

What is a neighborhood?

Third-grade differentiation

■ Reading and discussion tips:

- Before students read the article “Neighborhoods,” have them brainstorm about what the term “neighborhood” means to them. Record students’ answers on the board in an idea web with the word *neighborhood* at the center. Then, as students read the article, have them underline parts that are similar to the words and ideas in the web.
- Instead of having students read the article for homework, read it aloud in class. Ask students to take turns reading. Define difficult words, such as *dwelling*s, *duplex*s and *landlords*.
- Consider reading the interview over two class periods. As you read, pause after each question-answer pair to assess students’ comprehension. Have a student volunteer provide a summary of the section, and give the class an opportunity to share any questions they may have.

■ Activity tips:

- If possible, before the lesson, take photos of the neighborhood around the school. Display them for students to help stimulate their thinking as they take their “imaginary walk.”
- Allow students to complete the “A walk in the neighborhood” worksheet in pairs or small groups.
- After you brainstorm the list of questions to ask the neighborhood representative, assign one to each student. Give students note cards, and have them write their questions on their cards. During the question-and-answer session, students can take turns standing up and reading their questions from their cards.

■ Optional extension tips:

- Explain that one goal of Habitat for Humanity’s Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative is to persuade the government to fund Habitat’s efforts to build and repair neighborhoods. As a class, draft a letter to your congressional representative to request funding for Habitat. Make sure the letter explains why neighborhoods can benefit from Habitat’s work.

Fifth-grade differentiation

■ Reading and discussion tips:

- As part of their homework assignment, have students identify and write down three main ideas from the article “Neighborhoods.” Then have them write down at least one detail to support each main idea. Ask students to share and discuss their answers in class the next day.
- Have students read the interview for homework. Ask them to come to class with one idea from the text that they found interesting or surprising and one question they had. Before you discuss the interview as a whole class, have students meet with partners or small groups and share their questions and reactions.
- As a class, identify five to 10 challenging words from the interview. Have students write down the words in their reading or vocabulary notebooks, look up and record the definitions, and write a sentence using each word.

■ Activity tips:

- Give each student two copies of the worksheet “A walk in the neighborhood.” Have students complete one copy on their own and ask a neighborhood resident—perhaps a caregiver, shop owner or other adult—to fill out the other. In class, discuss the similarities and differences between the problems identified by the students and those identified by the adults.
- Ask students to write a brief essay that details the plan for improving the neighborhood problem you have identified. The main idea should be the problem and its solution, and the essay should explain the steps involved in carrying out the solution. Make sure students explain each step clearly and use transition words, such as *first*, *then* and *next*, between steps.

■ Assessment tips:

- If you ask students to write an essay (see “Activity tips” above), evaluate it on the following criteria: focus, clarity, organization and use of transitions. Be sure to share the criteria with students in advance.

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Grade four

Objectives

Students will:

- Read about what a neighborhood is and what elements make up a neighborhood.
- Read an interview with a Habitat for Humanity housing expert.
- Identify the features of a selected neighborhood, including problems.
- Brainstorm solutions to one problem in the selected neighborhood.
- Discuss neighborhood issues and problems with a neighborhood representative.

National content standards

Social studies

- Students consider existing uses and propose and evaluate alternative uses of resources and land in home, school, community, the region and beyond.
- Students describe personal connections to place—especially place as associated with immediate surroundings.
- Students distinguish among local, state and national government and identify representative leaders at these levels, such as mayor, governor and president.

Language arts

- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and posing problems. They gather, evaluate and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

Scope

- Two class periods (30 to 45 minutes each).

Materials

- **Article:** “Neighborhoods.”
- **Interview:** “An interview with a housing expert.”
- **Worksheet:** “A walk in the neighborhood.”

Lesson plan

In this lesson, students will explore the nature and components of a neighborhood, including the neighborhood(s) where they live and attend school. They will learn about the role of Habitat for Humanity in a neighborhood and how the building of a Habitat home affects a neighborhood. They will identify and discuss neighborhood issues with an alderperson or other neighborhood representative.

■ Preparation:

Before beginning the lesson:

- Have students read the article “Neighborhoods” for homework.
- Contact a neighborhood representative from the area where your school is located. Arrange for the official to visit your classroom on Day 2 of the lesson. Ask the official to speak about the strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood. Ask him or her to suggest small, concrete ways students can improve the community.

■ Procedure:

Day 1 Introduce the topic of neighborhoods.

1. Discuss the article “Neighborhoods.”

Be sure to cover the following main ideas:

- Neighborhoods are defined by physical area.
- Neighborhoods are set up to be communities.
- Neighborhoods are usually divided by who can afford to live there.
- Some neighborhoods are unsafe for families.
- Many neighborhood problems can be solved by neighbors who are willing to get involved.
- Habitat for Humanity improves neighborhoods through its A Brush with Kindness program.

2. Read and discuss “An interview with a housing expert.”

In a discussion, be sure to bring up the following points:

- Habitat for Humanity often builds in neighborhoods where the land is inexpensive so that the new Habitat homeowners will be able to afford their property.
- Habitat tries to improve neighborhoods by fixing up old houses or building new houses.
- It is important for new Habitat homeowners to get along with existing neighbors.

3. Students complete the worksheet “A walk in the neighborhood.”

- Distribute the worksheet to students. Tell them that they are going to take an imaginary “walk” through the neighborhood. If many of your students live in the same area, you might have them imagine the neighborhood in which they live. Otherwise, you might have them imagine walking around the neighborhood where the school is located.
- Read the directions and questions aloud on the worksheet. Have the students complete the worksheet independently, based on their knowledge of the selected neighborhood.
- Help students understand that the problems they define may be anything that could be improved. For instance, maybe the neighborhood does not have any parks or playgrounds nearby for children to play in. Maybe it does have these places, but they are littered with trash, in need of repair or unsafe.
- Have students share the neighborhood observations they recorded on their worksheets. List the “strengths” and “problems” on the board.
- Explain that a neighborhood representative will be visiting your classroom the following day. Brainstorm a list of questions the students can ask the representative regarding the problems the class listed.

2. Ask the representative to speak.

Invite the official to speak for a few minutes about the strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood.

3. Encourage students to ask questions.

Have student volunteers ask the questions you have prepared previously.

4. Invite the neighborhood representative to address student concerns.

Prompt the official to offer small, concrete ways in which students can help make the neighborhood a better place. List these ideas on the board.

5. Draft a plan of action.

After the neighborhood representative’s visit to your classroom, discuss the ways your students can get involved in improving the neighborhood. Choose one of the options you listed on the board. Then draft a plan to improve the problem over the next several weeks. Together, put your plan into action.

■ Assessment:

Check to make sure student work is complete and accurate.

■ Optional extension:

Investigate Habitat for Humanity’s Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative.

Have students look into Habitat for Humanity’s Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. Share with students pertinent information about the initiative from http://www.habitat.org/gov/take_action/GRA_Build_Louder_NRI.aspx. Have students identify neighborhoods in your area that might benefit from this initiative. Contact your local Habitat for Humanity affiliate to see how your class can get involved in supporting Habitat’s mission to strengthen communities by improving run-down or abandoned homes.

Day 2 Define and discuss neighborhood issues with a neighborhood representative.

1. Welcome the representative to your classroom.

Write the official’s name on the board. Explain the lesson on which you and the students have been working.

Neighborhoods

What is a neighborhood? A neighborhood is one small area within a city or town. It is a group of dwellings and other buildings on streets that run near each other. Some neighborhoods have small houses. Some neighborhoods have larger houses. Some neighborhoods have rows of duplexes or apartment buildings. Some neighborhoods have many different kinds of dwellings on the same street.

Many neighborhoods also contain stores and other businesses. A neighborhood might have a grocery store, a gas station, a school or a hospital. It might have a playground or a swimming pool. A neighborhood is a place where some people live, some people work, and some people play. A neighborhood is a community.



Kids play basketball in their neighborhood in Gulfport, Mississippi.

The people who live in a neighborhood are neighbors. They live next door to each other. They live across the hall and across the street from each other. They might work at the stores and other businesses in the neighborhood. Sometimes they know each other. Other times, they do not.

Unfortunately, not all neighborhoods provide safe and decent places to live. Some people are forced to stay in run-down or unsafe neighborhoods because they cannot afford to move. Some neighborhoods are in very bad shape. Buildings are falling apart.

Sometimes landlords and homeowners do not keep their properties in good repair. Sometimes people cannot afford to fix their properties. Some people are not proud

of neighborhoods where all the buildings are run-down. Housing prices have risen for many years. Wages for many people have stayed low for many years. Because of both these things, many people cannot afford good housing.

In some run-down neighborhoods, the crime rate is high. The neighborhood is unsafe for families. In some poor neighborhoods, the neighbors are sick of crime. They want to live in safety. Some of these neighbors form groups called Neighborhood Watches. A Neighborhood Watch is a group of neighbors who meet with police officers and come up with a plan to fight crime in their neighborhood.

People also form other groups to improve their neighborhoods. They might form a group to help each other make repairs to their homes. They might form a group to help a neighbor who is sick or injured. They might meet to plan a neighborhood party or barbecue. Neighborhood groups celebrate the strengths of a neighborhood. They solve neighborhood problems. They create pride in a neighborhood.

There also are outside programs that help people improve their neighborhoods. Habitat for Humanity has created a program called A Brush with Kindness to help communities. Sometimes it is a struggle to keep up with the maintenance and needed repairs on a house. Over time, a house can become unsafe if these repairs are not made. A Brush with Kindness is run by local groups of Habitat for Humanity. Low-income families partner with Habitat volunteers to help them make their homes look better. They help them paint and make repairs to the outsides of their homes. The program also does things to help people make their homes more energy efficient, like sealing windows and doors to keep out cold air.

Safe and well-maintained homes improve the neighborhood as a whole. When neighbors see what a few repairs can do, they want help repairing their homes, too. When someone cares enough to repair run-down buildings, people begin to feel pride in their neighborhood. People who feel pride for their neighborhood are more likely to take action to make their neighborhood a better place.

An interview with a housing expert

The following interview is with Kelly Peterson*, a Habitat for Humanity housing expert, who works in north suburban Chicago. She has been helping people find safe, decent housing for 20 years. She is now director of a Habitat for Humanity affiliate.

Are most of the Habitat for Humanity houses in your community built in urban or rural areas?

We build in urban areas because we found land to buy in between other houses. This way the land already has streets and sewer and water pipes running close by. Out in the country, sometimes there are no pipes. And if there are no pipes, it is very expensive to add them. Then the house would cost too much for the family who is buying it.

Also, many of our families have jobs close to the urban areas so they like to live near their work. Some of them do not have good transportation, so living in the city often means they can use public transportation. Some Habitat affiliates build in rural areas. In rural areas there are still many places to build houses. The builders often dig a well for the family instead of piping water in from the city. The builders also dig a septic system. That way, the house doesn't need to be connected to the city sewer.

How does Habitat for Humanity decide which neighborhoods to build houses in?

We look for neighborhoods that look like they need better houses and where the land is not too expensive. Sometimes we find old houses that are very bad. We buy them, tear them down, and build nice new houses in their place. Other times we find vacant land that does not cost too much money. Sometimes Habitat fixes up an old house, and then a family moves into it. We always try to find a site where a family can have a good house and a good life.

**Names have been changed.*

Are there neighborhoods where there is land available but you decide not to build houses?

Yes, sometimes a neighborhood has very nice land available, but the land is too expensive for our program, and the family would not be able to afford to buy the house. Often in these neighborhoods the taxes are too high for our families to afford.

Also, in some neighborhoods, the city requires that we build a very large house to follow its laws. These are not good neighborhoods for Habitat homes, because the family cannot afford a house in these locations. In other cases, a neighborhood is very dangerous and would not be a good place for a family to live. Sometimes a plot of land is next to a very busy road or a dangerous cliff. That is not good for a family.



Habitat volunteers fix an old house in Birmingham, Alabama.

What is the process you follow when building a house in a neighborhood?

First, Habitat buys the land or someone gives it to us. Our architect helps decide what type of house will fit best on the land—maybe a two-story house or maybe a one-story ranch house. He gives us a drawing of the house. Then our civil engineer measures the land and makes an engineering drawing for us. Then we get a permit from the sewer company to install pipes that hook to the city's sewer system.

Then the city reviews the drawings and the permit. If everything is okay, the city gives us a permit to build the house. We have a celebration, called a groundbreaking, when we dig with shovels into the ground and bless the ground and the people who will build the house. Then we start to build the house. Once the outside of the house is done, we finish the inside. Then we put in the driveway and sidewalks. Finally, we plant the grass and bushes.

When everything is ready, we have a celebration. It's called the dedication. We bless the house and give the family the key. Then the family can move in.

Do new Habitat homeowners get a chance to meet their neighbors before they move into the neighborhood?

Usually they do meet their neighbors. We visit the neighbors to tell them who we are. We invite them to the groundbreaking ceremony. Sometimes they come over and help build the house. Many neighbors are very nice and let us use their water before we have our own water for the house. Sometimes they let us sit on their grass in the shade to rest or eat lunch. They are usually very nice to us, even when we make extra noise and make a mess with all the dirt. They're happy when they have a beautiful new house next door. Many times they come to the dedication ceremony.



A Habitat neighborhood in Homestead, Florida. High school and college students helped build these homes.

How do the neighbors react when you come to start building a house?

Sometimes the neighbors' dogs bark at us! But usually the neighbors are very nice to Habitat workers and to the new family. Sometimes they do not like the extra noise and dirt from our building project. Once in a while, the children

play at the site. When they do, it is very dangerous. They should not do it, because they could get hurt. Some of the neighbors come and ask questions about how to fix up their own houses, and we help them.

What effects does a new Habitat for Humanity house have on a neighborhood?

The new house usually makes the neighborhood look nicer, because it is clean and shiny and new. Sometimes, once the house is built, the neighbors start to fix up their own houses to make them look better. The neighbors tell us that the value of their houses often goes up after the new Habitat house is built. That means their house is worth more. Sometimes when the volunteers are at the building site, neighbors come out and everyone starts talking to each other more. When that happens, the neighborhood gets better.

How does it make a neighborhood better when the people know each other and are friends?

When people talk to each other, they get to know each other. They share more of their lives with each other. When neighbors know each other, they begin to care about each other. That means they want to help each other. It also means there is someone they can depend on living close by. They help each other with shoveling snow. They help if someone's car breaks down. They watch their neighbors' houses when they go on a trip. They take care of their pets.

Neighbors who care about each other also make the neighborhood safer. They keep an eye out for each other. They know who lives in the neighborhood. They speak up if they see something suspicious. They form groups like Neighborhood Watch to keep crime out of their neighborhood.

Sometimes we get enough land to build whole neighborhoods. Once we built 14 homes on one block. We also built a subdivision with 23 homes. We built another subdivision with 33 homes. Some of these neighborhoods have local parks where all the children can play. Some affiliates have built playgrounds in the subdivisions they are building. They put the playgrounds in when they have enough land. A playground becomes a gathering place where both children and adults can come and spend time together and get exercise.

These Habitat neighborhoods are very strong. Before

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the houses are built, the families take classes on money management. Then they all help build their houses and their neighbors' houses. Everyone who buys a Habitat home has to put in that kind of "sweat equity." So all these people end up being friends before they move into their houses. These Habitat neighbors work very hard to make their neighborhoods special.

What is the most difficult thing about building in a neighborhood?

In some neighborhoods there is not very much space, so it is very crowded when we are building, since we have so many construction trucks and cars. We have to be careful not to block the mailboxes of the neighbors so they can get their mail. We also have to be sure not to block the neighbors' driveways. We also have to be careful about safety so no children or adults or pets get hurt with the extra cars and the work we do.

What is the best thing about building in a neighborhood?

The best thing about building in a neighborhood is seeing the new neighbors become friends. Many times, the people are strangers, but after many months of building, the strangers become friends. Then after the Habitat volunteers are gone to the next site, the neighbors stay friends. Many years later, they still talk to each other and help each other to keep their neighborhood safe and beautiful.



Neighbors talk outside a Habitat home in Denver, Colorado.

Why do communities in the United States today need Habitat for Humanity?

Housing is very expensive. Many people are living in places that are overcrowded or unsafe. Rent has gotten very high. Sometimes families have to live together because they've lost jobs or they have low-paying jobs and can't afford to live anywhere else. I've seen 15 people living in one house, because they couldn't afford anything else. I knew one family who lived in a basement. It was very dark, and there was mold growing there. It was very unhealthy. Habitat allows families to get their own houses.



Habitat volunteers build a playground in a neighborhood in Durham, North Carolina.

What housing problems do you see in neighborhoods now?

Over the years that we've been building we've seen the prices go up and up. It costs a lot now for us to even get started on building a home. We have to pay for insurance and permits for the sewer and electricity. The people who sell land, building materials and permits want to make as much money as they can, so they charge more and more each year. I have seen a shortage of affordable rental properties, too.

When people charge more and more money for housing, some people make a lot of money and some people are left with very little. We have in this country people who have two and three houses and some people who have no house and not even a decent place to live.

It used to be that people wanted to live in the suburbs. But we're seeing some movement from suburbia back toward city living. More people are moving into multi-family dwellings in urban areas. People are buying dwellings in urban neighborhoods and fixing them up. As I said before, Habitat sometimes buys old houses and fixes them up. It feels great to take something that's run-down and make it beautiful.

Worksheet: A walk in the neighborhood

Directions: Answer the questions about the neighborhood.

1. Describe the neighborhood. What kind of buildings do you see? What are they like? What are the people like?

2. What do you like best about the neighborhood?

3. List three problems you see in the neighborhood.

4. Circle the problem on your list you would like to solve the most.

5. What are some ways to solve this problem? Write down as many ways as you can think of.

6. How would the neighborhood around your school be better if this problem were solved?
