



Skills for Problem Solving

Intermediate – Respect Another Person’s Personal Space

A. **Lauren** lives in North America. She has met a new girl from Greece called Demi. Demi has just started at the school, and she’s cool. However, Lauren thinks she’s a bit strange because she likes to hold hands, and when she comes round, she likes to sit close and tries to hug Lauren.

Demi has moved to North America. She’s finding it a little bit difficult. She has met a girl called Lauren. She likes her, and they have fun, but she isn’t sure Lauren likes her back because she seems a bit unfriendly.

What do you suggest they do?

B. **Martinos** is on holiday with Masaki and his family. They’ve visited Tokyo, and they’re currently visiting Kyoto. Martinos was very uncomfortable when they got on the metro in Tokyo. He thought the people were rude, and the train was really crowded. Why didn’t they just wait for the next train? Now, in Kyoto, there are so many people at the temple. He can’t understand why they’ve decided to visit it on such a busy day because there are just too many people!

Masaki’s friend Martinos is visiting Japan. Martinos is behaving very strangely, and Masaki doesn’t understand why. Martinos comes from a small town in Denmark, and it’s very different to a big city in Japan. There are many more people in Japan, and most people go on holiday at the same time, which makes the most popular places crowded.

C. **Toby** is going to stay with a South American family on an exchange trip. His host family have met him at the airport. Toby is finding it very strange because all the members of the family, including the dad, have kissed him on the cheek, and he’s never met any of them before. Apparently, he’s going to share a room with Paco, the boy in the family who’s his own age.

Paco is waiting at the airport for Toby, an English exchange student. His mom has told him to be very friendly and make Toby feel welcome. In South America, it’s normal to kiss someone on the cheeks, but Paco’s first impression is that Toby seems a bit uncomfortable.

Reflection Point

Different people have different ideas about personal space. Learning to protect your own space and respect other people’s space can help your interactions with others.



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Aim: To help students respect other people’s need for personal space and to protect their own.

Lead-in: Write the following, clearly spaced in three columns on the left side of the board:

Very Personal Distance	15 – 45 cm	
Personal Distance	0.5 – 1.5 m	
Social Distance	1.5 – 3.5 m	
Public Distance	3.5 – 7.5 m	

Now write the following list of people on the right side of the board:

best friends, boy/girlfriends, brothers/sisters, parents, teachers, postman, classmates, other students at school, strangers

With the help of a couple of students, use a measuring tape to demonstrate the approximate distances given in the table. Discuss with the class where in the third column they would put the people listed on the board based on how close they would usually get to those people, and why. Get students thinking about the fact that we allow the people emotionally closest to us to get physically closer. Find out from students how they would feel if the people they were closest to kept their distance and if strangers stood very close (e.g., *the closeness might be uncomfortable, distance might make them feel the friend was angry or upset with them*).

Now put students into pairs and get them to brainstorm situations where it’s almost impossible to respect personal space. Suggestions might be places such as: *crowded public transport, lifts, queues at airports, concerts, busy markets*, etc. Get students to come up with ways they would deal with these scenarios, and how they would try to respect others. Ask: *What would you do with your body? What would you do if you bumped into someone?*

Choose A Scenario: Ask students to work in pairs and choose one of the three scenarios (A–C). Explain to students that you would like them to think about the situation and make a list of the things

that might be making the people uncomfortable and why. Ask them to decide which of the people in each scenario they find it easier to understand.

Get students to suggest ways to deal with the discomfort and to ask themselves: *Is there a solution, or do they just have to accept it?* Recommend that students refer to the Reflection Point while working on the task.

Reflection Point: Remind students that because personal space can be very different from one person to another, it’s important to be sensitive when dealing with it. For example, for somebody who comes from a country where people have a lot of physical contact, being distant might seem unfriendly. Explain that this doesn’t mean they should change their habits, but maybe it’s helpful to explain to somebody from a different culture how you feel about the personal space differences.

Class discussion: Put each pair with another pair that worked on the same scenario. Encourage them to compare their lists. Ask: *Did you identify the same problems? Did you both feel that there was a solution or did you decide the people had to accept the situation? Which student was it easier for you to relate with?*

Discuss with students whether they have experienced similar situations in real life. Ask students the following questions:

- *How does culture affect personal space?*
- *In which situations must you tell people you need personal space?* (at school, in public places where a person has come close to you and they don’t need to be close to you, when someone behaves in a threatening way)
- *How can you tell if you have invaded someone’s personal space?*

Work alone: Ask students to work alone to choose a second scenario from A–C and follow the same steps as in section 2. Once they’ve finished, invite volunteers to present the issues and possible solutions they’ve put together.

If appropriate, ask students to comment on the presentations by asking them if they would like to add anything to what their classmates have said.



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Extension: Talk to students about other things that are invasions of personal space; point out that it doesn't only have to be about physical distance. Write the following up on the board:

- *Reading someone else's emails or diary*
- *Eating/drinking from someone's plate/glass*
- *Listening to very loud music in a public space*
- *Taking someone's books or pens without asking*
- *Listening to strangers' conversations*
- *Looking in someone else's bag*
- *Being security-checked at the airport*

Get students to work in pairs and order the list according to how big an invasion of space they think each item is. Elicit answers asking which of the situations on the list could be unavoidable or necessary, and why.

Encourage students to consider whether they are invading anybody's personal space in the home. Ask if there's anything they could change so that there's less of an invasion.