

## Lesson One — Circles of Compassion

**Objective:** Students will consider who they include in their circle of compassion.

### Materials Required

Handouts — Circle of Compassion Worksheets:

Draw 10 concentric circles on a regular-size page. The circles should be spaced far enough apart to allow writing between the lines. Leave enough room at the top of the page for a student to write their name. This is a "Circle of Compassion Worksheet." Make enough copies for each student in the class to have two copies.

Film or PowerPoint presentation (to be determined, depending on availability)

### Activity One

Ask students to define the word compassion and the word empathy. One dictionary definition of compassion is "a deep awareness of and sympathy for another's suffering," and one dictionary definition of empathy is "understanding and entering into another's feelings."

Discuss with the class what compassion and empathy mean. Ask students if they wish others to be compassionate toward them and to have empathy for them.

Hand out one Circle of Compassion Worksheet to each student and explain that it represents their own personal circle of compassion. In the center, ask them to list for whomever or whatever they feel the most compassion (self, family, friends, nature, animals, people in other parts of the world, and so on). Then ask them to fill in the rest of the circles, going from those they feel the most compassion for in the inner circles to those they feel less compassion for as they move outward.

Ask students:

- If someone from another family filled out the form, do you think their family would be at the center?
- If someone from another culture filled out the form, do you think their culture would be at the center?
- If there were a way for another species to fill out the form, do you imagine that they and their family would be at the center?

To the teacher: Collect these Worksheets now and save them for use again in Lesson Eleven, when the students assess whether their views have changed.

### Activity Two

Film and discussion

(Any film or PowerPoint presentation about compassion. Can be about those willing to witness and speak out about injustice)

### Activity Three

Write the following list on the board:

- My own family
- Other families in my neighborhood
- Other families in my region
- Other people in my country
- People in other countries
- Nonhuman primates, like chimpanzees and bonobos
- Other nonhuman land mammals
- Marine mammals
- Birds
- Fish
- Insects
- Plants
- Bacteria

Go down the list one by one, asking students to state what they think they do not have in common with each one on the list.

Then go down the list again, this time asking students to list what they think they do have in common with them. If they are not certain, ask them what they imagine they have in common with them (physical characteristics, senses, communication, family/relationships, feelings like pain and pleasure, wanting to choose what they do and when and where they do it, and so on).

Ask students the following questions:

How do we decide who we will care about and who we will not care about?

Do our ideas about who is part of our community and who we care about change over time?

Over the course of history, how have our ideas changed about how we treat the following people:

- Children
- People with disabilities
- Women
- Other races

For example, in the U.S., not until 1920 did women have the right to vote. Before 1807 in the U.K. and 1865 in the U.S., it was legal to own slaves. At one time in the U.S., it was acceptable and legal to burn to death a woman suspected of being a witch. Until the constitution of the U.S. state of Maryland was changed in 1826, only people of one religion could hold public office. What a culture decides is right and wrong changes over time. What we consider acceptable to do to another person or another species changes over time.

## Activity Four

As a class, in small groups or on their own, ask students to do the following:

Imagine that you are in charge of welcoming and helping to orient a being, called Zano, from another planet. Your job is to explain to Zano how to act while he or she is here on Earth. Zano needs to be trained in our human culture so he or she does not offend anyone or cause needless harm or suffering.

Zano asks the following questions:

- *How should I treat other people who don't look like you?*
- *How should I treat people who are very weak?*
- *How should I treat people who cannot speak to me because I do not know their language?*
- *I noticed that you do not treat all animal species in the same way, and it is confusing for me. How should I treat birds? Should I treat all birds the same way? I noticed that some are looked at through special glasses you call binoculars and are very much loved, while others are taken from their homes, put in small cages, and not allowed to fly, and still others are killed and eaten. Why?*
- *I noticed that some colorful fish are valuable to you when they are alive, while other fish are killed and eaten. I noticed that even those you think are beautiful are taken from their homes and brought into your homes. Why?*
- *How should I treat dogs? I noticed that dogs in some places are treated better than the royal family on our planet, while other dogs are beaten and often not given enough food or shelter. Why?*
- *How should I treat horses? Donkeys?*
- *I noticed that you treat some horses like very special family members, while other horses are starved and abused. Why?*
- *I noticed that the donkeys work very hard here, but they are not treated with gratitude for all they do. Why?*
- *I noticed that you are beings who need water and air to survive, but your air has poison gases from factories, vehicles, and cattle and your water has waste and chemicals from trash, sewage, oil, pesticides, and poisonous substances. Why did you do this?*

*I know I am asking a lot of questions, but the way things are on my planet is so different from the way things are on yours. I want to understand the way things are here so I can live in peace with others here by doing what is right, according to your culture.*

How will you help Zano understand the culture on Planet Earth so he or she can travel over our planet and know how to make important decisions?

## Activity Five

Ask the class to list the biggest problems on Earth right now. They can include water pollution, destruction of entire species and ecosystems, abuse and neglect of domestic animals like dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, cows, sheep, goats, chickens, pigs, and others, air pollution, deforestation, slavery, dog and cat overpopulation, wars between people, and so on.

Questions for discussion:

- What do these problems all have in common? (They are all caused by people.)
- Who has the power to change the way things are and to do things in a new and more caring way? (People have this power.)
- Explain how purchases are the same as voting. (Every purchase is saying "Do this again. I believe in what you are doing and will support it." Voting power can also be veto power. If certain products or actions do not match our values, we can boycott them.)

### Activity Six

Discuss the importance of staying open to new ideas about caring and compassion and about who we can include in our circle of caring and compassion. Include in the discussion consideration of the following quotations:

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

*US black civil rights leader and clergyman (1929 – 1968)*

*Letter from Birmingham Jail, April 16, 1963*

The opposite is also true: Justice anywhere is a threat to injustice everywhere.

"Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

Voltaire

*French author, humanist, rationalist, and satirist (1694 - 1778)}*

If other beings on our planet were more powerful than we are, we would want to be included in their circle of compassion. We would want them to understand that:

- We can feel pain and pleasure. We want to be free of pain and experience some pleasure in life, just as they do. This can lead into a discussion of what donkeys might be feeling when they are beaten, starved, overloaded, injured, and so on.
- We want to be in our home with our friends and family nearby.
- We want the freedom to choose how we will spend our days — what we will eat, when we will sleep and eat, where we spend our days and nights. We want choices.

Students may laugh at the idea of work animals (or any animals we own) having choices — we own them, so we choose how their lives will be. Encourage students to think about how they would feel if they were in the situation of animals and of any living being, and to consider whether we are justified in behaving the way we do toward others, or whether it is time to reconsider our relationships with others on the planet, for the good of all.