



## **ART BRIDGES: Lesson Plans for Enrichment, Growth and Healing**

### **Creating a Safe Place**

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**Kristina Marcelli Sargent**  
<https://kristinamarcelli.wordpress.com>

Including the activity  
**Kindness Tree: Growing Hearts of Kindness**

#### **Objectives:**

1. The facilitator/teacher will be introduced to methods that will be beneficial in making clients feel safe and “at ease”
2. The participants/clients will reflect on their actions and the importance of treating others with kindness
3. The participants/clients will create and use a “Kindness Tree” as a means for monitoring and recording their positive actions

#### **Insights from Kristina:**

To truly address maladaptive behavior, ineffective social skills, and emotional issues in children we must first help the child feel safe. Feeling truly internally safe and peaceful is so important, which is why I’m always writing about it.

I was recently reminded of the significance of feeling safe when my husband and I adopted an adult rescue dog. This dog had been a stray, been sent to the pound, was saved by a rescue, was treated for heart worm, and was then adopted by us. Joey became attached to us quickly—he is loving and playful, and has always had an eye on where my husband and I are in the house.

We knew leaving him alone for the first time would be hard on us and the dog. Sure enough, Joey appeared pretty upset when we left him alone for the first time and an hour later he had gotten into our dirty laundry and made a small pile of it in his bed. Each time we left him he did this. I decided that Joey didn't feel safe. He was searching for reminders of us when we left. I tried to think what would help a dog feel safe. So I went out and bought this silly looking but soft and endearing ostrich stuffed animal and gave it to Joey. He loved it and started



carrying it with him everywhere. He had had plenty of toys but it seems there was something comforting in the stuffed animal. Let's just say he hasn't gotten into our laundry since. We find him cuddled up with his stuffed animal when we get home—something consistent, something that belongs to him.

I know, I know—Joey is a dog and this blog is about kids. But my point is there is something truly significant in feeling safe, in feeling like nothing bad is going to happen to you. We cannot always help the children we work with truly be safe in their external environment but there are simple things we can do to give them some internal security and peace.

Tips to making your office, classroom, or home feel safe for children:

1. Create consistent rules, expectations, and rituals. Take turns choosing the activities and review positive behaviors utilizing the kindness tree at the end of each session, etc. (*see below*)
2. Follow through. At the end of a session, ask the child how they want to start their session the next time you meet--write their response down. Next session get out the paper and read it together. This shows you value the child's opinion and you don't forget about their wants and needs.
3. Meet developmental needs through play and comfort. Have picture books out and available and offer the child a stuffed animal to hold during the session, etc.—DESPITE THE CHILD'S ACTUAL AGE. By doing so, you will show the space is safe for the child to have his or her developmental nurturing and play needs met without being judged or feeling embarrassed.
4. Create a mini safe space. The mini safe space is literally a space only the child can fit into and utilize WHENEVER he or she wants or needs to. This could be a mini pop up tent or any variation of a miniature secluded space. Name it, too, with a sign the children can read that identifies its purpose "safe space," "peace corner," etc. and fill with stuffed animals or pillows.
5. Use a calming scent such as lavender or peppermint. Even having an oil stone and allowing the child to choose the scent can be powerful. I personally use a bag of dried lavender buds and the children know if they want to make the scent stronger in the room they can squeeze the bag to release more scent from the flowers. These last a long time, too.
6. Tap into your own inner peace! Meditate for a minute or two before meeting with a child, practice mindful breathing during your session; create loving reminders and encouragement for yourself to access when you need it.

Hoping for some more awareness of inner peace for you and the children in your life today!

## Kindness Tree: Growing Hearts of Kindness



If you've ever been in a Head Start classroom, you may be familiar with a kindness tree. The basic premise is to reinforce "kind behaviors" by giving the child labeled praise and allowing him or her to put a heart on the tree. "Katie, I saw you help your friend clean up and you didn't even make that mess. That was so kind of you! I think you made Gabe happy when you did that. Come put a heart on the tree so we can remember the kind thing you did today!" Pointing out the feeling of the person receiving the act of kindness is really important to reinforce, too.

Great news though, these are not just successful behavior reinforcements in the classroom but also at home! I have a kindness tree in my therapy office that I use to reinforce kind behaviors observed during sessions or based on what caregivers and children report to me ("Yesterday I helped my little brother calm down when he was sad and gave him a hug.").

I like the kindness tree because children love the tangible visual of the tree and the verbal praise from adults--plus, what better behaviors to reinforce than empathy-building skills?! When I make them in session with kiddos, I already have them laminated and allow the child to just help me cut out the tree and hearts

and add the Velcro while we talk about the types of behaviors that can allow them to put a heart on the tree when they get home. I tell parents they can attach an incentive to the tree but the labeled praise and excitement is usually enough. "Wow! You two filled up the entire tree with hearts today for all of the kind things you did! I'm so proud of you both! Do you remember some of the kind things you did? Let's try to remember so we can tell Daddy when he gets home today." Bottom line: the bigger deal the adults make out of it, the more on board the kids are going to be. I have been seeing some children in therapy for over a year and they still get excited and love putting hearts on the tree in my office! I have used them with children ages 3-7, but I'm sure they could even be used with slightly older children. All kids love attention and praise.

### How to Make a Kindness Tree:

#### Supplies/Materials:

- Brown, red and green felt in the size desirable for the kindness tree (four feet or less for the facilitator's office)
- Construction paper in brown, red and green (to make trees for the clients to take home)
- Laminate (for the trees the clients will take home)
- Velcro dots
- Scissors
- Glue/glue gun
- Embellishments to give life-like qualities (eyes, etc.)

There are plenty of different ways to make the tree. The kindness tree in my therapy office is just a little less than four feet tall and made with felt (so the hearts stick easily). When I make these with children in session for them to take home, I use a laminated enlarged clip art tree and laminated hearts with Velcro dots to stick to the tree.

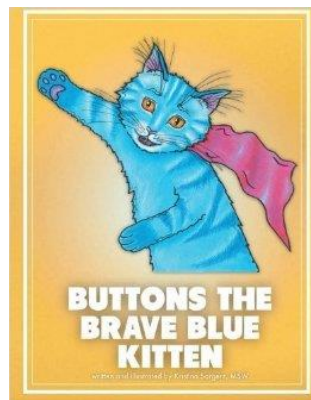
TIPS: if you go the laminated route, make sure to be consistent in putting all the same size of the Velcro dots on the hearts and the other side of the Velcro dots on the tree (if they get mixed up its harder to find a spot for the heart). Also, a side note on the word "kindness": I really like using the word "kind" vs. "nice" because I think it holds more meaning. "Nice" is used so much in our language it loses significance: "nice haircut, nice boat, nice weather," etc. And if children

don't know what "kind" means, this provides a great opportunity to learn! How many hearts of kindness can you grow today??



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Heartfelt thanks to **Kristina Marcelli Sargent (MSW)** who graciously gave permission to Hildegard Center to re-post this activity from her website <https://kristinamarcelli.wordpress.com> . Kristina is a mental health therapist (living in Cincinnati, OH) who works with children and their families. Her blog is a place where creative expression and social/emotional well-being can become one, offering creative interventions, activities and inspiration for all ages—please visit it! Kristina has her undergraduate degree in art and creative writing and has written and illustrated her first book, “Buttons the Brave Blue Kitten” a story



*about separation anxiety intended to help children develop empathy and give adults the skills to reinforce its development. The book is available to order on Kristina's website or on Amazon.com. Also check out Kristina's newest book: "Ursula Unwinds Her Anger" which teaches children mindfulness-related skills and offers adults tips on encouraging these skills in children. You can purchase this great book at <http://www.amazon.com/Ursula-Unwinds-Kristina-Marcelli-Sargent/dp/1499073003> .*

**If you have enjoyed this article and used this lesson plan, we'd love to hear from you! Please send questions or comments through our website [www.hildegardcenter.org](http://www.hildegardcenter.org) .**

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