



The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

Shining light on mental health through education.

9 Parent Strategies for Civil Conversations

Over past years, we have witnessed significant divisions in our nation and bad-mannered arguments across the media. Political turmoil has added incredible stress for families and communities, resulting in conversations that are far from civil or respectful. How can we improve this situation, and promote healthy growth for our kids? By modeling the type of behavior we'd like to see in them. Below are strategies to consider.

- 1. Demonstrate Respect.** Whatever the issue, begin by making it clear that everyone's ideas and opinions are worthy. As caregivers, a key part of showing respect, especially for kids, is being mindful of your *non-verbal* responses – scowling, sighing, rolling your eyes. No civil conversation can begin if someone feels disparaged – even a young child.
- 2. Listen and Try to Understand the Other Point of View.** Listening is a skill and an art. Try not to interrupt or make assumptions about the other person's ideas. Ask questions if you don't understand why someone feels a certain way. Repeat it back to them what you've heard and ask if you have got it right.
- 3. Beware of Attacking the Person.** It is a common reaction to take disagreements personally, even when they are not, which can invoke a "fight" response in us. But no civil conversation is helped by directly calling another person ridiculous or blaming them in the middle of a discussion. Focus your reactions on the topic at hand – not the person. Ask open ended questions to clarify their position.
- 4. Use Empathy.** This can be tough but try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Try to feel and appreciate where they're coming from. While you may still disagree, you probably will find some common ground on most topics. And while your opinion or solutions may differ, if your child or teen senses you can understand why and how they are thinking, they are more likely to hang in and listen to your point of view. They may even use the same empathic skill to walk in your shoes.
- 5. Take Turns and Tell Stories.** It can be easy to talk over our kids. Make a point to take turns when having conversations, without interrupting each other. A great way of taking turns is by asking your child or teen to tell a story from their life that captures their point of view.
- 6. Accept Being Wrong and Ask for Advice.** In many hot conversations, it's common to begin by thinking we are right. But if we keep an open mind, we might learn something from our kids! Ask them for advice.
- 7. Don't Be Afraid to Disagree.** There are healthy and growth-promoting ways to voice opposition, and other ways that just fan the flames. It's empowering for kids to challenge their parents, and it's invaluable for them to learn how to articulate their point of view and have their opinion be considered.
- 8. Role Play.** As a follow-up to the last point, caregivers, parents, or other family members can role play disagreements in front of younger children. Having a civil argument over virtually anything is incredibly useful, particularly if it models all the points above. It's always best to take a position of humility and curiosity when engaged in conversation.
- 9. Have Frequent, Ongoing Conversations.** Whether we disagree or agree on a particular topic, it's always valuable to have several conversations, particularly about complicated issues. This encourages going deeper and giving the other person time to think about what was discussed, especially on difficult concepts. All difficult conversations take practice. The more we practice, the better we become.

Thanks for all you do to support a young person in your life. It really makes a difference.

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