10 minutes to create a plan of action. **Important note:** For this portion of the activity, students must work independently.
8. When 10 minutes have elapsed and/or students have completed their plan, invite 1–2 students to share their work with the class.
    - Ask students the following questions:
        - What was challenging about this exercise?
        - Do you think your plan is realistic? Why or why not?
        - How would the ability to work in a group or team impact your plan?
9. Next, divide students into groups of 4–5. Provide each group with a piece of large-format paper and a selection of markers.
10. Instruct students to return to the **Happiness Advantage: Hampering Hunger prompt**. However, this time they will work as a team to address the challenge in the prompt.
11. Provide students with 15–20 minutes to develop a team plan. Instruct students to write their plan on the large-format paper.
12. When groups have completed their plans, have students post their plans on the walls of the classroom.
13. Going group by group, ask students to present their food plans.
14. Close the activity with a reflective discussion: When each group has presented their plan, revisit students' initial impressions by asking the questions below in one of three following ways:
    - Pose to the class and facilitate a wider discussion.
    - Divide students into pairs and instruct them to devise answers together and report to the class.
    - Allow students time to reflect on the questions individually and write down their responses.

    Critical Questions:

    1. **What traits do you associate with evolutionary advantage?**
    2. **Does kindness equal weakness? Why or why not?**
    3. **Were there any examples of kindness that occurred in your team?**
    4. **Is being selfish a good thing? Why or why not?**
    5. **Do you think that intentionally being kind to each other changed the way your group worked together? Why or why not?**
    6. **What are some ways that you rely on others in your day-to-day life?**
    7. **Was it easier to work alone or together to come up with a food plan?**
    8. **What advice would you give another team about kindness?**

Standards

Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)

HS-LS2-8 Ecosystems: Interactions, Energy, and Dynamics
Evaluate evidence for the role of group behavior on individual and species' chances to survive and reproduce.

Happiness Advantage: Hampering Hunger

Imagine that you are a member of the Homo sapiens species living 50,000 years ago. The place where you've made your home (in what's considered modern-day North Africa) is cold and arid. It's subject to extended droughts. However, it's been getting warmer and warmer every summer. Lush grasses and edible vegetation have started to appear. However, despite the prolonged drought, you've recently noticed the water level of a nearby sea is rising.

Food is scarce. The weather is unpredictable and can change suddenly. You and your family are never sure if there will be enough food to make it through the winter, much less a whole year. Famine and disease are major risks.

You need to:

1. Figure out how to feed your family/tribe for the next three months (gather, preserve, and protect from wildlife);
2. Gather enough resources to help you in your quest for food security;
3. Protect yourself from the elements (rain, wind, sun, temperature extremes, sudden squalls); and
4. Transport your bounty safely back home.

Outline a 10-step plan:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.