

Spotlight on Social Learning

November 2020: Responsibility Month

November is **Responsibility Month** at Sistema Toronto. Last year, our activities focused on personal responsibility, with activities and materials that encouraged our students to think about their own self-regulation and accountability. This year we wanted to focus on our responsibilities to others, through the lens of one of our sub-themes, Allyship.

Allyship is the practice of standing up for the needs and interests of oppressed people and groups, of promoting inclusion, and fighting against racism, sexism, gender discrimination and other forms of oppression. As educators we consider ourselves to be allies and advocates for our students, but we also want to empower and prepare our students to act as allies themselves. Research has shown that children as young as four exhibit racial *and* gender biases that reflect the problematic and unjust attitudes they see in societyⁱ, and that children are particularly vulnerable to learning negative ideas and stereotypesⁱⁱ. If we want to equip our students to fight these pernicious attitudes and ideas, and to act as allies in the battle to dismantle systems of oppression, we need to learn about them together.

One important part of allyship is learning about systems of oppression and the historical injustices that created them. In Ontario, the first week of November is Treaties Recognition Week, an important opportunity for us all to reflect on the legacy of colonization and the treaty agreements that deeply affect Canadian and Indigenous peoples today. As a first step towards deeper understanding of these fundamental issues, we created some activities to help our students better understand the text of our land acknowledgment, and the context and history that makes it necessary.

Each of these activities approaches the issue of Indigenous treaty and land rights from a different perspective. *The Land We Occupy*, for example, focuses on our students' responsibility for the land they live on. Using a film by Sarah Roque and Selena Mills, with illustrations by Chief Lady Bird, the activity asks students to reflect on their own relationship with the land, and on our collective and individual responsibility to the other people who live, have lived, and will live on the land we occupy.

Other activities focused on better understanding the text of our land acknowledgment, and on how treaties such as Treaty 13 (sometimes called the "Toronto Purchase") affect our life today. These activities represent a small, first step in our commitment to act as responsible allies to the Indigenous





peoples around us and learn about our responsibilities as treaty peoples. Our next step as an organization will be to work with Indigenous partners to help us deepen our understanding, so we can all be better allies in the journey towards reconciliation and the fight for Indigenous rights.

Another important aspect of Allyship is learning to be inclusive and accepting of everyone. Sistema Toronto is an LGBTQ2+ positive organization. We want all our students, staff, and community members to feel welcome, and to understand how to make each other feel valued, included, and safe in our community. Thanks to a Rainbow Grant from Community One Foundation, we were able to hold virtual workshops this month with Toronto-based educational performers and drag stars Fay Slift and Fluffy Soufflé. These workshops presented an in depth discussion on inclusivity and allyship and gave our students a chance to ask questions, learn about respectful language, and work together to turn our Sistema Toronto classes into the welcoming, safe spaces we want them to be.



Of course no theme would be complete without musical activities. This year our special focus is on listening, and this month's listening activity, *Song Share – Responsibility* is designed to teach our students about the business of making music. Helping our students understand who is responsible for writing the lyrics, checking the microphones, editing the recording, marketing the album, and paying the band is an important part of the education as musicians, and helping them understand who makes money from subscriptions to music services, advertisements, and t-shirt and ticket sales can help them understand who has power in the music business and why.

As we learn about responsibility and allyship, we not only want our students to act more responsible, but to better understand the supports they have around them. We have all had occasion over the past



eight months to be grateful for the responsible people who keep the lights on and the food supply safe, and for our friends and colleagues who help us feel connected, cared for and supported. This month has also been an occasion to reflect on the responsibilities we have not lived up to as a society: to care for the land and the environment, to live up to our treaty obligations, and to heal the wounds and right the wrongs of colonization. We have a lot of work to do, to live up to our responsibilities and learn to be better allies, and are excited to see our students growing into their own roles as responsible young citizens and allies.

ⁱ Perszyk, DR, Lei, RF, Bodenhausen, GV, Richeson, JA, Waxman, SR. "Bias at the intersection of race and gender: Evidence from preschool-aged children." *Dev Sci*. 2019; 22:e12788. <https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.12788>

ⁱⁱ Nicole C. Baltazar, Kristin Shutts, Katherine D. Kinzler. "Children show heightened memory for threatening social actions." *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 2012; Volume 112, Issue 1, pp. 102-112. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2011.11.003>