



COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS: A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

Adapted from [Let's Talk! Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#), by Learning for Justice and [Fostering Civil Discourse: How do we Talk About Issues that Matter?](#) by Facing History and Ourselves

"We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist." —James Baldwin

Being an educator is one of the most complex professions. We may act as teacher, parent, mentor, counselor, nurse, and more, all within the course of a day. Our students are always watching and listening... and silence can send the loudest message of all. This responsibility can feel especially overwhelming during community-wide traumas such as the COVID-19 pandemic; a polarized presidential election; climate-related catastrophes; and a national reckoning with anti-Blackness, racism, and violence.

Good teaching includes helping students process their thoughts and feelings about the world and creating space for them to bring their full selves to school. Here are some resources to support you in this aim:

BEFORE YOU START:

- 1. Reflect on your identities.** It's important to do your personal reflection before asking students to reflect and share about topics such as identity, power, and oppression. Use tools such as [Reflecting on Intersecting Social Privileges and Disadvantages](#) to get started.
- 2. Consider your level of (dis)comfort.** Be honest about your comfort level in discussing various topics. It may feel easier to avoid challenging topics, however [silence is not an option](#). Challenge yourself to create a brave space by considering these [guidelines](#). [Assess your strengths, vulnerabilities, and needs](#) and address challenges that may arise.
- 3. Know what you don't know.** You don't have to be an expert to begin a conversation, however, do commit to educating yourself about areas you are less informed. Lesson plans, sample presentations, and other resources can be found on [Human Relations, Diversity and Equity's website](#).
- 4. Create healthy classroom culture.** Creating a safe and inclusive [classroom culture](#) is essential to facilitating challenging conversations. Utilize routines such as [checking in/out](#) and [community-building circles](#). Practice [compassionate listening](#) and provide space for sharing emotions. Reinforce classroom [norms or agreements](#) for respect.
- 5. Build relationships with families.** Invite caregivers in as guest speakers. Learn about their backgrounds and identities and relate your content to their lived experiences. Incorporating family and community wisdom are [critical practices of anti-bias education](#).
- 6. Identify additional support for students.** Many students, staff, and families are experiencing the toxic effects of [racial trauma](#) and oppression. Have a list of [resources](#), hotlines and mental health referrals in your area. Students who seem particularly distressed may benefit from a check-in with a school counselor or [School Mental Health](#) provider. Students who need more intensive support can be referred to one of our [clinics or wellness centers](#).

DURING THE CONVERSATION:

- 1. Set expectations for respectful communication.** Review your classroom's agreements for respectful communication. Prompt students to [brainstorm respectful ways to communicate](#). Examples could include, "Listen with respect to the experiences of others," "Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment."
- 2. Introduce the conversation first.** Consider introducing the topic ahead of time. Review or develop the goals of the conversation. You might start with material such as a text to review ([see p. 26 of this guide](#)). Ask questions, such as "Who in this text has power? How can you tell?" You could also start with a personal prompt, such as "Think about the characters in your favorite movie, TV show or book. How are the characters like you? Different from you? Would you say the characters are diverse?"
- 3. Teach students key terms for talking about identity and injustice.** A shared vocabulary can make for clearer communication. You might use glossaries like this [kid-friendly anti-oppressive word bank](#) or the [glossary for socially conscious conversation](#). Remember that language is constantly evolving and that even within a group with shared identities, people prefer different terms. Respect peoples' self-determination and use the terms they request, even if you don't understand them.
- 4. Anticipate strong emotions.** It's natural for emotions to arise when discussing issues such as identity, power, and privilege. Help students stay connected even if they're feeling uncomfortable. Consider using this graphic organizer, [Responding to Strong Emotions](#) and nonverbal "check-in" such as ["fist-to-five" hand signal or stoplight method](#) to gauge how students are doing.
- 5. Uncomfortable vs. unsafe.** Though learning requires us to step outside of our comfort zone, do create a safe environment for challenging conversations. Don't ask students to share personal or painful experiences. No one can represent an entire group of people. Integrate [trauma-informed strategies](#) during instruction.
- 6. Encourage openness.** Model curiosity and active listening with prompts like, "Tell us more", "What experiences have led you to this conclusion?" or "What I heard you say is..." Allow wait time and pockets of silence.
- 7. Model respectful ways to communicate.** Sentence stems can help students express themselves, "What did you mean when you mentioned ...?" "I agree when you say ... but disagree when you say... because ..." [Model respectful ways to "call in"](#) someone who has made a harmful comment, such as "There's some history behind that expression that you might not know about."
- 8. Challenge bias and address harm.** Some statements, arguments, or debates won't be accepted. "The humanity of other people is not up for debate. Help students distinguish between [intent and impact](#). [Rehearse ways to speak up, take accountability, and make a sincere apology](#).
- 9. Teach stories of action, hope, and change.** [Teach stories of resistance](#) and [history that is representative](#) of diverse experiences and perspectives. And yes, [young children](#) absolutely understand the concept of social justice.
- 10. Provide opportunities for action.** Explore ways that youth can take action around the issues they care about. [Give examples](#), such as writing articles for a media outlet, contacting an elected official, or submitting public comment at a community forum. Lead students in an exercise where they envision the world they want to live in then explore how they can turn that vision into a reality.

AFTER THE CONVERSATION:

- 1. Wrap up but don't stop.** Close with a circle prompt. Appreciate each other and the effort to engage in the conversation. Brainstorm ways to learn more, take action, and stay engaged with the topic.
- 2. Allow time and space for reflection and debriefing.** Process the conversation through [journaling](#) or drawing. Hold a follow-up community-building circle to assess students' takeaways. Identify students that may need additional support or have residual misunderstandings that should be tended to.
- 3. Get anonymous feedback.** All educators benefit from feedback especially those who are new to facilitating courageous conversations. Anonymous surveys can help us identify areas for follow-up, process our own experiences, and prepare for the next courageous conversation.
- 4. Practice [self-care](#) and [community care](#).** Educators are not immune from the anxiety, stress, and trauma of our social and political contexts. We also need to care for our own bodies, minds, and spirits. The traumatic effects of racism, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression may compound this stress for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color [\(BIPOC\) educators](#).
- 5. Monitor your students' emotional responses and seek additional support, if indicated.** Utilize [restorative practices](#) and [get support from administrators](#), as needed. Use simple, yet powerful tools such as [Psychological First Aid](#) to support students through challenging times. Students who seem particularly distressed may benefit from a check-in with a counselor. [School Mental Health](#) and [clinics or wellness centers](#) are available for students who need more intensive support.