

*If you have the words, there's always  
a chance that you'll find the way.*

—Seamus Heaney



# EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Mindfulness-Based Social & Emotional Learning

## I-Statements

**Level:** Upper Elementary (3-5)

**Timeframe:** 20-30 minutes

**Concepts:**

- Assertive Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Identifying & Expressing Emotions



### Big Ideas For This Lesson

No, this is not a fancy new product from Apple - this is the good old fashioned **I-Statement** known for: fostering assertive communication, lowering defensiveness and blame, helping people to accept responsibility for their feelings, and ultimately highlighting the connection between **events, thoughts, and emotions**.<sup>1,2</sup>

The I-Statement is introduced early in the school year as an attempt to create a standardized communication tool that can be used across all environments in the school setting. For instance, you may want to encourage the use of I-Statements in conflict resolution, as an alternative to punitive consequences, as a cool down tool, or just as a preventative measure to encourage self-reflection and awareness.

The **I-Statement** consists of 3 parts:

- a. **I Feel** \_\_\_\_ (emotion) \_\_\_\_
- b. **when** \_\_\_\_ (event) \_\_\_\_
- c. **because** \_\_\_\_ (thought about event) \_\_\_\_.

Practice I-Statements often with your students. It takes a while to really get it down. Younger grades can start simply by identifying feelings and using a more simplified version, e.g., I Feel \_\_\_\_\_, when \_\_\_\_\_.



### Essential Vocabulary

Behavior	Emotion or Feeling
Event	Facts vs. Opinion
I-Statement	Thought
You-Statement	

### Materials

- SEL Journal & Pencil
- Timer
- [I-Statement Poster](#)
- [Feelings Chart](#)



### Preparation

1. Post the **I-Statement Poster** and the **Feelings Chart** in the classroom.
2. Write a model **I-Statement** on the board.
3. Write the questions in Step 5 on the board.



## Teaching Script

### BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE & CONCEPT MODELING (I DO)

While further lessons will cover emotions in more depth, teaching this lesson requires some basic understanding and agreement about the definition of emotions. Begin with an open discussion around the following question:

| *What is an emotion?*

**Teaching Note:** For now a simple definition will suffice, e.g., *an emotion is something you feel in response to an event or thought*. Provide several examples of emotions (e.g., joyful, disappointed, grateful, loved, afraid, etc.).

Once an agreement has been reached around the definition of emotions, explain to your students:

| *Today we are going to learn one way to talk about our feelings. For some people, talking about feelings can be uncomfortable or difficult, but it does not have to be.*

**Teaching Note:** Depending on the safety and cohesion of your class, you may ask students to raise their hands if they have ever had a hard time talking about their feelings. This will help normalize the experience and draw students' attention to the universality of this experience.

| *There is an easy way to talk about our feelings; it is called an I-Statement. Although I-Statements not feel like a natural way to talk at first, I-Statements are actually used all over the world by adults and children to help communicate in difficult situations. Let's try it!*



## GUIDED PRACTICE (WE DO)

Begin by asking students to close their eyes and remember a time in the last week when they felt a really strong emotion. Encourage them to pick any situation they like, but to choose one that they are comfortable sharing.

*Think about a time in the last week when you felt a strong emotion. Maybe it was something positive –like joy, or excitement, or hope. Maybe it was something difficult –like frustration, or jealousy, or hurt. Whatever it was, try to remember **what happened** that led to your **emotion** and **what you were thinking** at the time.*

*Open your eyes and take a few minutes to write down your answers to the questions on the board.*

Write these questions on the board, set a timer, and provide students with a few minutes to write their answers in their Journals:

- a. **Emotion:** What were you feeling?
- b. **Event:** What happened that led to your emotion?
- c. **Thought:** What were you thinking at the time about what happened?

*Great! Now we'll practice using the I-Statement. Is anyone willing to share what they wrote as an example? First, I am looking for someone who had a positive or happy emotion.*

**Teaching Note:** Be selective about who you choose. It helps in the beginning to select a student who can share a concise, simple story about a positive emotion they felt.

Once the student has shared, explain that we are going to put their experience into an I-Statement.

**Teaching Note:** Post an I-Statement poster or write an I-Statement model on the board to fill in as you are speaking.

*The first part of the I-Statement is 'I feel \_\_ (blank) \_\_.' This is where we share our emotion. What was Dante's emotion?"*

*That's right! Dante was feeling excited, so he would say, 'I feel excited.' You may be feeling a lot of emotions, but try to pick just one or two to use in an I-Statement.*

*Now, can anyone remember what happened that led to Dante feeling excited?*

*This is called the **event** and it is the second part of our I-Statement. So far, our I-Statement looks like this.*

- a. I feel excited
- b. when I go to the amusement park.

Remember, when we share the **when** of our I-Statement, it is important to just stick to the facts. Imagine that someone took a snapshot of exactly what happened and is sharing just that. This is not where we share our opinion about the event.

The last part of our I-Statement is our thought, or belief, about the event. This is where we share our opinion about why we felt the way we did. In other words, what might Dante have been **thinking** about going to the amusement park that led to him feeling excited?

Correct! Dante felt excited about going to the amusement park because he got to go on fun rides and spend time with his family.. So his I-Statement would look like this.

- a. I feel **excited**
- b. **when I go to the amusement park**
- c. **because I like going on fun rides and spending time with my family.**

**Teaching Note:** Naming the initial “strangeness” of using I-Statements will lower student resistance and normalize its use for students who may be feeling uncomfortable. It is okay, and actually helpful, to name the “awkwardness” of expressing emotions in such a structured format.

*It seems kind of funny doesn't it? Almost like a robot talking. Even though it might seem strange, let's think about why it might be helpful to use I-Statements.*

- a. “I am going to say something that may sound harsh.”
- b. Say the following statements in a surprisingly aggressive tone to the class:  
“**YOU** make me feel so angry! **YOU** make me mad! **YOU, YOU, YOU!**”
- c. “How does that make you feel when someone speaks to you like that?”
- d. “This would be an example of a **You-Statement**. You-Statements usually do not feel very good and also tend to make others defensive, so they do not really listen to what you are saying. Now let me try saying what I am feeling using an I-Statement.”<sup>13</sup>
- e. Calmly and gently turn to a student and say the following: “I **feel** angry **when** you call me names **because** I want to be friends and it hurts to hear that.”
- f. Allow students to share how they feel about the difference between I-Statements and You-Statements.

*One of the reasons the I-Statement is so useful is because it lets us share our feelings in a calm way that does not make someone else defensive. It also helps us to understand the connection between **events, thoughts, and emotions**.*

**Teaching Note:** Using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as a lens, **thoughts, emotions, and events** are all related, so that if you change one you will affect the others. The I-Statement is useful in helping us to identify maladaptive thought patterns to create change. The **Cognitive Triad** lesson #17 will cover this in-depth.



## REINFORCING LESSON CONCEPTS (YOU DO)

*Now it is your turn to practice. Look at the answers to your questions and create your own I-Statement using all three parts.*

Remind students that if they are having trouble, just answer these questions:

- a. What was my emotion?
- b. What happened?
- c. What was I thinking about what happened?

Set a timer and allow students to write their own I-Statement. When all students have finished, facilitate a turn-and-talk or pair-share for students to share their I-Statements with classmates.



## EVIDENCE OF CONCEPT ATTAINMENT

### *Reflect on it*

- *How are **I-Statements** different from **You-Statements**?*
- *How can you use I-Statements with your parents? Your siblings? Your friends?*
- *Talk about some situations where I-Statements might be useful.*
- *How can you make an I-Statement sound more natural and less robotic?*

### *Journal it*

Each day this week, write at least one I-Statement in your journal to describe how you are feeling that day.



## EXTENSIONS

### *Classroom*

- Post the I-Statement Poster in cool-down area and/or on board/wall for easy reference.
- When students request a cool-down time, ask them to write or share an I-Statement before re-entering the class.
- Prompt students to share I-Statements when in conflict.
- Practice sharing I-Statements during morning meeting and circle time.

### *School-wide*

- Incorporate use of I-Statements in school discipline practice. For example, rather than having students write an incident report, ask them to write an I-Statement from their perspective.
- Encourage use of I-Statements in conflict mediation.
- Model use of I-Statements by teachers and administrators.



## REFERENCES

1. I-Statements. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.austincc.edu/colangelo/1318/istatements.htm>
2. "I" Message [Web log post]. (2015, August 4). Retrieved from <http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/i-message>
3. Johnson, J. (2012, November 30). Are 'I' Statements Better than 'You' Statements? Retrieved July 9, 2015, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cui-bono/201211/are-i-statements-better-you-statements>

## EMOTIONS



EXHAUSTED



CONFUSED



ECSTATIC



GUILTY



SUSPICIOUS



ANGRY



HYSTERICAL



FRUSTRATED



SAD



CONFIDENT



EMBARRASSED



HAPPY



MISCHIEVOUS



DISGUSTED



FRIGHTENED



ENRAGED



ASHAMED



CAUTIOUS



SMUG



DEPRESSED



OVERWHELMED



HOPEFUL



LONELY



LOVESTRUCK



JEALOUS



BORED



SURPRISED



ANXIOUS



SHOCKED



SHY

# I-Statement

I feel (emotion)

when (event)

because (thought about event)