

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-theconversation.com/7-ways-to-teach-civil-discourse-t...>

www.schoolclimate.org
www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/civil-di...
[Civil Discourse in the Classroom | Teaching Tolerance](#)
www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/civil-di...

Youth Substance Use: Prevention and Intervention

The pandemic has brought with it a plethora of concerns outside of the virus itself including a rise in both mental health and substance use concerns as a result of increased stress, change and uncertainty. During challenging times, individuals may turn to drugs and alcohol as a way to self-medicate and cope with their emotions. In fact, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that substance use has increased among all age groups during the pandemic. For parents, it is important to pay attention to your own response to the stress of the pandemic. For example, if a teen sees their parent using alcohol or drugs to ease their anxiety, they might think it's okay for them to do the same. Despite individual resiliency, we must not assume that everyone will bounce back once life begins to regain some normalcy. As our communities continue to move forward, it is important to check in with loved ones and friends to ask how they are doing. A meaningful message for kids and adults alike to hear is, "it is okay to not be okay" and just as importantly, "it is okay to ask for help". It is especially important for parents/caregivers to talk with their teens about how they are feeling during this time, given the increased risk for substance use and be attentive to possible signs of substance use.

One of the more challenging parts of being a parent of a teenager is deciphering what is normal adolescent behavior and what behavior may raise a red flag as to a concern. Experts agree that a substance use problem is more likely if you notice several of these signs at the same time, if they occur suddenly or if some of them are extreme in nature. Potential warning signs of a possible substance use issue in adolescents may include:

- Mood Changes- flare-ups of temper, irritability, or defensiveness
- School Problems- poor attendance, low grades, recent disciplinary action
- Rebellion against family rules
- Isolation or withdrawing from family
- Friend changes- switching friends and a reluctance to let you get to know the new friends
- A "nothing matters" attitude: sloppy appearance, a lack of involvement in former interests and general low energy
- A presence of alcohol, drugs or paraphernalia- finding it in your child's room or backpack, smelling of alcohol or other substances such as marijuana
- Physical or mental problems: memory lapses, poor concentration, bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech

It should be noted that many of these signs may also be symptoms of mental health issues such as depression. If there is reason to suspect use, err on the side of caution and have a conversation or seek guidance from a physician, a behavioral health care professional or your school's SCIP (School Community Intervention & Prevention) Coordinator.

The good news is parents have a significant influence in their children's decisions to experiment with alcohol and other drugs. Engaging in opportunities to have meaningful conversations with youth about the risks of drug and alcohol use is a powerful prevention strategy. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), "developing good communication skills helps parents catch problems early, support positive behaviors, and stay aware of what is happening in their children's lives". Experts offer the following tips for developing open and trusting parent-child communication:

School Community Intervention and Prevention

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- Ask open-ended questions- the kind of information you receive depends a lot on how you ask the question. Encourage your child to tell you how he or she thinks and feels about the issue you are discussing. Avoid questions that have “yes” or no” responses.
- Actively listen- before engaging in conversations, make sure you have the time and focus to listen and respond to your child. Be both physically and mentally present.
- Show interest and concern- avoid blaming/accusing.
- Validate feelings- keep in mind that validating another person’s feelings does not mean that you have to approve or agree with their perspective.
- Offer empathy and support for your child’s experiences.
- Give encouragement.

Now, more than ever, kids need to be able to open up about their feelings and emotions and find ways to cope with stress and change in healthy ways to avoid at risk behaviors such as substance use.

The following resources offer additional information on youth substance use and parent-child communication.

Center for Parent and Teen Communication- “Five Coping Skills Teens Need to Know”

<https://parentandteen.com/coping-skills/>

Talk Heart 2 Heart- Local resource developed to provide easy to use resources that encourage adults to talk with young people about alcohol and drugs, mental health and risky behaviors.

<https://talkheart2heart.org/>

Partnership to End Addiction-

“How to Spot the Signs of Teen Substance Use”

<https://drugfree.org/article/spotting-drug-use/>

“Help and Hope Crisis Resource for Parents”

<https://drugfree.org/get-help-hope-by-text/>

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Journal of Adolescent Health; National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Partnership to End Addiction, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

Staying Mentally Fit

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), 31.1% of American adults will experience an anxiety disorder at some point in their life. Of this number, 73% will experience a psychological complication such as anxiety and depression, with 77% of these individuals experiencing some type of physical complication due to stress. These could include issues such as high blood pressure, stomach issues, headaches, and skin conditions. So, what can you do to stay mentally fit? Let's take a look at some steps you can take.

There are things you can do for your physical health that will, in turn, help you stay mentally fit. One thing you can do is to exercise for 30 minutes every day. This delivers oxygen to your brain, helping you improve your memory, reasoning abilities and reaction times. Another is to actively manage your health. Going to the doctor for regular check-ups or when you are sick helps you take care of your physical health by addressing issues early on.

Believe it or not, what you eat can also help with your mental well-being. Eating foods like vegetables, fruits, protein, nuts, and other foods that have a high nutritional content will help reduce your chances of feeling depressed and stressed, which will, in turn, improve your mood. You can also boost your Vitamin B intake by eating whole grain cereals, green vegetables, and dairy as Vitamin B is vital to brain health.

It is also important to make sleep a priority. According to the Department of Homeland Security, *“Researchers have found that people need at least eight hours of sleep. When you do not get enough sleep, you are at risk of numerous adverse effects – many of which have to do with your mental health. Not getting enough sleep is linked to higher levels of stress, anxiety symptoms, and even depression.”*

So, what are some things you can do to more directly impact your mental fitness? One option is to read a book or article on a regular basis. Maintaining an interest in the world around you helps keep your mind stimulated, which could then lead to interesting conversations with friends, families, and even strangers. According to Better Health, *“This gives your brain an opportunity to explore, examine and inquire.”*

You can also challenge your brain power and memory. Learning a new language, filling out crossword puzzles, playing chess or taking up a new hobby gives your brain a workout which helps build neural pathways. Even watching game shows or playing question and answer games exercises your brain. These tactics can not only improve your brain health but also your social life.

Lastly, it is important to develop stress relief techniques, which can vary from one person to another. Journaling, drawing, writing music or poems, writing stories, or engaging in other creative activities can prove relaxing to some people. Others prefer working out or reading. And still others simply need to spend time with friends and family.

The brain is a muscle that needs to be exercised, just like the other muscles in our body. By exercising your brain, you can create a healthier outlook on life. Not only can it improve your mental health, it can also improve your physical health. Try to incorporate a few of these tips into your daily life – your brain will thank you.

References

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/ten-tips/10-tips-to-improve-your-mental-fitness>

<https://www.dhs.gov/employee-resources/7-tips-mental-fitness>

Here are some other resources on staying Mentally Fit:

Staying Mentally Fit

<https://www.mhanational.org/staying-mentally-healthy>

Quick Facts on Why You Should Stay Mentally Fit, and Tips

<https://www.healthline.com/health/depression/mental-fitness>

How to Make Yourself Mentally Stronger

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201701/10-strategies-make-yourself-mentally-stronger>

How to Look After Your Mental Health

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-mental-health>

Staying Mentally Fit During COVID-19

<https://thinkhealth.priorityhealth.com/10-tips-for-staying-mentally-fit-during-the-covid-19-state-shutdown/>

Nutrition

<https://www.hhs.gov/fitness/eat-healthy/how-to-eat-healthy/index.html>