



THE LIKING GAP

This strategy is suggested in the 11-14 BrainWaves lesson:

Building connections and friendships

About the strategy

The 'liking gap' is a term coined by social psychologists to describe a common bias in social interactions: people tend to underestimate how much others like them after a conversation or social encounter. The liking gap helps explain why many individuals feel socially anxious, assume they made a poor impression, or avoid future interactions—even when those interactions were actually positive. Understanding this bias can support healthier self-esteem, greater social confidence, and more willingness to form new relationships.

For adolescents, social uncertainty is particularly strong. The liking gap can contribute to social avoidance, fear of rejection and overthinking after interactions. Teaching young people about the liking gap can help normalise these feelings and reduce self-criticism. When students understand that others likely see them more positively, they may feel more confident initiating conversations, joining groups and maintaining friendships.

The scientific evidence behind the strategy

The liking gap was first formally demonstrated in a series of studies by Boothby, Cooney, Sandstrom, and Clark (2018). Results consistently showed that participants underestimated how much they were liked. Importantly, this effect remained even when interactions were extended over time, suggesting the liking gap is not just a first-impression phenomenon.

- Boothby, E. J., et al. (2018). *The liking gap in conversations: Do people like us more than we think?* Psychological Science. 2018 Nov; 29(11): 1742-1756.

The liking gap has even been perceived in children as young as 5 years old:

- Wolf, W., et al. (2021). *The Development of the Liking Gap: Children Older Than 5 Years Think That Partners Evaluate Them Less Positively Than They Evaluate Their Partners.* Psychological Science, 32(5), 789-798.

Further reading

This article from the British Psychological Society explains more about the liking gap:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/research-digest/liking-gap>