Civility & Civil Discourse

With so much happening these days, it seems like we rarely see or read respectful discussions on varying views on most any political topic or social issue. Instead, we see, tweet, read and hear speech that all too often includes name calling, putdowns, threats, and/or false or unproven accusations by adults.

Yet, we are befuddled, even outraged when kids bully or are rude and disrespectful to adults and one another inside and outside of school. The reality is when we model such behavior, it should come as no surprise to us when we see kids mirror back rude and disrespectful behaviors and attitudes towards others they disagree with or do not like.

And with so much social unrest looming over us these days, now seems like an optimal time for us to get back to the basics by modeling and teaching civility and civil discourse in a very intentional manner.

But first, what is Civility? Quite simply, it is polite and respectful behavior directed at others in a manner that allows us to exist and live peacefully with one another, in the midst of differing beliefs and views. The core elements of civility include mindfulness, empathy and respect.

So, what is Civil Discourse? Civil Discourse is respectful conversation intended to increase understanding, especially between two or more differing views on a particular topic or social issue.

Here are some ideas and ground rules for teaching and engaging in civil discourse in the classroom. Remember the teacher's role is to model and facilitate discussion that ensures that students remain respectful to one another as they discuss and express themselves.

1. Lead by example.

2. No personal attacks of any kind should be tolerated.
- Often times, when a person feels attacked, they shut down and are no longer open to the process.

- Discussions should be structured, whether it is a formal debate or where students enable their own learning through group discussion. No matter the format, establish and communicate clear rules. This will make it easier for you as a facilitator to enforce the rules of engagement and respect.
- Teach students to think about the impact of their words and behaviors on others.
- Students in the class, decide what respectful conversation looks and feels like. Volume and tone are often just as important as word choice.

3. Begin with less intense topics to discuss.
- Before you jump into a more controversial topic, discuss and debate less heated topics such as school dress codes or cellphone rules in school.
- Remember lived experiences often shape beliefs and so developing empathy goes a long way when trying to gain understanding into another person's view.
- Remind students to seek understanding of another student's view that differs from their view.
- Be mindful that almost any social issue or political topic could stir up strong emotions.
- Allow students to challenge each other's views without attacking each other.

4. Keep discussions structured.
- Effective discussions are organized and planned, which help make it easier for the teacher facilitate and enforce the rules set up by everyone.
- Praise students for their civil behavior, regardless of their viewpoints.

Furthermore, modeling and teaching civility and civil discourse can go a long way in improving school climate. School climate is best described as the school conditions that influence a student's learning. The better the school climate, the better the learning environment.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-moment-youth/201206/teaching-civility-in-f-word-society

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