Animal Instincts

Purpose: To explore conflict and the variety of peoples’ responses to situations in which conflicts arise.

Skills: Cooperation, Communication, Conflict resolution, Listening, Inquiring, Noticing, Trusting others

You will need...
- 10–30 participants
- Upper elementary or middle school age participants
- Enough space for participants to move around freely

Before You Begin
- Print one poster (attached) for each of the four animals.
- In this activity participants will be working in four small groups. Consider whether you will assign groups before the activity or guide participants to choose their own groups.
- Prepare the reflection questions you will ask participants in the debrief.

Directions

Introduce the activity Animal Instincts. Use this time to reinforce any established expectations that are important for participants to remember during the activity.

Explain that during this activity participants will think about their own reactions to conflict and compare these reactions to common animals’ reactions to conflict.

Display the posters of the four animals around the space so small groups can easily walk between posters.

Preview for participants that the bullets for each animal include stereotypical responses to conflict in order to prompt a conversation that all participants can be a part of. These animal descriptions represent how these animals tend to respond instinctively. But there are always exceptions to this—just as we often respond the same way to conflict, but not always.

Acknowledge that reactions can be positive, negative, or a mixture of the two. Participants should understand that none of these reactions are “good” or “bad” but people have many different kinds of responses that can be helpful or harmful to a conflict.

Tell participants that they are going to walk around the space in small groups to read each of the four posters about the bear, owl, shark, and turtle.

Explain that the groups will have two minutes to discuss how the animal on the poster typically reacts in conflict, the strengths and challenges of these reactions, and how that might compare to their own reactions to conflict. Tell players that then you will signal for groups to move to the next poster on their left.

Ask participants if they have any questions about the activity.
DIRECTIONS CONTINUED

Divide participants into four groups and begin the activity by directing each group to a different animal poster.

Give time (two minutes) for small groups to have a discussion.

Tell groups to rotate to the next animal poster. Continue this process until each group has visited each poster.

After the groups have visited all the posters, stop and ask individual participants to think about which animal they are most like when reacting to conflict.

Direct participants to move to the poster of an animal that has a reaction to conflict that is most similar to their own.

Once participants have all moved to the poster with the animal they selected, ask that everyone look around and take note of how many participants are standing at each animal poster.

Remind students that different situations may also cause us to react and respond differently. The big difference between animals and people is that people can decide they want to respond differently and can change their behaviors and actions.

Explain to participants that now they will reflect on how they experienced the activity.

Debrief

Debrief the activity with participants. Remember, this activity is only as effective as your debrief. This is your opportunity to help participants connect the activity to personal experiences, actions, and beliefs. You will want to reinforce any skills or beliefs you are hoping participants will carry beyond the activity.

For more on facilitating debriefs, refer to the Debriefing Tip Sheet on our Digital Activity Center.

We’ve included some suggested questions below to get you started.

Ask:

What happened during the activity?

Why did you choose the animal you chose? Was it hard to choose just one?

How does the animal you chose typically react to conflict? How is it similar to how you respond?

What are the strengths and challenges of your response to conflict? Do some responses help to make the conflict better or worse?

Thank participants for taking part in the activity.
Turtle (withdrawing)

This description represents a turtle’s reputation for response to conflict. But there are always exceptions to this—just as we often respond the same way to conflict, but not always.

- Hides from conflict
- Will wait out a conflict
- Takes time to think through actions
Owl (problem solving)

This description represents an owl’s reputation for response to conflict. But there are always exceptions to this—just as we often respond the same way to conflict, but not always.

- Is seen as wise
- Is clear and cautious when making choices in a conflict
- Is quiet, but can be deadly
Bear (careful)

This description represents a bear’s reputation for response to conflict. But there are always exceptions to this—just as we often respond the same way to conflict, but not always.

- Avoids conflict when possible
- Will become angry when provoked
- Is very protective and territorial
Shark (forceful)

This description represents a shark's reputation for response to conflict. But there are always exceptions to this—just as we often respond the same way to conflict, but not always.

- Can be very aggressive and persistent
- Is drawn to trouble
- Will stick up for itself when provoked