
Barriers to Learning

Ideas to help children think and talk about learning barriers in PSHE

Why talk about barriers to learning in your classroom?

Good mental health starts with getting to know who you are and being able to talk about it with others. Research suggests that learning can have a positive influence on wellbeing.

Barriers to learning can make children feel alone or excluded. Being open about them can reduce their impact on self-esteem and, in turn, on learning itself. Children often lack the confidence or language to say that they need something different. Creating inclusive and compassionate learning environments helps build that confidence — and models a kinder way of being, learning, and working together.

The aims of this work are to enable children to:

- Explore what might create a barrier to learning and how this can make them feel.
- Understand how talking about barriers helps make learning spaces more adaptable.
- Share what school, teachers, and friends could do to help reduce or remove those barriers.
- Recognise that the more everyone talks and listens to each other, the better learning becomes.

Creating a safe space for talking and listening

Support children to create their own guidelines for their safe space, using their own language. Common ideas include:

- Everyone's opinion is respected and considered.
- Opinions are not right or wrong — all contributions are valued.
- Children can pass if they do not wish to share.
- Adequate thinking time is always allowed.

Introduce active listening: after hearing from a classmate, can pupils share back what they understood was said?

Activities that explore what a barrier to learning is

- **Silent ordering:** can children get into different orders without speaking — for example, by month of birthday, temperature of hands, or length of hair?
- **Describe it and draw it:** children sit back-to-back. One describes a picture; the other tries to draw it from the description alone.
- **Blindfolded navigation:** set up a series of obstacles. Partner 1 must guide a blindfolded Partner 2 through the course using only words.

After each activity, ask: How did that make you feel? What was difficult? What helped? What was the barrier?

Discussion questions — before and after watching the film

Identifying barriers:

- How do you know someone may be experiencing a barrier to their learning?
- Can you think of barriers that are physical? What about barriers we cannot see?
- Why might invisible barriers be even more challenging for children experiencing them?
- What questions do you have? (Children can add questions to speech bubbles and share.)

Exploring frustration in the classroom:

- Acknowledge that everyone gets frustrated sometimes.
- What frustrates you in the classroom?
- Create a "frustration box" where children anonymously write what frustrates them. The teacher reads them out and the class discusses how they could help.
- The class could create a poster together.

End the session with the prompt: **"I learn better when..."**

What would help? — small group activity

Ask children to share ideas in small groups around the following prompts:

- Being aware of each other's needs.
- People sharing how they feel.
- Teachers knowing what a child finds difficult.
- Helping the people around you.
- Knowing that someone needs something different to help them learn.
- Letting people feel comfortable to talk about the barriers they experience.

Further resources

- Coram Life Education: coramlifeeducation.org.uk
- Jigsaw PSHE: jigsawpshe.com
- Twinkl: twinkl.co.uk
- TES: tes.com
- PSHE Association: pshe-association.org.uk/topics/mental-health