

"The Poverty Game," an experiential simulation for families

A. Supplies

A collection of magazines, a quantity of Elmer's glue, scissors, a packet of bright construction paper, an assortment of dull, faded construction paper, scrap paper, foil paper, vividly colored tissue paper, pipe cleaners, dirty yarn, soda straws, clean yarn, cigarette butts, etc. Numbered envelopes containing pieces of construction paper marked one cent, two cents, three cents, four cents, five cents, according to the needs described below.

B. Preparation

Divide your group into the following categories: citizens (the majority of your group), storekeepers, a police officer, welfare workers, a clergyman, an organizer of the poor, a group of observers, and a game supervisor to keep the game moving.

Citizens indiscriminately receive money on this scale: in a group of ten, three have no money, two have three cents, two have six cents, one has ten cents, one has twelve cents, and one has seventeen cents. A larger group would have more wealth but a wider distribution of poverty.

For instance, in a group of twenty participants: six have no money, four have three cents, two have ten cents, four have six cents, one has twelve cents, one has fifteen cents, and one has twenty cents. The welfare workers receive half-cents to give as welfare payments and the storekeepers have money for change.

C. Plan of Action

The citizens are told they must produce a collage in twenty minutes. They are given sealed money envelopes and told that supplies are sold at various stores. At the end of the time period, every citizen must have a collage to hang on the wall.

Storekeepers sell materials the workers need. In a glue store, one dab of Elmer's glue costs one cent; in an equipment store, scissors are three cents; in a paper store, a small sheet of colored tissue paper is two cents, construction paper is three cents, and scrap materials may be any price. A junk store has such items as pictures torn from magazines, chicken feathers and wilted flowers. Storekeepers may overcharge, sell wealthy customers items on credit, sell damaged merchandise, or bargain with the customers. The poor should be mistreated. Near the end of the time limit, storekeepers can increase or reduce prices. They can send a police officer to collect an I.O.U. A citizen can be sued for not paying.

The police patrol the area. They spy on the poor and harass them. They especially watch for cheating and stealing. They rough up offenders. They ridicule poor people and side with the wealthy. They make arrests and place offenders in a "jail" for one to five minutes.

The welfare worker has a few half-cent pieces. She/he assists the poor, but requires them to fill out long forms and wait for long periods before receiving help. She/he asks personal questions like: "What will you

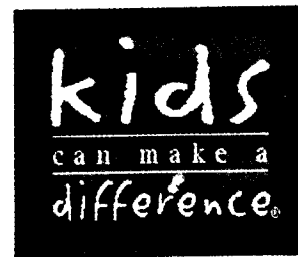
do with your money? How much money did you get? Have you tried to get money somewhere else?" She/he gives one-quarter and one-half cent allowances.

The clergyman gives out very little money. She/he talks about the poor people's relationship to the church and gives money only if people promise to attend church. She/he asks several rich people for money for the poor.

The supervisor is the director of the game. She/he must know who is assuming what role and who has money. She/he acts as a catalyst and is very pushy and insulting. She/he demands that the poor produce more work but is very critical of their work. She/he rejects even the finished products saying they could have been better.

The organizer of the poor attempts to unite them. She/he can organize sit-ins, demonstrations, boycotts, or whatever. She/he may achieve the goal in either a constructive or destructive way. The police are very much opposed to such activity and act accordingly.

The observers have a list of citizens and how much money each has received. They record the comments and interaction of the group for later discussion.



Kids Can Make A Difference® (KIDS), an educational program for middle- and high school students, focuses on the root causes of hunger and poverty, the people most affected, solutions, and how students can help. The major goal is to stimulate the students to take some definite follow-up actions as they begin to realize that one person can make a difference.

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D. Conclusion

At the end of the game, all collages are displayed. The participants may jeer or cheer. The supervisor should ask the feelings of the participants and compare them to real life situations. A discussion about relation of powerlessness and poverty should follow. Questions like "Why would the police assume that a low-income person is cheating?" "What keeps the low-income person going?" "What makes it difficult to 'produce' for the low-income person?" "What are sources of support?"

From *Educating for A Just Society*, pp 116-117, by Kathy McGinnis, available from IPJ.