



School Group Welcome and Orientation with SEL Activities

Many Residential Environmental Learning Center (RELC) programs formally begin with some sort of large group welcome. Many topics are typically covered in these initial gatherings: introductions of staff, behavioral expectations, tour of facilities, land acknowledgements*, and much more. We believe that these program openings are greatly enhanced when social and emotional learning (SEL) is at the forefront. Indeed, warm greetings and welcomes are social events.

Thus, welcomes can also be an opportunity to explicitly frontload the social and emotional outcomes of the residential program for students. Chances are, if you're reading this, your program already has some type of designated opening event. Here are some small activities and tweaks that you might consider dropping into your existing welcome in order to highlight SEL.

***Land Acknowledgment**

Acknowledging the native people(s) that inhabited and stewarded the land on which the site is located is an important way of recognizing the original stewards of that area, while helping students to develop a sense of place. Additionally, acknowledgment is a simple, powerful way of showing respect, and a step toward correcting the stories and practices that erase Indigenous people's history and culture while moving toward inviting and honoring the truth. Land acknowledgments should be crafted in collaboration with Tribal leaders.

Here are some helpful resources for learning more about land acknowledgments:

[Whose Land](#)

[Honor Native Land: A Guide and Call to Acknowledgment](#)

Greeting Frenzy

Time: 3 minutes

Overview:

This activity provides an opportunity for each person in the room to make a brief connection with everyone else in the room.

When and Why:

“Greeting Frenzy” lifts up the energy in the room and reinforces positive connections by name and face.

SEL Focus:

This activity builds Relationship Skills (Social Engagement, Building Relationships)

Steps:

1. Explain: *“You have XXX minutes, and within that time, your job is to introduce yourself, greet everybody in the room by name, and make some brief physical contact. It could be a handshake, high five, fist or elbow bump; there may even be some huggers in the room...”*

(Groups of 12 or less might take one minute; larger groups, two minutes; huge groups, three minutes, with the instruction to *“...greet as many people in the room as possible...”*)

2. Set the timer and use an agreed-upon attention signal to bring the room to full quiet before the debriefing comments.

Debrief by asking one or more of these questions:

How’s your energy? Notice a lift in the room? (Draw attention to the physiological and emotional aspects noted by participants.) Why do you think that’s the case?

You can find a [printable version of this activity here](#).

You can access CASEL’s entire [SEL Signature Practices Playbook here](#).

Where I’m From Introduction

Read out loud the poem [“Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyons](#). Ask a student to read it out loud a second time.

After reading the poem, ask the students to share their impressions—details that stood out, the structure of the poem, etc.

Highlight three kinds of details in the poem:

A significant PERSON - e.g. grandpa, mother

A significant PLACE - e.g. porch

A significant EVENT - e.g. grandpa finger, etc.

Ask the students to think about an example of a significant PERSON, PLACE, or EVENT from their lives and write it down in a short sentence. Then ask them to choose one and write it down on a sticky note to place on the board.

Read the group’s “Where We’re From” poem out loud.

Debrief Questions: How did it feel to share something so personal with the whole group? How did it feel to hear where other people are coming from? What does this mean for our time together this week?

For another variation, see: iamfromproject.com/resources

Three Challenges

Give these three challenges to your students to complete daily. This also sets up potential debriefs and reflections at the end of the day—What did we do to accomplish these challenges?

Use drums rolls to introduce each one.

Challenge number 1: Try Something New! Every single person here will have the opportunity to try something new today. Maybe you've never hiked up a mountain. Maybe there's some new food in the dining hall just waiting for you to try. Maybe you've never kissed a banana slug. Whatever it is, when a new thing presents itself—try it!

Challenge number 2: Take Care of Something! As human beings, we are some of the largest living things in this ecosystem. With this great size and (somewhat) great intellect comes responsibility to take care of what is around us. And there's so much to take care of! If you see a beetle crossing the trail, you could become a beetle bodyguard and make sure nobody steps on it. If you see a piece of litter, you could pick it up. If you notice a classmate is having a hard time, take care of them and offer them some encouragement. There's so much to take care of!

Challenge number 3: Have Fun! Even when the going gets tough, find some way to dig deep and find something to smile about!

Multnomah Education Service District Case Study

At MESD Outdoor School, all 6th grade students from Multnomah County, Oregon are given the opportunity to spend a week at outdoor school. During this program, students are assigned “living groups” with others from several different schools. This means that MESD’s Welcome and Orientation is heavily focused on students meeting their new group-mates and getting to know the facilities. Here is the lesson plan given to the high school students who serve as chaperones throughout the week.

Welcome to Outdoor School!

Introductions

Ask students to share their name and one thing they are looking forward to! Tell them to wear their nametag at all times, on their outermost layer of clothing. If their name is not spelled correctly, we can fix it at the nurses station.

Introductions help students develop strong relationships with their group leaders (assuming the leaders make the effort to learn names and pronounce them correctly), which is essential for a positive learning environment. Asking students to share something about themselves, and expecting each person to contribute, helps to establish expectations that all voices and perspectives are welcome.

Expectations

Stick with me

Hand up for quiet voices

We walk wherever we go, and keep our feet on the ground and our hands to ourselves.

Establishing clear expectations right from the start helps students feel safe.

Scavenger Hunt Stations

Bathrooms

Dining Hall

Nurse

Campfire

Courtyard

Instructions: Try to get to all of these stations, but you must go to the places in **RED**. When you are done, you can head to the all-group orientation at the basketball court or the Dining Hall. If one is crowded, go check out a different one or play a game. If you run into another group, they can introduce themselves and/or play a game from the list below!

Developing familiarity with a new space helps students feel safe in what may be an unfamiliar or uncomfortable environment. The experiential approach of this activity makes it fun!

Ice-Breakers and Team Building Games

Truths and a Lie: Each team member tells two true facts and one lie to the group. The rest of the cabin tries to guess which statements are true and which “fact” is the lie.

In this activity, students share aspects of their lives with their group leaders and other students, practicing self-awareness and developing trust. Listening to others, applying what you know about them, and making educated guesses about their life experiences supports relationship skills and social awareness.

To Be or Knot To Be: Form a circle facing one another (the difficulty of the activity increases the greater the number of students in the group). Students close their eyes and reach across the circle with their right hand to grasp the right hand of another student. They should pretend that they are shaking hands—but hold on! With eyes open, have each student reach across the circle with their left hand and grasp the left hand of a different student. No student should be holding both hands from the same person. Now, without letting go, have the students untangle themselves. The result should be a circle of intertwined circles, or one large circle.

In this activity, students practice self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness. They need to listen actively and cooperate in order to be successful.

Line Up: Divide the group in half. The two teams will compete to see who can get the challenge done faster. Challenges might include lining up according to height (shortest to tallest or tallest to shortest), by birthday month and dates, alphabetically by first name or last name, by age, by eye color (e.g. green, first; blue, second, etc.), by sports (e.g. those who play baseball, first; basketball, second, etc.), and so on. Try the same challenges without talking, or while singing songs as you travel from place to place.

This activity supports self-management and social awareness. It also provides an opportunity for students to get to know one another.

Mingle: Everyone moves around the room, saying “Mingle,” until the leader calls out a number. The players must form groups with the correct number of people. Players introduce themselves to the other people in their group. Call out numbers until everyone has met everyone else.

This activity supports self-management and social awareness. It also provides an opportunity for students to get to know one another.

The Round Moon: Ask the students to do everything you do. Hold a stick or pencil (in your left hand) and then say, “The moon, the moon, the big round moon. It has two eyes, a nose, and a mouth.” While you are saying this phrase, you are drawing the moon and its face in the air with your object. The students will then attempt to do everything that you do, but most students will use their right hand to hold the stick or pencil.

This activity supports self-management and social awareness.

Picnic: Tell the students that you are going on a picnic and that they may join you if they know what to bring. For example, say your Outdoor School name is Walrus; you might say, “I am going on a picnic and I am going to bring waffles, but not pancakes.” Whatever items you may bring must start with the first letter of your name; the other item does not. Don’t tell them the trick! The students may come on the picnic when they can figure out this method.

This activity supports self-management and relationship skills.