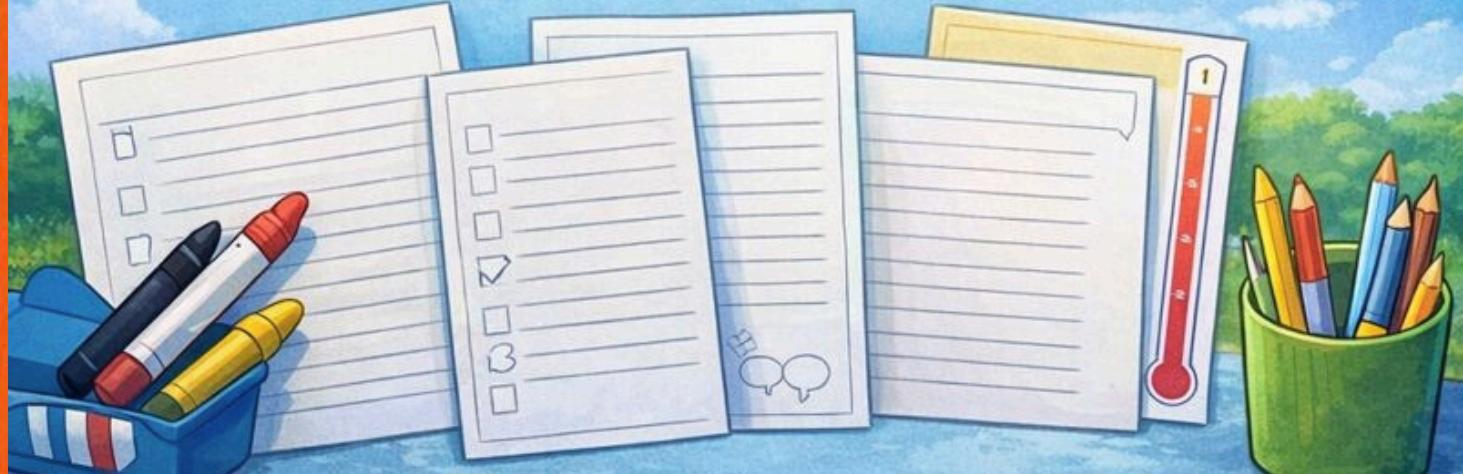


The Bench in the Middle



Created by Alina Holovata

Conflict Resolution & I-Messages



Includes:

- **Storybook – “The Bench in the Middle”**

Printable SEL story (student pages) about a playground conflict, hurt feelings, and how a simple bench becomes a place for second chances and calm problem-solving.

- **Comprehension Questions**

12 open-ended questions covering plot, characters (Ruben, Jonas, Mira), conflict moments, “Bench Rules,” and the main lesson of the story.

- **Reading Check**

True/False, Multiple Choice, and “Put the Story Events in Order” activity to quickly check students’ understanding of the text.

- **Story Map**

Graphic organizer for characters, setting, problem, key events, solution/ending, and theme/lesson – perfect for story retell and identifying the central message.

- **SEL Reflection Sheet – The Bench in the Middle**

Guided reflection page where students choose the most important moment, define “conflict” in their own words, notice conflict clues, and think about what each character might feel or need.

- **My Conflict Resolution Toolkit – SEL Graphic Organizer**

Step-by-step organizer (NOTICE – FEEL – SAY – DO – NEXT TIME PLAN) to help students plan a calm, kind way to solve a real or imaginary conflict.

- **Writing Prompt – “A Conflict I Can Solve Calmly”**

Writing page with paragraph space, drawing box, word bank, and checklist (what happened, feelings, I-message, peaceful solution, win-win idea).

- **Role-Play Cards – The Bench in the Middle**

4 scenario cards based on key moments from the story (soccer argument, silent bench at lunch, creating the Bench Rules sign, a new classroom conflict) to practice I-messages and fair solutions.

- **Bonus Activity – “Bench Rules: Sort & Fix”**

Sort helpful vs. unhelpful bench rules and rewrite unhelpful ones into positive class rules. Great for creating a shared “Conflict Bench Rules” poster.

- **Bonus Activity – “Feelings Thermometer: When to Pause?”**

1–5 feelings thermometer to help students notice when a conflict is “heating up,” choose a personal pause number, and create a simple pause plan and calm sentence.

- **Coloring Pages**

Black-and-white coloring pages based on key scenes (bench on the playground, the argument, Mira mediating, Bench Rules sign) – perfect for early finishers, calm-down time, or SEL centers.

- **Teacher Guide**

Detailed teacher guide with lesson objectives, suggested pacing, discussion questions, step-by-step lesson ideas, extensions, and assessment suggestions.

The Bench in the Middle

There was a wooden bench in the middle of the school playground.

In the morning, it was just a bench.

By the end of the day, it was a battlefield.

On Monday, Ruben and Jonas were playing soccer. The bench was their "goal."

"Goal!" shouted Ruben, kicking the ball.

"No way! It was too high," Jonas said, crossing his arms.

"It was inside the goal," Ruben argued.

"You always change the rules," Jonas snapped.

Their voices got louder. Other kids stopped to watch.

Mira, who liked peaceful mornings, was reading on the swings. She heard the shouting and sighed.

"Here we go again," she whispered.

The bell rang, but Ruben and Jonas walked to class in silence, side by side but far apart in their hearts.

At lunch, the playground felt different.

Ruben sat on one side of the bench.

Jonas sat on the other.

In the middle, there was a space where their friendship used to sit.

Mira walked over, holding her lunch tray.

"Can I sit here?" she asked, pointing at the empty space.

Ruben shrugged.

"Whatever," Jonas muttered.

Mira sat very carefully, like she was putting herself between two angry storms.

"So," she started slowly, "what happened?"

"He cheated," Ruben said.

"He never listens," Jonas answered at the same time.

They glared at each other, like the bench was a line they could not cross.

Mira took a deep breath.

"Okay. One at a time. Ruben, you go first. Jonas, you just listen. No talking, no eye-rolling, no faces.

Deal?"

Jonas rolled his eyes... but then smirked.

"Fine. I'll try."

Ruben looked down at his hands.

"When I kicked the ball," he said, "I thought it was a goal. You shouted in my face and said I always cheat. It made me feel... stupid. And kind of small."

Mira nodded.

"So you felt hurt when Jonas said you always cheat?"

"Yes," Ruben whispered.

Now it was Jonas's turn.

"Okay, Jonas," Mira said. "Your turn. Ruben, now you listen."

Jonas picked at the bench with his finger.

"When Ruben plays, he never explains the rules. He just says, 'It doesn't count' when I score. It makes me feel like my points don't matter. Like I don't matter."

"So you felt ignored and not respected?" Mira asked.

1. We agree on rules before we start.
2. We use I-messages, not blame.
3. We listen to both sides of the story.
4. We take a break when we're too angry.
5. We try to find a win-win solution.

Mira added a small drawing of a soccer ball and a little peace sign.

When other kids came to the playground, they pointed at the sign.

"What's this?" asked Elsie.

"It's our conflict bench," Mira explained. "If we have a problem, we sit here, listen to both sides, and try to fix it."

"Does it work?" Elsie asked.

Ruben and Jonas looked at each other.

"It's working today," Jonas said.

"And if we forget," Ruben added, "Mira will probably make us sit here again."

Mira laughed.

"Maybe. But that's what friends are for."

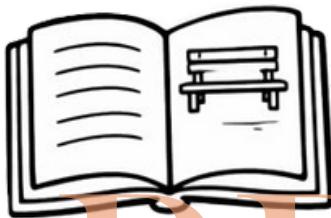
From that day on, the bench in the middle wasn't a battlefield anymore.

It was a place where games started, feelings were heard, and conflicts slowly turned into agreements.

It was still just a wooden bench.

But now, it was also a place for second chances.





Name: _____ Date: _____

The Bench in the Middle

1. Where is the wooden bench, and how do students use it at the beginning of the story?

2. Why are Ruben and Jonas arguing during the soccer game?

3. How does the argument change the way they sit on the bench at lunch?

4. Who is Mira, and why does she decide to sit between Ruben and Jonas?

5. What rules does Mira set when she asks each boy to tell his side of the story?

6. How does Ruben describe his feelings when Jonas says he "always cheats"?

7. How does Jonas describe his feelings when Ruben changes the rules after he scores?

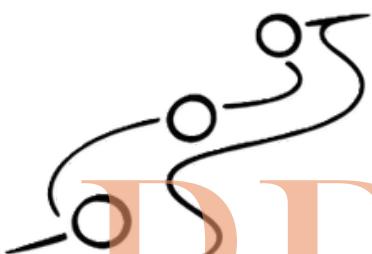
8. What are I-messages? Write the sentence starter that Mira draws in the dirt.

9. How do Ruben and Jonas use I-messages to talk about their feelings? Give one example.

10. What do the three friends decide to do before they play next time?

11. What is written on the "Bench Rules" sign they make together? Name at least two rules.

12. What is the main lesson of the story? How can a simple bench become a place for second chances?



Name: _____ STORY MAP
Date: _____

The Bench in the Middle

CHARACTERS

1

Who is in the story? Main characters and helpers.

Where and when does the story happen?

2

SETTING

PROBLEM

3

What is the main conflict?

List 3-4 important events.

4

KEY EVENTS

**SOLUTION /
ENDING**

5

How is the conflict solved? What changes?

What does the story teach about conflicts and friendships?

6

**THEME /
LESSON**

Name: _____ Date: _____

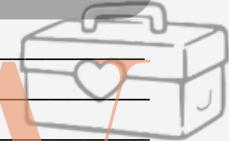
MY CONFLICT RESOLUTION TOOLKIT

Think of one real or imaginary conflict. Use this page to plan a calm, kind way to solve it.

NOTICE

WHAT I SEE / HEAR

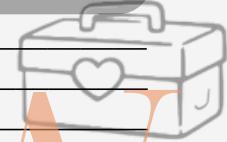
Clues I notice: _____



FEEL

WHAT THEY MIGHT FEEL

They might feel: _____



SAY

KIND WORDS / I-MESSAGE

An I-message or kind sentence I can say: _____



DO

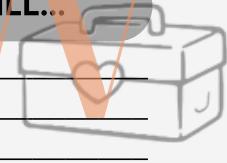
ONE PEACEFUL ACTION

One calm action I can take is: _____



NEXT TIME PLAN

NEXT TIME I SEE A CONFLICT LIKE THIS, I WILL...





FEELINGS THERMOMETER – WHEN TO PAUSE?

Sometimes conflicts heat up like a thermometer.

Use this page to show how big the feelings are and when it's time to take a break.

Part 1 – Feelings Thermometer

Draw or imagine a thermometer from 1 to 5.

- 1 = calm
- 2 = a little annoyed
- 3 = frustrated
- 4 = very angry
- 5 = ready to explode



Questions:

1. At the start of the soccer game, what number do you think Ruben is at?

Number: _____ Why? _____

2. When Jonas hears "You always cheat!", what number is he at?

Number: _____ Why? _____

3. When Mira asks them to sit and talk, what number do you think they are at now?

Ruben: _____ Jonas: _____

4. In your own conflicts, at what number do you need to take a break before saying something unkind?

My "pause number" is: _____

Because when I get to this number, I...

Part 2 – My Pause Plan

Finish the sentences:

- When I feel my thermometer go up to _____ or higher, I can:
 - take 3 deep breaths
 - count to 10
 - ask, "Can we take a quick break?"
 - drink some water
 - other: _____
- A calm sentence I can use:

"I need a short break because I feel _____."

I want to talk again when I feel more calm."



PREVIEW

PREVIEW

BENCH RULES

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



PREVIEW

Teacher Guide – The Bench in the Middle

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson or mini-unit, students will be able to:

- Retell the main events in The Bench in the Middle and describe the key characters: Ruben, Jonas, Mira, and the other students on the playground.
- Explain in their own words what a conflict is and why small disagreements can grow when people don't feel heard.
- Identify the story's "hot spots" (the soccer argument, the silent bench at lunch, the Bench Rules moment) and connect them to real-life playground conflicts.
- Use simple I-messages ("I feel... when... because... I need...") to express feelings without blame.
- Describe and practice a basic conflict-resolution plan: notice clues → listen to both sides → share I-messages → agree on rules and next steps.
- Complete comprehension and reading-check activities using details from the text.
- Reflect on their own experiences with conflict using the SEL Reflection Sheet and My Conflict Resolution Toolkit pages.
- Write a short narrative/reflective paragraph about "A Conflict I Can Solve Calmly" using the word bank and checklist.

Standards Alignment

SEL Competencies

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

ELA Standards

- Reading Comprehension – characters, setting, problem/solution, sequence of events, theme, and character change.
- Speaking & Listening – participating in partner/group discussions, listening to others' perspectives, role-playing social situations.
- Writing – narrative and reflective writing about real or imagined conflicts, using details from the story and from students' own experiences.

Materials Needed

From this resource:

- Printable storybook: The Bench in the Middle (student pages with text and illustrations).
- Comprehension Questions page (12 open-ended questions).
- Reading Check page (True/False, multiple choice, and sequencing).
- Story Map graphic organizer (characters, setting, problem, events, solution, theme).
- SEL Reflection Sheet – The Bench in the Middle (students analyze conflict clues, feelings, I-messages, and big questions).
- My Conflict Resolution Toolkit graphic organizer
– NOTICE – FEEL – SAY – DO – NEXT TIME PLAN.
- Writing Prompt – A Conflict I Can Solve Calmly (paragraph + drawing box + word bank + checklist).