

Talking to Kids about Things That Matter

Classroom discussions on moral issues can be productive if teachers set clear expectations.

Photograph by Jan F. Anderson



Forming an identity and learning to make decisions were never easy, even when parents, churches, and schools reinforced essentially the same values. Today, with values and family structures in flux and mixed messages on TV every day, the process has become tortuous.

Many kids today are growing up alone, developing their personalities with little moral, ethical, or personal direction from any significant adult in their lives. Most parents would like to give more attention to the nurture of their children, but they are simply too busy trying to make ends meet to do so.

Lack of adult direction exacts a price. From my work on the radio and in the classroom, I have come to believe that many youngsters are growing up amoral. In addition, the children are not blind to other circumstances around them: the arms race, adults' hypocrisy, environmental degradation, famine, and greed confront them on the news almost every night. And they sense that their country, their planet, their species—and their futures—are in deep trouble.

In despair, some children commit suicide rather than go down with the ship. Others retreat to the cynicism reflected in this comment: "I might as well keep on smoking because we're all going to die soon."

Fortunately, most kids don't want to abandon ship, but they *do* want adults they can talk to. As one of my students, Keeley Smith, said the other day: "There are a lot of things going on in the real world—like AIDS and stuff like that—and we have to deal with it. It's out there, like it or not. So help us adapt."

Recently on my radio talk program a 16-year-old remarked: "I think kids are often willing to try to communicate better with parents and teachers, but sometimes they just don't know how to go about it—especially if the adults aren't receptive to changing their own communication patterns."

Kids *want* to talk about the tough choices facing them. For most people—*young and old*—the question is how to do it.

Getting Beyond Recitation

Effective classroom dialogue does not just happen. It is a product of several factors—our mindsets, the parameters we establish for interaction, and the content and process of communication.

Attitudes and mindsets have a profound effect on the outcomes of interpersonal interactions. Those of us who grew up with didactic teaching, even though we may have despised it then, often end up teaching the same way. Similarly, adults who grew up with autocratic, noncommunicative parents must work very hard to avoid treating their own children that way. Adults whose formative years did not prepare them to be open and candid may find it difficult to change their basic communication patterns, but it's worth the effort—teachers who get beyond recitation succeed with youngsters because they engage kids in learning communication skills that will be useful throughout their lives.

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Talk show host Steven Landfried examines "The Stages of Adolescence" with Shelley Joan Weiss and Rachael Bass (8th grader) of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, on WILV's "Parent/Teen Connection."



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Establishing Parameters for Dialogue

To begin the process, it is essential to tell young people—and adults for that matter—what is expected of them. In a classroom, on the radio, or in an in-service meeting, I like to engage everyone actively in thought and conversation. Since I want to assure everyone an equal chance to be heard, I explain that verbal or rude individuals will not be allowed to dominate discussions, interrupt others, or otherwise distract the group. Moreover, I emphasize that emotional language, personal attacks, and gross generalizations won't be tolerated because free expression of thoughts cannot occur if students are maligned or put down for what they think.

After all, respect for different views is basic to dialogue. In my classes only one person may speak at a time and then only after raising a hand and being called on. This habit helps to maintain an atmosphere conducive to careful listening, respect for everyone, and opportunities for all students to express themselves. Also, when any-

Sample Discussion Excerpt #1: Do You Want to Get Pregnant?

Teacher: How many of you girls would choose to be having a baby nine months from today?

[Girls in the class give a quizzical look.]

Teen #1: Are you serious?

Teacher: Absolutely. How many of you would want to be having a baby nine months from now?

[No responses]

Teacher: Why aren't you raising your hands?

Teen #2: No way; I'm not going to throw away my future.

Teen #3: It doesn't make sense.

Teacher: Then why did 1,200,000 teenage girls get pregnant last year?

Teen #2: They weren't thinking—they were feeling.

[Laughter]

Teacher: But should they be thinking?

Teen #4: Of course, but *before* they got themselves in that situation!

Teen #5: No, they should have been thinking at the time, too.

Teacher: Thinking about what?

Teen #1: They should have been thinking about what it's like to be raising a kid when you're 16.

Teacher: Do you think you're ready to be raising a child now?

Teen #5: No.

Teacher: Why not?

Teen #5: How can I be raising a kid when I'm only a kid myself?

Teacher: An interesting point. In what ways would having a child at this point in your life stunt your own psychosocial development—and thus make you less effective as a potential parent? . . .

Sample Discussion Excerpt #2: Talking About Sexuality

Teacher: Do you think many adults feel comfortable talking to kids about sexuality?

Teen #1: Are you kidding?

Teacher: I'm serious. Is this an issue most adults can talk about easily with kids—and any kids?

Teen #2: Some parents don't want to bring up sex because they fear their children might ask a whole lot of questions that the parents can't answer. So the parents keep their mouths shut.

Teen #3: And other parents might think you shouldn't know about sex yet.

Teacher: Could it be a combination of things?

Teen #4: Sure. Some might just be embarrassed to talk about it. The scared ones might not want to believe their kids could have sex so young. For others it's a moral issue—you know, the ones who think sex is the sort of thing you only do when you're married.

Teen #5: Yeh, when they grew up the general ideas on sex and morals were different from today. Chances are their ideas haven't changed much since then.

Teen #6: When they were raised, most parents were kept away from sexuality. They didn't know much when they were kids and it didn't matter, and now they feel we don't—and shouldn't—know about it.

Teacher: Can you understand how they feel?

Teen #2: To a point, but why can't parents accept our sexuality?

Teacher: To some extent it's a psychological issue. For some parents it's hard to accept that their baby is now capable of producing babies or that they are getting older.

Teen #5: I think there's another problem.

Teacher: What is that?

Teen #5: The lack of time parents spend with their children. How can you talk with someone about anything important if they aren't around?

Teen #1: Yeh, and then they complain because we're not around much.

Teacher: What factors in society today explain that?

Teen #7: Divorce mostly. But does that excuse parents from not taking time to talk to their kids? . . .

one displays persistent lack of respect, I talk to that person outside of class about social justice and respect issues; if that doesn't work, I do not hesitate to involve school counselors and/or parents. Further, since young people respond well when treated as equals, I address students as "Mr." or "Ms." to allow us to operate on the same level; they address me as "Mr. Landfried" or "Mr. L."

Our discussions become the place where students can practice giving meaningful responses. When opinions are asked, saying "I don't know" is interpreted to mean "I'm too lazy to think" or "Get off my back." If students begin with "I don't know," they can expect further questions rather than being let off the hook. If they need more time to think, I give them a minute or so, then come back to them. Once they learn to come prepared to be more than "a bump on a log," they find that school can be exciting.

In this day of information overload, it is more important to know how to learn or how to obtain information

"Young people live life, not textbooks, and they live it in the real world."

than to remember who invented barbed wire. For that reason, I concentrate on teaching process skills, such as listening, speaking, and communicating nonverbally—skills that students will be using long after they've forgotten that Millard Fillmore was the 12th President of the United States. A good exchange of ideas calls for everyone to practice assertiveness skills. Together we learn that it is appropriate to question each other about our motivations or behaviors with the intent of clarifying meanings and understanding each other. I encourage students to view corrections as constructive feedback that may spare them embarrassment or problems later.

Everyone is expected to participate every day. To minimize "tuning in and out" of the conversation, I periodically call on people to restate what others have said. I use physical proximity and eye contact to bring daydreamers back to the flow of discussion and then throw a query at them to let them know I expect their attention. As a rule of thumb, students who raise their hands and offer their comments to the class once a day will achieve a C grade, those who raise their hands 2-3 times a day will receive B's, and A's will be given to those who consistently make 3-4 contributions to class per day. (The quality of their contributions and their conduct are also factors in their grades.) Students are invited to keep track of how many times they raise their hands—most people *think* they participate more than they actually do.

Setting expectations like these should help any teacher to conduct lively, provocative discussions—the kind that can and should be a prominent part of any curriculum in any discipline. We all realize that information about population dynamics in India compared with those of the West may not serve a girl particularly well if she lacks both the skills and the assertiveness to say "no" to a pushy boyfriend. By drawing students out and relating the concepts and material in our courses to their lives, we enrich our curriculums, our students, and ourselves.

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Bridging the Gap, Creating Bonds

Few great teachers are known for their ability to dispense information. Rather, they are dynamic, vital individuals who relish the freedom and the discipline to think and act—on principle. Somehow, as they bridge the gap between ideas and life, they create a bond between themselves and students. The risks are real, but the rewards are worth it. There is nothing quite as exciting as watching self-esteem blossom as students—especially those with few positive adult role models and little self-affirmation—discover that there is an adult who respects their views, their experience, and their intelligence. □

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