

Empathy & Emotions SEL Pack

Activities for Self-Awareness & Support

Help 3rd-4th graders unpack hidden feelings, build empathy, and strengthen classroom connection!

- ✓ Story-driven lesson to explore unspoken worries
- ✓ Hands-on "Invisible Backpack" craft for personal reflection
- ✓ Daily empathy journal & class reflection tools
- ✓ Role-play scenarios & mask-making extensions



Scroll

to see what else is included



What's Included

- ✓ **Story-based lesson** - Mia's Invisible Backpack introduces emotional weight and hidden feelings
- ✓ **Printable backpack craft** - Students reflect on what makes them feel heavy, supported, and lighter
- ✓ **Empathy journal** - Daily and weekly prompts to notice kind moments and practice emotional awareness
- ✓ **Role-play cards** - Short scenarios to help students respond with empathy and kindness
- ✓ **Mask-making activity** - Creative extension to explore emotional expression and self-awareness
- ✓ **Class reflection guide** - Discussion questions and wrap-up prompts to build classroom connection
- ✓ **Full-color & outline versions** - Choose what works best for your students and ink budget

Mia's Invisible Backpack story

Mia's Invisible Backpack

Mia wore a big smile as she walked into her classroom each morning. She happily waved at her friends, helped unstack the chairs, and always said "good morning" to her teacher, Mr. Lee.

But no one saw the invisible backpack Mia carried. There were things inside she didn't talk about, like how her dog had run away last week, how her mom had been crying a lot lately, and how she missed her grandma, who used to bake cookies with her every Sunday. The backpack felt heavy. Her shoulders slumped sometimes, her tummy felt tight, and some days it made her tired before the first bell even rang.

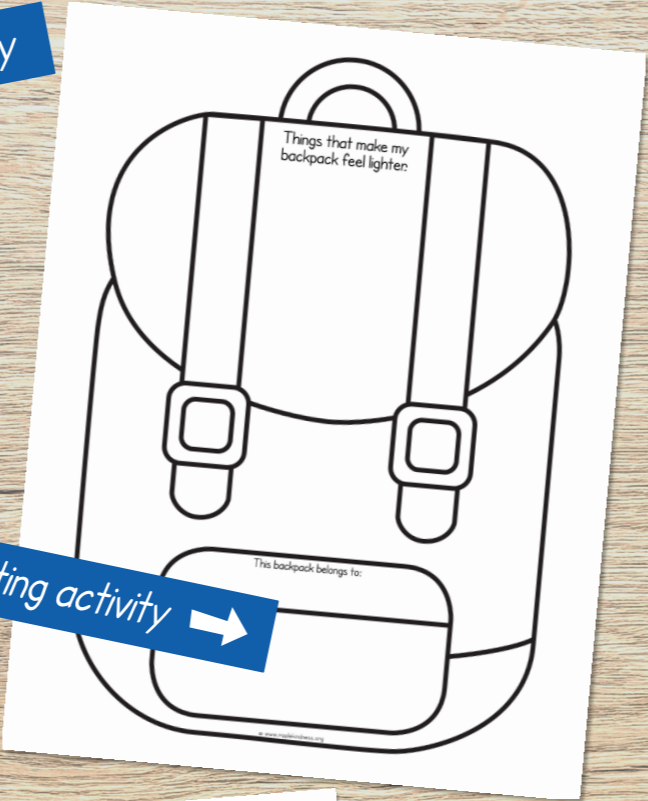
One morning, Mr. Lee noticed Mia staring out the window during circle time. He walked over and whispered, "You seem a little far away today. Want to talk about it?" Mia nodded slowly.

They sat together in the reading corner during lunch when no one was around. Mia didn't say much at first, but Mr. Lee was patient and just stayed beside her quietly. The cushions were soft and cozy, and she liked her teacher. She felt safe and brave enough to let her guard down.

Finally, she whispered, "I have lots of things that make me feel worried and sad." Mr. Lee smiled gently. "We all have an invisible backpack that carries stuff that bothers us. Sometimes it can get heavy, but you don't have to carry yours alone."

Mia didn't feel like everything was fixed. But she felt lighter. Like someone had helped her unzip the backpack and take out a few things. The next day, she brought Mr. Lee a drawing. It was a backpack with a heart on it. Inside, she'd written: "Thank you for seeing mine."

Backpack craft & writing activity



Individual & Group Activities

Group role-play cards



Mask making reflection activity



Story-Based SEL Lesson

Mia's Invisible Backpack helps students explore emotional weight and hidden feelings.

- ✓ **Engaging narrative** - Mia carries invisible worries that affect how she feels and acts
- ✓ **Discussion prompts** - Encourage empathy, emotional awareness, and classroom connection
- ✓ **Visual storytelling** - Students create a backpack to help them:
 - identify their worries
 - realize they have people in their corner
 - understand what it means to show empathy to those around them
 - find things that make their worries feel lighter and easier to deal with



Scroll

to see extension activities

Things that make me feel heavy, worried or scared.

reading out loud

being an only child

Grannie died

Bye making a mistake

Worries or stressors that make children feel heavy

likes me

Dad doesn't live with us.

being laughed at

My dog is sick.

Jacob moved away

angry

not feeling the same

People who make my backpack feel lighter:

Someone who listens to me is _____

Someone who makes me laugh is _____

Someone who helps when I'm stuck is _____

Someone _____

Someone _____

Someone who gives good advice is _____

Someone who plays with me is _____

Someone who helps me feel safe is _____

Someone who understands _____

People they can turn to for support

Ways I can show empathy to others

I notice when someone:

Looks sad

Is sitting alone

Is angry

Has stopped talking

Don't want to play

Quieter than usual

I help by:

Sitting with them so they're not alone.

Asking if they want to talk.

Asking them to play.

Tell a teacher.

Ways they can show empathy & support

I can listen by:

Looking at them when they speak.

Not interrupting while they talk.

I can include people by:

Asking if they want to sit with us.

Partnering with them.

Letting them go

Things that make my backpack feel lighter:

My friends

Grandpa

TV

People & things that help them feel safe

My dog Max

Playing Basketball

This backpack belongs to: Maurice

Reading Harry Potter



Mask-Making Reflection Craft

Students create expressive masks to explore emotions, identity, and empathy, learning that what we see on the outside doesn't always reflect how someone feels.

- ✓ **Creative extension** - Design masks that reflect how students feel or how they want to show up in the world
- ✓ **Emotional expression** - Explore feelings like sadness, joy, worry, and kindness through art
- ✓ **Empathy-building** - Discuss how masks can hide or reveal emotions, and how we can support others
- ✓ **Story-connected activity** - A creative way to build on the emotional themes from Mia's Invisible Backpack



Optional Extension Activities

The backpack activity is powerful by itself, but if you're ready to go deeper, these extensions give students more ways to connect with the idea of "invisible backpacks" and the "masks" people wear.

They help them practice empathy, build emotional vocabulary, and see coping strategies in action. You can use just one or two of these activities or spread them out over several days or weeks.

1. Mask Activity: "What I Show vs. What I Feel"

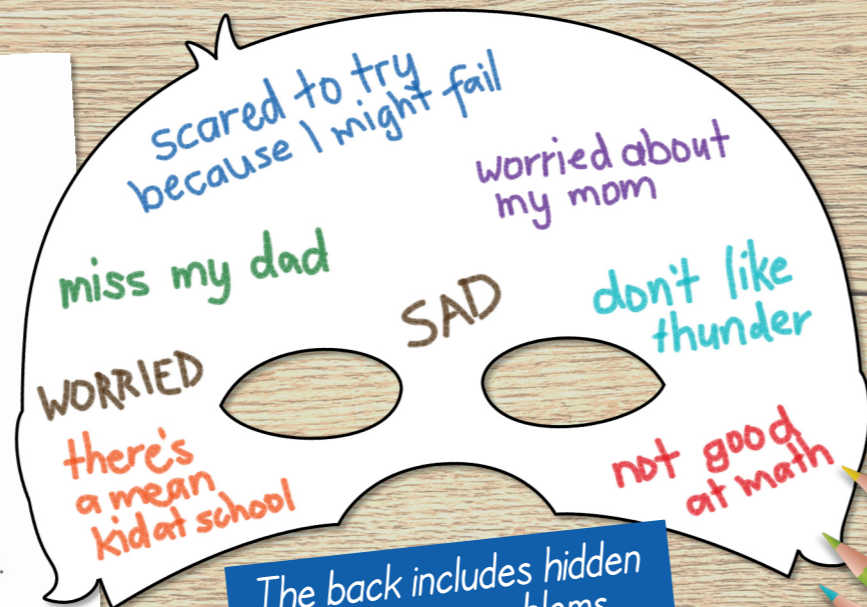
Students explore the difference between outward expressions and inner emotions, helping them understand that people may hide how they truly feel. This activity builds emotional awareness, empathy, and safe sharing.

You Will Need:

- Mask templates (a mix of styles)
- Crayons, pencils, markers
- Optional: glue, scissors, craft embellishments

Instructions:

1. Introduce the idea that people sometimes wear a "mask" to hide how they really feel.
2. Give each student the mask template:
 - Front: Decorate with what they show to others (e.g., smiles, jokes, confidence).
 - Back: Write or draw what they feel inside (e.g., nervousness, sadness, pressure, what they're afraid of or sad about).
3. Encourage students to reflect on why people might hide their feelings and how empathy helps us look beyond the mask.
4. Choose one of the following sharing options:
 - Gallery Walk: Display masks around the room. Students walk quietly, observing each other's masks and leaving empathetic comments.



Empathy in Action

Role-Play & Journal

Help students practice empathy through real-life scenarios and personal reflection. They explore how empathy looks, sounds, and feels, then reflect on their own growth.

- ✓ **Role-play cards** - Short, relatable situations for students to act out and practice responding with kindness and understanding
- ✓ **Discussion prompts** - Encourage students to think about how others feel and how they can help
- ✓ **Empathy journal** - Daily and weekly prompts to reflect on emotions, kind moments, and personal growth
- ✓ **Flexible formats** - Use in small groups, morning meetings, or end-of-week wrap-ups

Role Play Questions

1. What is the number of your role play scenario? _____
2. What did you notice about the situation? _____

3. How did your response show empathy? _____

Name: Sam

Empathy Detective - sheet 1

What did I notice? Jack was sad

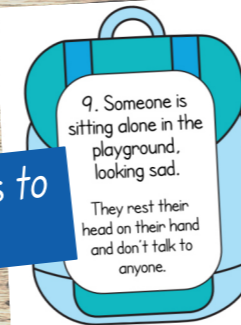
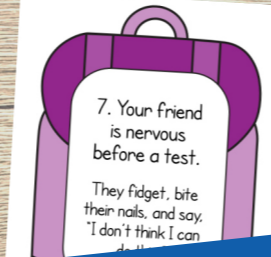
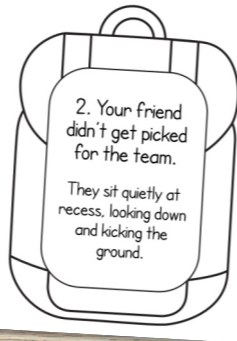
DAY 1 How did I respond? I sat next to him and asked if he wanted to talk

What could I do next time? Ask him to play

What did I notice? _____

DAY 3 How did I respond? _____

What could I do next time? _____



Students work in groups to act of responses

Empathy Detective - sheet 2

What did I notice? _____

DAY 4 How did I respond? _____

What could I do next time? _____

DAY 5

What did I notice? _____

How did I respond? _____

What could I do next time? _____

Kids journal about ways they were able to show empathy

Kids become empathy detectives, spotting kind moments & learning how to support others.

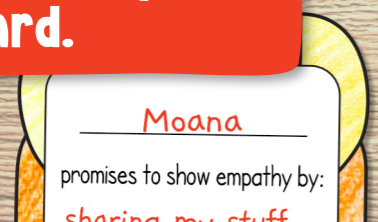
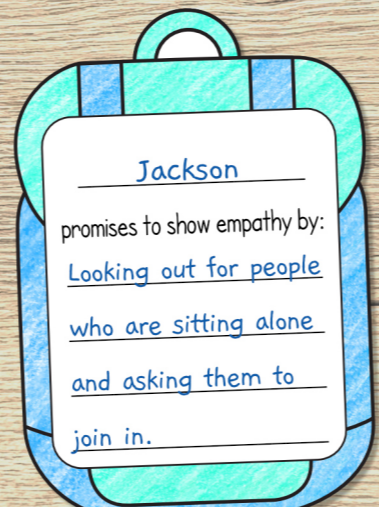
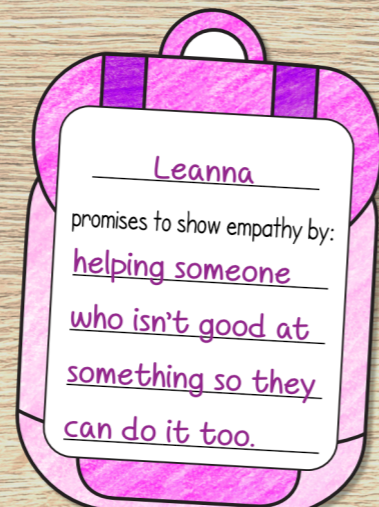


Class Charter of Empathy Poster

Students collaborate to create a visual agreement of how they'll support one another. This shared poster helps build a culture of kindness, emotional safety, and connection.

- ✓ **Collaborative activity** - Students contribute their promise to show kindness and empathy in your classroom
- ✓ **Visual anchor** - Create a poster or bulletin board to display student's commitments
- ✓ **Creative expression** - Decorate with drawings, handprints, or the backpack-themed border
- ✓ **Ongoing connection** - Revisit the charter weekly to add new ideas or celebrate kind moments

We Promise Show Empathy



Kids write how they'll make their classmates feel better.

Includes pledge cards and display heading to complete your bulletin board.

Mia's Invisible Backpack

An SEL Lesson About Feelings, Empathy, and Support

Storytelling helps students connect with abstract or memorable. It helps them link feelings to words, pictures, or through someone else's eyes.

The story of Mia's Invisible Backpack introduces feelings and worries. Through discussion, create explore how empathy and support can make things better.

This resource is designed for 3rd-4th graders to explore vocabulary, self-reflection, and empathy in age-appropriate ways by showing that people often hide their worries or sadness underneath.

How to Use This Resource

I suggest working through the activities in this order:

1. Read the story of Mia's Invisible Backpack
2. Discuss what you've read and ask questions
3. Complete the invisible backpack activity
4. Share reflections as a class or in small groups
5. Follow up with one or two of the optional activities

My Invisible Backpack

You Will Need:

- ➔ Backpack outlines (Inside, Outside, Who's Inside)
- ➔ Scissors, crayons, pencils, tape or glue

Instructions:

1. Read Mia's Invisible Backpack

2. Brainstorm

After talking about the story, ask students to list things that make their backpacks heavy and write them on the board and discuss some of the things listed, asking if they can relate to them.

This discussion can reveal insights into your students' or home life. This can be invaluable for identifying needs.

3. Make a Backpack

Explain that students will make their own backpack or worries they carry. There will be a backing sheet for each student.

NOTE: Click on the appropriate sheet number to view the activity.

Sheet 1 - Things that Make Me Feel Heavy (Back of Backpack)
Students can cut and paste from the picture and text provided for inspiration. Encourage kids to write or draw their own challenges that make their "backpack" heavy. Ask for responses (e.g., "I feel anxious before tests because I don't know if I'll pass"). See [example page](#).

Sheet 2 - Who Helps Me (Inside the Backpack)
Students list or draw the people, pets, or role models (this sheet goes between the inside and outside).

Sheet 3

Students

between

- "I notice

- "I help

- "I can

See [example page](#)

Sheet 4

Student

2. Empathy Role-Play Cards

Students practice responding with empathy in real-life scenarios, helping them build social awareness, perspective-taking, and kind communication.

You Will Need:

- ➔ Printable [scenario cards](#)
- ➔ [Role play reflection sheet](#)
- ➔ Space for small group work

Instructions:

1. Make small groups of 5-6 students. Each group will take turns acting out scenarios and responding with care.
2. One student from each group will act out a scenario. They will use the cards to help them decide how to respond with empathy.
 - "What might this person be feeling?"
 - "What could we say or do to help?"
 - "What would feel kind and respectful?"
 - "Is there anything we should avoid?"
3. Two students work together, with one acting out a scenario and the other responding with empathy. They use the cards to help them decide how to respond with empathy.
4. After each role-play, use the reflection sheet to discuss the experience.
5. Repeat with 2 or 3 extra scenarios.

Whole Class Collaborative Option

Instead of each group working on a different scenario, the whole class to explore together. This can be done in several ways.

Instructions:

1. Assign the same scenario to all groups.
2. Each group discusses the questions from the reflection sheet.
3. They can again use the role play reflection sheet to discuss the experience.
4. After each scenario, have groups share their reflections with the class. You can record responses on a display board as a reminder.

5. Class Reflection

Wrap up the activity with a whole-class discussion or journaling session to help students process the story and connect it to their own experiences. Use the questions below to guide reflection and build empathy:

- "Why did Mia hide how she was feeling?"
People often hide their feelings because they're afraid of being judged, don't want to worry others, or think no one will understand. Mia smiled and acted cheerful, even though she was hurting inside.
- "Why did Mia feel tired before the first bell rang some days?"
Carrying emotional stress can affect our bodies. Mia's tight tummy and slumped shoulders show how feelings like sadness or worry can drain energy and make it hard to focus.
- "How did Mr. Lee make Mia feel better?"
Mr. Lee didn't try to fix everything. He listened, stayed close, and made Mia feel safe to help her feel seen and supported. This made her backpack feel lighter.
- "What helps you feel better when your backpack is heavy?"
Encourage students to share personal strategies like talking to someone, journaling, drawing, playing outside, or using calming tools. This is a great time to add some of your own ideas to show that heavy emotions can affect everyone, even adults. Modeling vulnerability helps normalize emotions and build trust.
- "What are some signs that someone else's backpack might be heavy?"
Help students tune into emotional cues like quietness, frustration, or changes in behavior. This builds emotional literacy and encourages compassionate observation.

It's important to notice when someone might be feeling heavy, even if it's not obvious. We can't always fix problems, but by noticing, we help create a classroom where everyone feels supported.

3. Empathy Detectives Journaling

Students become "empathy detectives," observing moments when others might need support and reflecting on how they respond. This activity builds emotional literacy and encourages kind action.

You Will Need:

- ➔ [Journaling pages](#) with daily prompts
- ➔ Pencils or pens
- ➔ Optional: weekly reflection sheet or sticker chart

Instructions:

1. Explain that empathy detectives look for clues that someone might need support.
2. Each day for a week, students complete a short journal entry:
 - "What did I notice?"
 - "How did I respond?"
 - "What could I do next time?"
3. At the end of the week, hold a class reflection circle. Invite volunteers to share one moment they're proud of.
4. Celebrate kind actions with stickers, shout-outs, or a kindness wall.

4. Class Charter of Empathy Poster

Students collaborate to create a visual agreement of how they'll support one another. This activity reinforces shared values and builds a culture of kindness.

You Will Need:

- ➔ [Empathy pledge cards](#)
- ➔ Markers, sticky tape or pins to attach
- ➔ Optional: [empathy-themed backpack border](#) and [display heading](#)

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5 Activities with Detailed Instructions

Optional Extension Activities

The backpack activity is powerful by itself, but if you're ready to go deeper, extensions give students more ways to connect with the idea of "invisible masks" people wear.

They help them practice empathy, build emotional vocabulary, and see it in action. You can use just one or two of these activities or spread them over several days or weeks.

1. Mask Activity: "What I Show vs. What I Feel"

Students explore the difference between outward expressions and inner feelings by helping them understand that people may hide how they truly feel. This builds emotional awareness, empathy, and safe sharing.

You Will Need:

- ➔ [Mask templates](#) (a mix of styles)
- ➔ Crayons, pencils, markers
- ➔ Optional: glue, scissors, craft embellishments

Instructions:

1. Introduce the idea that people sometimes wear a "mask" to hide their true feelings.
2. Give each student the mask template:
 - Front: Decorate with what they show to others (e.g., smiles, happy faces).
 - Back: Write or draw what they feel inside (e.g., nervousness, what they're afraid of or sad about).
3. Encourage students to reflect on why people might hide their feelings. How does empathy help us look beyond the mask?
4. Choose one of the following sharing options:
 - Gallery Walk: Display masks around the room. Students walk around, observe, and take notes on what they notice.