

THE EXPANDED CRUMPLED PAPER EXPERIMENT

The Crumpled Paper Experiment is a classic SEL activity, expanded here with the Say Something Sweet framework. Students begin by writing something kind about themselves on a piece of paper, then listen as a series of sour word scenarios are read aloud, crumpling their paper once after each one. When they try to smooth it back out, the wrinkles remain. What makes this expanded version different is what happens after the crumple. The reflection questions are designed to move students from the visual metaphor into genuine conversation about impact, intent, and what it means to choose kind words.

Step One - Set the Stage (3–5 minutes)

Hand each student a blank piece of paper and something to write with. Ask them not to fold or crumple it yet. Say to the group: "Today we're going to do an activity about words, specifically about the words that stay with us long after they're spoken. I'm going to read some scenarios aloud. After each one, we're going to crumple our paper once. Don't worry about why yet. Just follow along and notice how you feel."

Step Two: Write Something Kind About Yourself (3–5 minutes)

Before any crumpling, ask students to write one kind thing about themselves anywhere on their paper. It can be a word, a phrase, or a sentence. It can be about who they are, something they're good at or something they're proud of.

Give students 2–3 minutes of quiet writing time. If students are stuck, offer gentle prompts:

- Something you're good at that not everyone knows about
- A way you've helped someone recently
- Something about yourself you're working on and proud of

Step Three: Ask reflection questions before reading the sour word scenarios (1-2 minutes)

1. Look at what you wrote about yourself. How does it feel to say something kind about who you are?
2. How easy or hard was it to think of something nice to say about yourself? Why do you think that is?

SOUR WORDS SCENARIOS

Step Four: Read the scenarios aloud. After each scenario, pause and say "Crumple your paper once." Give students a moment to feel the action before moving on. Don't add additional commentary, let the silence sit.

1. You've been working on a drawing all morning. You're really proud of it. A classmate walks by, looks at it, and says, "That doesn't even look like anything." Then they walk away laughing.
2. You raise your hand in class and give an answer you were sure was right. It's wrong. Before the teacher can move on, the kid next to you whispers, "How did you not know that? That was so easy."
3. It's the first day back after a school break and you're wearing a new outfit you picked out yourself. Someone in your class looks you up and down and says, "Why would you wear that?"
4. You're trying to open your lunch and it spills a little. Someone at the table says loudly, "Ew, what even is that? That smells so weird." A few other kids laugh.
5. You've been practicing a skill in gym class all week. When it's your turn, you don't do it perfectly. A classmate sighs and says, "Why are you even on our team?"
6. You mispronounce a word while reading aloud in class. Before you can correct yourself, two kids in the back start giggling and repeating the word back to each other.
7. You're excited to tell your friend a story at recess. Halfway through, they look past you, wave at someone else, and say, "Sorry, I wasn't really listening. Can you just finish later?" Then they walk away.
8. You worked really hard on a project and your teacher gives you a good grade. When a classmate finds out, they say, "You only did well because the teacher likes you. It wasn't even that good."
9. You're new to the school and trying to find somewhere to sit at lunch. You spot an open seat and ask if you can sit there. The kid shrugs and says, "I mean, I guess, but we were kind of saving it." You sit somewhere else.
10. You share an idea during a group project. Nobody responds. A minute later, someone else says almost the exact same thing — and everyone says, "Oh that's a great idea!" No one mentions that you said it first.
11. You've been dealing with something hard at home and you're having a rough day. A classmate notices you're quiet and says, "What's wrong with you today? You're being so weird."
12. You overhear a group of kids talking about a birthday party you weren't invited to. When they realize you heard, one of them says, "Oh, it was just a small thing," and they change the subject. But you know it wasn't small at all.

FOREVER WRINKLED

Step Five: Try to smooth it out. (1 minute) After the last scenario, ask students to try to smooth their paper back out as flat as they can. Give them about 30 seconds. Then say: "No matter how carefully you smooth it, the wrinkles are still there. They're not going anywhere. Let's talk about what that means."

Step Six: The Reflection (10-15 minutes) This is the heart of the activity, so spend the most time here. The questions below can be used as a whole-group discussion, in pairs, or as a written reflection. Choose the format that fits your group.

1. No matter how carefully you smooth it, the wrinkles are still there. What does that tell us about words we can't take back?
2. If this piece of paper were a person, how might they feel walking around with all these wrinkles?
3. Does it matter whether the person who said the sour words meant to cause harm? Does the paper care?
4. Even though we're just doing an activity, did any of those sour words make you feel something in your body? Where?
5. Think about the kind words you wrote at the beginning — they're still on that paper, under all the wrinkles. What does that mean to you?
6. Has anyone ever tried to smooth things over with you after saying something hurtful? Did it help? Did the wrinkle go away completely?
7. What is one thing you could do this week to help keep someone else's paper smooth?

Step Seven: Close (3 minutes) End the activity by bringing it back to the Say Something Sweet framework, the choice to say something sweet.

Ask students to look at their crumpled paper one more time and find the kind words they wrote about themselves at the start. Then say: "Those words are still there under all the wrinkles. They never went away. That's also true about the kind things people say to us. They stay too. This week, let's see how many papers we can keep smooth."

NOTES FOR EDUCATORS

- Start with scenarios 1 through 4 for a shorter session which cover everyday dismissiveness and are the most universally relatable. Scenarios 5 through 8 add layers around effort, performance, and being ignored. Scenarios 9 through 12 carry more emotional weight and work best when students are already settled into the activity and trust the room.
- You do not need to use all 12 in one session. Eight is a natural stopping point that leaves the paper visibly damaged without overwhelming students before the reflection begins. Save the remaining scenarios for a follow-up session or use them selectively based on what your group needs.
- If a student becomes visibly emotional during the reading, pause, acknowledge it quietly, and remind the group that the goal isn't to re-live hard moments but to understand why they stay with us — and what we can do about that.

