

Personal Journals

A Life Skills Teaching Tool

Children who write in their journals regularly develop a better understanding of themselves and of the world around them.

Educators and psychologists recommend journal-keeping for all ages. What are the benefits of asking children to keep a journal? Do early elementary students have the skills to express their thoughts and feelings in writing?

Children start out by sharing their emotions with the world. Everyone knows when a small child is happy, frightened, angry, or sad. However, from the time they're young, we teach children to suppress their emotions. Journal-writing is a way for them to express pent-up emotions in a socially acceptable way.

Linda Gallipoli is a 3rd-grade teacher at Ryerson Elementary School in Wayne, New Jersey, who believes in the benefits of journaling for children. She says, "They can freely express themselves in writing in many creative ways without the pressure of more structured writing where punctuation, spelling, and grammar rules are so important. They are able to simply enjoy communicating through writing."

Aisling D'Art teaches journaling and art journaling to children in school and homeschool settings. She believes that journal-writing is important for children because it gives them a sense of their own story. She says, "If you ask a kindergarten student to write a story, he or she will often write it in the first person, while a 5th-grade student has often switched to third person. He no longer writes about himself. Sadly, many children have lost touch with their dreams and their sense of self-worth, at least in relation to the rest of the world."

A journal can be a problem-solving tool. Suppose a child in your classroom is not getting along with a parent, is having difficulty understanding a religious doctrine, or has had an argument with her best friend. There are journaling techniques you can teach to help her clarify the situation and discover a solution.

Gallipoli talks about one of her students who was helped through journaling. She says, "This student was very shy, but she began to open up to me through her journal-writing. She could write things down that she had a difficult time saying. As a result, some social problems she was having with her peers came to light, and we were able to work on them together."

Fourth-grade teacher Sam Gerald* used journaling in his classroom to help thwart cliques. He observed that some children were being excluded from playground activities. During free play, those who lacked athletic ability or who weren't popular were not invited to participate.

When Gerald introduced the concept of journal-keeping to his students, he suggested that they

By Patricia L. Fry

* To protect individuals' privacy, some names have been changed in this article. An asterisk appears after such names the first time they are used.

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write their feelings and thoughts about friendship—what is a friend, how does one become a friend, and what does it mean to have a friend? He took this theme a step farther and asked the children to explore what it feels like to lose a friend or to be rejected by your peers.

After doing the journal-keeping unit, the class discussed their writing. Many of them expressed disdain toward people who exclude others. Even those who were in the cliques admitted that everyone should be treated equally. Some of the popular students recalled times when they felt excluded and rejected. While things didn't change overnight, this wise teacher did notice many of his students becoming more accepting of others.

Children who write in their journals regularly develop a better understanding of themselves and of the world around them. This helps them to realize that they have choices and to understand the impact their actions will have.

Some children are dealing with anger. They're upset because their parents are getting a divorce, because they have lost a loved one or friend and weren't given the opportunity and the tools to grieve in a healthy way, or because they don't feel safe—even at home. Journaling can

help these children work through their anger by helping them acknowledge it, recognize its source, and make new choices about how to deal with it.

Following are some ideas to get your students involved in journal-keeping and to help them benefit from the process:

Resources

Web sites

Journal-keeping tips and ideas for working with students
<http://www.creative-journal.com>

Journaling prompts for elementary school teachers
<http://www.canteach.ca/elementary/prompts.html>

Books

Write On! Journal-Keeping for Teens
By Patricia L. Fry
Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2001

The Creative Journal for Children: A Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Counselors
By Lucia Cappacchione
Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1989

- Explain that a journal can be a child's best friend—by helping him or her to find answers to questions and solutions to problems.

- Make journal books a class project for language arts.

- Help your students commit to a time for journaling. Allow classroom journaling sessions, but also urge them to write in their journal at home. Gallipoli suggests having students write in their journals after recess. She says, "It's a nice way to calm and quiet them so they are ready to learn more in the afternoon."

- Establish a privacy rule regarding journals in your classroom, and discuss how to find a safe place for the students to keep their journals at home.

- Provide a topic each week to encourage those students who aren't very spontaneous to write in their journals.

Beth Lewis teaches journal-writing to her 3rd-grade class in a California elementary school. In an article she wrote for about.com, she says, "In my experience, students' writing tends to get silly with lack of focus." So she typically gives her students a topic. She recommends that teachers select something that interests the kids. She says, "Children are more likely to write in a lively and engaging manner if they are entertained by the topic."

She also plays classical music while they're writing because "it sets a serious tone for productive, quality writing."

Here's a list of sample topics that students may enjoy, and that will help them get to know themselves better:

- Who do I admire, and why?
- What can I do really well? (If the children seem stuck on this one, offer some suggestions: braiding hair, kicking a football, hitting a baseball, writing, making friends, telling the truth, taking care of my pet, organizing my backpack)
- What can I do this week to help someone?
- What has someone done to help me lately?

- What are my future plans?
- Where would I like to be scholastically/athletically/spiritually this time next year?
- What do I want to be remembered for when I leave this school?
- What is the best gift I could give, and who would I give it to?
- What is my favorite memory?
- What do I value most in my friendships?
- What are 10 things I like about myself?
- What three things would I like to change about myself?

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Manage Your Journaling Session—Carefully

How does a teacher integrate a journal-keeping unit into a lesson plan without encroaching on students' privacy? And how do you grade something that personal? Here's what the experts suggest: Encourage each student to keep a journal at home, but also give journal-keeping assignments in class. Inform the students that you will be checking their journals periodically.

Of course, students can write whatever they want, but I recommend offering assignments such as those suggested in the list above. Collect the journals every week or once a month and provide some constructive criticism for each student. Your job is to offer guidance and encouragement.

Beth Lewis grades her students' journals only occasionally. She says, "The kids know that every so often, I will collect the journals and grade them on their last entry. But they don't know when, so they must be on their toes."

Lewis's grading system is not based on content, but on neatness, whether or not the student remembered to date his

fer suggestions for making the assignment useful for each child.

You might say, for example, "Susanna, I admire your courage in confronting

write an essay about what makes a good friend?"

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or her entry, the number of sentences, and so forth.

Be careful about critiquing how students write in their journals. The best way to help students with journaling is to of-

your feelings. You might try offsetting your fear by listing a page of happy memories here." Or say, "Jonathan, you've done a good job of working through your problem with your friend. Why don't you

is your duty to act on this information. Either talk to the child about it or report it to the appropriate authorities or both. Aisling D'Art says, "If a child's life or someone else's is actually in danger, go to

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didn't want his classmates to know about his family, and he refused to write about it during the journaling project in his 6th-grade class.

What Bradley did, however, was create cartoon strips. Ms. Moulton,* his teacher, was upset. She said, "Bradley, you're not following the assignment outline." He assured her that he was and proceeded to explain the meaning behind some of his cartoon figures, "This is my Dad in a far-off land fighting his dragons. Here's my Mom at home struggling with all of the things in life."

The teacher asked, "Where are you in all of this, Bradley?"

He said, "In this box, I'm the little cocoon in the corner . . . Here I am breaking out of the cocoon. See all of the color and fireworks?"

"Yes I do," said Ms. Moulton. "You're telling a wonderful story, and I like the direction it's going. Keep up the good work."

While a classroom journal-writing unit can promote better communication

the authorities immediately. You can deal with the psychological consequences later. If it's a case of abuse, schedule a private conference with the child and another very understanding adult such as a minister or school psychologist."

Creative Journaling

A journal is personal, and each student should be allowed to manage it however he or she wishes. It's OK for the child to use drawings to express himself or herself, for example. Some children will write stories or poems either in conjunction with or instead of a more traditional jour-

nal style. For some children, the reality of their life may be too painful to explore directly.

Things were pretty awful at home for 11-year-old Bradley.* His father was in jail, and his single mother was addicted and unstable. Bradley spent as little time as possible at home. He attended an activities program every day after school. He often ate dinner at the homes of his friends. He

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skills, penmanship, spelling, grammar, and punctuation, it has a larger purpose. Journaling is an opportunity for a child to grow as an individual through self-expression that leads to a deeper understanding of self and others.

Journal-Keeping as a Problem-Solving Tool

Do children bring their problems to you throughout the school day? If you're like most grade-school teachers, you play the role of referee, therapist, parent, and friend. The fact is that children can work out some of their problems through journaling.

When there is a conflict between two children, suggest that they write about the problem. Help your students hone their problem-solving skills by offering some prompts. Ask them to write everything they know about the situation—

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what happened, how it happened, how it escalated; and, in their opinion, how it can be resolved. This may be a journal entry that needs to be shared between the children involved.

Journaling can also help children and adolescents make good choices. You can create scenarios or work with the students as they write about actual situations to help them make the best possible choice.

Suggest a "pro and con" exercise. Have your students write down all of the reasons why it is a good idea to smoke cigarettes, cheat on a test, lie to their parents, etc. Then have them write all of the reasons why they should not do this. Ask them to research their answers by using the Bible and looking for facts in the library or on the Internet. Discuss the lists

with the class.

You can help your students with their pro and con list by asking, "How would your decision affect you an hour from now, a week from now, a year from now, and 10 years from now?" They may think that smoking won't hurt them much right now. But what if they're hooked and are still smoking in 10 years—or 20? Help your students explore the pros and cons so they can make wise decisions.

Some of your students may already keep a personal journal. With additional instructions and guidance from you, they can learn some valuable new journaling

techniques and solve personal problems, as well. ✍



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