

## Fighting Words with Words <sup>32</sup>

**Class Time Needed:** 30 minutes

### Materials

- Examples of sweeping generalizations and balancing statements written on individual strips of paper
- Small weights (such as spools or small blocks of wood) to attach to each paper strip
- A two-sided scale
- Copies of "[Fighting Words With Words](#)"

### Objectives

- Students will recognize the faulty thinking behind stereotypes and sweeping generalizations.
- Students will practice using balancing statements to counteract stereotypes and sweeping generalizations.

### Introduction

"Fighting Words with Words" provides students with some simple tools to use when confronted with the prejudicial statements of others.

### Procedure

1. Prepare for the activity by writing examples of sweeping generalizations and balancing statements (see examples below) on individual strips of paper. Tape each strip to a small weight. You will use the two-sided scale to show students how balancing statements can "balance" sweeping generalizations.

#### **Generalization**

Elderly people are afraid to try new things.

#### **Balancing Statement**

My grandmother just bought a computer. She loves using e-mail!

#### **Generalization**

People with physical disabilities can't play sports.

#### **Balancing Statement**

Former New York Yankee pitcher Jim Abbott was born with only one hand.

2. Review the meaning of "stereotype" and "sweeping generalization" with your students.

**stereotype:** a preconceived belief that is applied to all members of a specific group. For example, a statement such as "Let's get Kyle to play on the basketball team. He's the tallest kid in the class" expresses a stereotype. The speaker assumes that all tall people like to play basketball.

**sweeping generalization:** a statement like "All tall people like to play basketball." This suggests all members of a group are alike.

3. Place a sweeping generalization on one side of the scale. Point out that sweeping generalizations give a one-sided or unbalanced view of a person or group. Then balance the scale by placing a counter or "balancing" statement on the other side. Ask students to describe the purpose of a balancing statement.

4. Place additional examples of sweeping generalizations and balancing statements on the scale. Point out the particular strategy being used in each balancing statement you place on the scale. (Examples: "This statement gives specific rather than general information" and "This statement politely disagrees.")
5. Have students work with partners to come up with the sweeping generalizations behind the balancing statements given in "[Fighting Words with Words.](#)" For example, if the balancing statement is "I just don't agree with you that girls don't do as well as boys in math. That hasn't been our class's experience at all," then the original statement could have been something like "Girls aren't good at math."

### Debriefing

Use the following questions to help students find ways to use balancing statements when they hear sweeping generalizations or stereotypes.

1. How does it feel when you hear a sweeping generalization such as "All kids are lazy"?
2. What did you learn from this demonstration? What effect do sweeping generalizations and stereotypes have on people?
3. Have you ever heard a friend or a family member use a stereotype to describe an individual or a group of people? How could you use balancing statements when this happens?
4. What are some other strategies you can use to counteract "unbalanced" thinking about other people?

### Extending the Ideas

- Have students make a list of sweeping generalizations and stereotypes they have heard. Ask them to work in groups to come up with counter statements to balance each statement. Share these with the entire class.
- Have students work with partners to write examples of situations that involve the use of sweeping generalizations and stereotypes. Then ask each pair to write a dialogue of a discussion that includes balancing statements. Have the groups perform their dialogues for the class and ask the class members to identify the balancing statements used in each scenario.
- Share the following description of a Peace Corps Volunteer's experience in his host country with your students. This anecdote provides a good opportunity to help your students understand that prejudice is not always a factor in situations where people from different cultures come together.

I would ride a bus from the capital out to a small town where I would catch another bus out to the village up in the mountains. I noticed that if I got on the bus and it wasn't very crowded, all the other seats on the bus would fill up before someone would sit beside me because I was different. I was the one white person on the bus. People naturally are going to gravitate toward what they know and what they are comfortable with. . . . I learned really quickly that they weren't [choosing other seats] because they hated white people. I was different and they were naturally going to go to where they felt comfortable first. My seat would usually be the last to fill up and I often had wonderful conversations with whomever ended up sitting next to me.

-Kevin Webb

- Have students work in cooperative groups to design posters that illustrate the nine types of balancing statements identified in the "[Fighting Words with Words](#)" [worksheet](#). Post the whole set in a public place, such as the school cafeteria or a hallway.

## Fighting Words With Words

We can do many things to act against stereotypes. One easy thing we can do is to change the way we talk about other people, particularly when we don't know them very well. In our everyday discussions with friends and classmates, we can use words and phrases that give a balanced view of others. Sentences that give another point of view are called "balancing statements."

**Directions:** Below are some examples of stereotypes and balancing statements. Can you identify the sweeping generalizations that are behind the stereotypes?

**1. Think about or share opposite examples when someone makes a sweeping generalization.**

They say: **Sri Lankans have long, straight hair.**

You say: **Two of my Sri Lankan friends have short hair that's permed.**

Generalization:

**2. Give specific rather than general information about people.**

**My new friend from Jamaica enjoys rock music and country music, not just reggae. He is interested in playing in the orchestra, but he also wants to try out for the volleyball team.**

Generalization:

**3. Point out the good or positive things about others.**

**When I was a Volunteer, most people in Nepal went out of their way to help strangers.**

Generalization:

**4. Share cultural information.**

**George isn't eating the sausages because his family practices Islam. Did you know that people who practice Islam usually don't eat pork?**

Generalization:

**5. Actively question (even just to yourself) the reliability of the source of information.**

**I wonder if John really knows what the Honduran people are like. He was there for only a few days. Maybe he or someone he knows just had a bad experience.**

Generalization:

**6. Politely disagree.**

**Really, I just don't agree with you that girls don't do as well as boys in math. That hasn't been true in our class.**

Generalization:

**7. Point out that what may be true for some is not necessarily true for all.**

**I know a lot of people in Senegal are farmers, but they don't all live in the country, nor do they all become farmers. In fact, many work in the cities or go to the university and study for advanced degrees.**

Generalization:

**8. Wait before making a judgment.**

Think to yourself: **That girl seems really stuck-up to me, but I'd better wait to form an opinion about her. Maybe she just doesn't speak English very well yet. Or maybe she's shy.**

Generalization: