

A Thousand Words

Overview:

To become more aware that compassion involves understanding and engaging in another person's life, students view images of people and creatively interpret what they see.

Materials:

- Photo(s) cut from magazines (remove all headlines, captions, and associated articles describing the scene)

Procedure:

1. Choose one or more photos that provoke an emotional response. They should feature at least one person. Choose images in which the emotions of the person are not overt (screaming, crying, laughing, etc.) and their mood or situation is ambiguous.
2. Say: There is an old saying: "A picture is worth a thousand words." We're going to look at a picture and describe it in a thousand words. But before we do, we need to ask how to feel compassion for another person and why it's important. Solicit and list answers. Point out that part of caring involves empathy — seeing another's perspective and feeling what he or she is going through. Say: Our purpose is to look at the people in the photo with compassionate eyes. Imagine their lives, thoughts, dreams, fears. Invent a story for them. To do so, you have to care about them.
3. Distribute the photo(s) and display them. If you have more than one, tell the students to choose only one to write about. Encourage them to pretend that they are the figure in the photo(s) or the photographer. Invite them to think about what the person/photographer sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches, and feels in the captured moment; why the person is happy, scared, bored, or sad; where he/she has come from and where he/she is headed; and why the photographer cared enough to take a picture. Share the stories. Suggest that taking the time to figure out a person's feelings is the essence of empathy and compassion, which are key elements of caring. Ask them to explain why.

This lesson is from *Good Ideas*, available for purchase from the CHARACTER COUNTS! online store.

Adapted from "Keeping the American Promise," Vol. 4, Issue 1, p. 2 (Los Angeles, CA: The American Promise, 1999). Also inspired by the "What They Were Thinking" photo feature of *The New York Times Magazine*.

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McREL standards

Language Arts

Standard 9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Level IV, Benchmark 7. Understands how images and sound convey messages in visual media (e.g., special effects, camera angles, symbols, colors, lines, textures, shapes, headlines, photographs, reaction shots, sequencing of images, sound effects, music, dialogue, narrative, lighting).