

Getting Started

And (Hopefully) Not Wasting Your Time



The main goal of the *Owning Up Curriculum* is to help students “own up,” or take responsibility for and control of the decisions they make in life. This is hard to do no matter how old you are, but this curriculum is designed for young people between the ages of 11 and 14: individuals who are in an amazing, tumultuous, and intense time of life. *Owning Up* asks them to take a big risk—to be self-reflective and honest about participating in social dynamics that can demean and isolate people. Furthermore, *Owning Up* asks young people to take this risk in the presence of their peers.

Wherever you teach, as the educator, your responsibility is to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment where this risk taking is possible. Students have to believe in the process; they have to see that everyone in the group will be asked to examine and reflect on their own experiences—including the adults. That requires a foundation of mutual trust and respect between the educator and the students, as well as among the students themselves.

OBJECTIVES

- To establish program guidelines for educators and students
- To create the foundation for mutual trust where students will want to be self-reflective, engage with the group, and speak their truth
- To present the core concept that each individual’s personal authenticity is connected to their right to be treated with dignity and the responsibility to treat others in the same manner
- To understand the positives and negatives of developing a personal armor

MATERIALS

- Whiteboard or flip chart
- Pencils or markers
- Approximately (ideally) 20 tennis balls, based on 25 students

Session Outline

What Are We Doing Today?

This session begins to create a safe environment for the students; it also lays the groundwork and sets the tone for the sessions that follow. Use the educator plan presented here and the following sessions as a guideline for expressing the main points (it's not a script to follow word for word), and be willing to go with the flow to respond to your students' questions, concerns, and views.

ACTIVITY: Cross Your Arms

Time: 5 minutes

Purpose: To put students in an “uncomfortable” situation

1. Ask students to cross their arms.
2. Ask students to uncross their arms and let their hands hang free for a moment.
3. Ask students to cross their arms in the opposite direction.
4. Once they figure out how to do that, ask them to drop their hands again.

Debrief

How uncomfortable did you feel with your arms crossed in the opposite position? It probably feels a lot less “normal” or comfortable that way. That’s what this program (the time we spend together) may feel like: putting yourself in uncomfortable situations.

Takeaways

You cross your arms in the same way most of the time, but that doesn’t make it “right”—it just makes it what you’re used to. This program is about challenging you to figure out what you’re used to and why, to allow yourself to feel uncomfortable, and then possibly to see things in a different way.

ACTIVITY: Silent Passing

Time: 10 minutes

Purpose: To teach students that communication gets progressively more difficult the more balls they have in the air

1. Separate students into groups of at least five but no more than eight.
2. Hand out one ball per group.
3. Silently toss the ball among all the people in the group.

4. *Gradually add more balls until each group has members tossing four or five balls to each other simultaneously.*
5. *Say: If you drop a ball or throw a bad pass, you remove yourself from the group.*
6. *Tell students they can rejoin the group, but don't specify how.*
7. *Stop the game after several minutes of students stepping in and out of their circle.*

Debrief

- Why do you think we played this game?
- How did it feel trying to get back into the group?
- How did it feel not knowing how to get back in or when?
- What are the different ways people tried to communicate with each other? Did it work?

Takeaways

- It's easy to communicate when there is only one ball in the air, and it gets more difficult with each additional ball.
- When each group had one ball, they were able to manage it all together. But when you're juggling a lot (which all of you are), it gets a lot more difficult.
- Everyone in this room is probably juggling lots of balls in the air. *Owning Up* will teach you how to communicate better with other people—especially when you get frustrated or annoyed at something they're doing.

ACTIVITY: Creating Group Guidelines

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To establish session guidelines

Before we move on, we need to set up some guidelines for our group. The first part of doing this is describing what you need from me so you walk out of every session feeling like you've gotten something out of it and I haven't wasted your time. I also want you to tell me about anything in general that would make you not want to participate.

Write students' responses down on the whiteboard or flip chart.

- What guidelines and expectations should I follow when we meet? (Listen, don't lecture, don't yell, don't talk down to us.)
- What guidelines and expectations should you have for yourselves? (Be honest, listen to each other, respect each other, own up to your actions.)
- Assume people have the best intentions.

- If you're offended by something someone says, ask for clarification of what they meant.
- Before passing judgment on someone, gather more information.
- What guidelines should I have for you? (Tell me what you truly think, not what you think I want to hear. Let me know if you can't relate to the topics we cover.)

If students say, "Respect each other," ask them to give concrete examples of respect. Examples could be, *You speak for yourself, not others; you don't roll your eyes; you don't say, "No offense, but . . ."*

Here's a guideline you can share with your students as well: "It's possible I may struggle with some of the things we talk about. I may really disagree with something I hear in class. When that happens, it may be hard for me, so I will be learning with you. But we will stick with the idea of everyone deserving to be treated with dignity, and that should get us through some of these tougher topics."

ACTIVITY: Understanding Confidentiality



Time: 5 minutes

Purpose: To reaffirm the definition of *confidentiality* for the students

The group's guidelines create a safe space for owning up by establishing trust, honesty, and willingness to listen for all participating students and leaders. You are encouraged to use your own words, phrases, and language to talk about the issues and topics.

Some of these terms could be considered "bad words" that you usually wouldn't say in an educational environment. But if you use these words in context, as part of a point you want to make, then you are encouraged to use them.

There is also a possibility that people in the group might say the "right" things but then behave the opposite way as soon as they leave the room. This doesn't mean the group isn't working. It means that what we are trying to accomplish is hard and doesn't happen overnight. Observe what's happening and ask yourself why the person is choosing to act the way they are (and that includes you if you find yourself in the same situation).

If you feel strongly that there is a big contradiction between what is being said in this group and how people are behaving outside the group (and you may already expect that to happen), you can come to me privately and share your thoughts.

The guidelines for the group also include that while you can share generally what we discuss in our sessions, what is specifically said in the room stays in the room. However, please know that if someone discloses that they or someone else are in imminent danger, then I'm going to work with that student to find another adult who can help. If a situation like this should happen, I won't tell another adult without your knowledge. We will work together to choose the person you feel most comfortable going to, and I will do my best to maintain your privacy.

Debrief

- *Owning Up* is what you learn in school that's not taught in books. It's about what happens in the hallways, in the lunchroom, in your classes. It's about the unwritten rules that may direct your or your peers' opinions and actions.
- You can expect that there will be moments in this program you won't like. Either you'll really disagree with something someone has said, or you won't like what we are discussing.
- If that happens, ask yourself why you are having that reaction, think about it, and then state your opinion.

Takeaways

- As the adult running these sessions, I don't assume I know what is going on in your life. I will present you with information. All I ask of you is to engage with the group and participate, even if—and especially if—you disagree.
- If you aren't getting what you need from this program, or any program like it, ask for what you need. You owe that to yourself and your education.
- This program will present you with one way to look at the world. Not everyone sees things in the same way. But our time together is grounded on the belief that your dignity, your worth, and the dignity of others are nonnegotiable. The goal of the program is to help you understand what is behind common yet difficult problems many people experience and to give you concrete, realistic solutions. Before we go on, let's take a few moments to be clear about definitions.

ACTIVITY: Getting Clear About Words

Time: 5 minutes

Purpose: To clarify definitions of *dignity* and *respect*

People can use words assuming that the person they're speaking to agrees with what the terms mean. So before we go on, let's make sure we agree about some terms.

What does *dignity* mean? It comes from the Latin word *dignitas*, which means "to be worthy." Dignity is a given. What does *respect* mean? It comes from the Latin word *respectus*, which means "to look back at." Today, respect is defined as "a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements." Unlike dignity, which each person gets no matter what, respect is earned.



Debrief/Takeaways

- What's your personal definition of *dignity*? What images, sounds, colors, etc., come to mind when you hear/see the word *dignity*?
- What's your personal definition of *respect*? What images, sounds, colors, etc., come to mind when you hear/see the word *respect*?

ACTIVITY: No Assumptions



Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To create a safe space for students to share their experiences

We don't want to make any assumptions about anyone in this room. So we are going to do a quick activity that will give us some knowledge about people's experiences without calling anyone out. Take out a piece of paper and a pencil or pen. I am going to read aloud the following statements. Every time I say something that you have experienced, write down a slash or a tally. If you're worried about people looking at which ones you mark, feel free to cover your paper with your other hand. After I read all the statements I am going to collect all the papers, total the marks, and then divide by the number of students in the room to get the class average. Or we can do the math together. It's your choice.

Here are the statements:

1. I have not been invited to something I really wanted to go to.
2. I have been unfairly labeled.
3. People have talked behind my back or gossiped about me.
4. I have pretended to be more confident than I really am.
5. I have not been able to talk to a friend about something important to me because I was worried they'd laugh at me or use it against me.
6. I have heard bad gossip about someone else.
7. I have been rejected by someone I really liked.
8. I have been caught up in a drama I wanted nothing to do with.
9. A friend made fun of me about something painful and didn't stop even though they knew I hated it.
10. I've been so angry I wanted to explode, but I didn't say anything.
11. My parents are divorced or not together.
12. I've been teased about the way I look.
13. I have dreaded going to school.
14. I've been at school pretending to be fine when I'm really not.

Debrief

- How does it feel even to write down those marks?
- How does it feel to know there are other people here who may have answered yes to the same statements as you?
- How are you feeling right now?

Takeaways

- People in this room have had similar experiences.
- You are not alone if you have struggled with a problem.

ACTIVITY: Building Our Armor

Time: 15 minutes

Purpose: To process and put into words how students “choose” to present themselves in public versus how they may really be feeling

We just admitted that sometimes we go to school pretending we’re fine when we really aren’t. How do we do this? Maybe one way of thinking about it is everyone has their own personal armor they wear to get through their day.

Give each student a piece of 12" by 18" paper with a drawing of a person wearing armor.

Draw in pictures and/or words what you show people on the outside. On the back of the paper write what you don’t show people, and if you would like to share it with the group or not.

Debrief

- In general, what are the positives of wearing this armor?
- In general, what are the negatives of wearing this armor?
- What are the positives and negatives of the particular armor you wear, and why did you choose it? Would you rather change it for something else? When do you take it off?
- Was your armor made overnight, or was it made over time?
- What would happen if you showed the parts of yourself you usually keep hidden?

Takeaways

- Everybody wears some form of armor.
- Some share what’s underneath; others keep it completely hidden.
- There can be really good reasons why people hide parts of themselves or how they’re feeling. Other times, hiding feelings can make problems feel overwhelming. We will examine both throughout our time together.

Wrap It Up

Time: 5 minutes

Everyone in this room has gone through challenging experiences:

- Some of you have gone through similar experiences.
- When you see someone act a certain way they may be feeling differently than you would assume.

Carry It With You

Let's choose a few times during a normal day when you can try to remember to check in with yourself.

- Can you feel it when you walk into your school? When does the armor come on? Can you visualize what it looks like?
- What does it feel like walking between classes? During lunch?
- Observe other people. Can you see their armor?

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