



FOSTERING CIVIL DISCOURSE:

HOW ADULTS CAN SUPPORT TEENS IN TALKING ABOUT **ISSUES THAT MATTER**

(Adapted from [Fostering Civil Discourse: How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter](#))



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INTRODUCTION

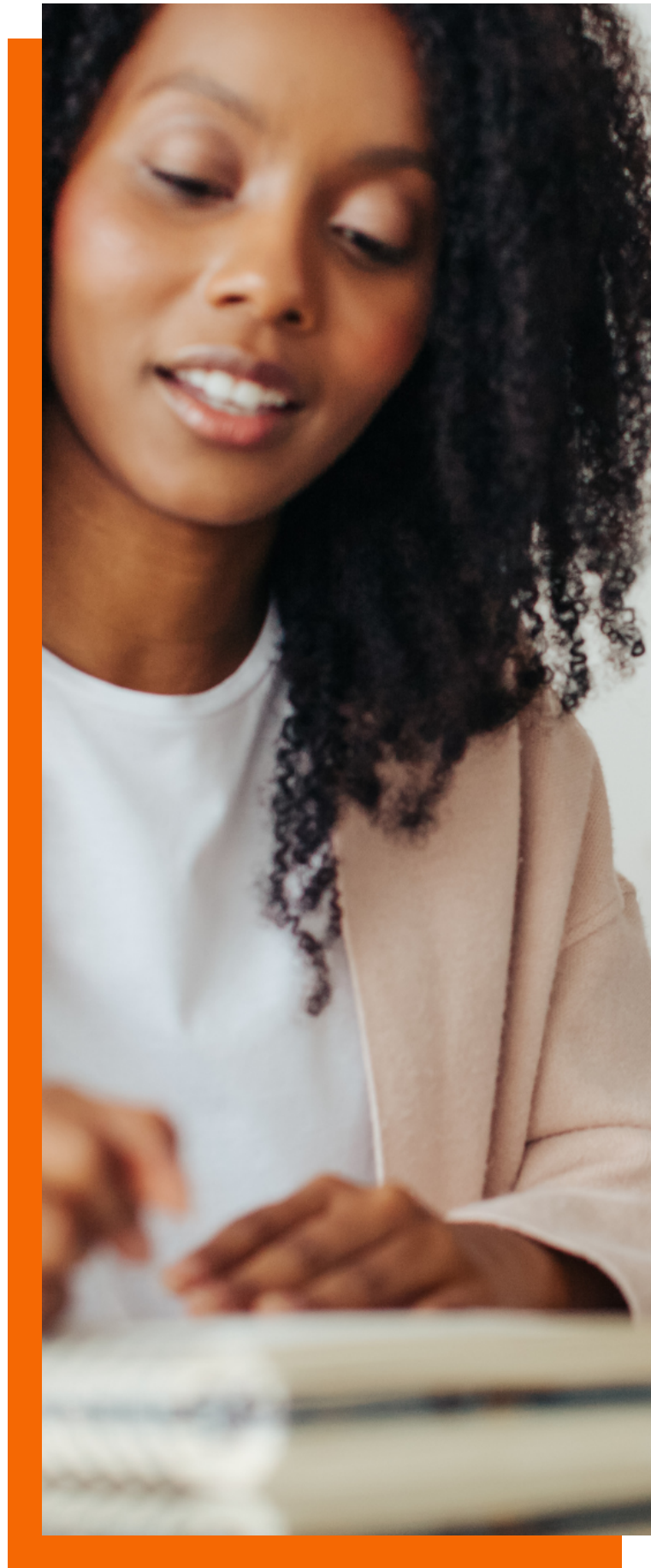
How we talk about things matters. But in our polarized country, how can we express our opinion while leaving room for someone else's viewpoint? How can we ensure that our discussions are rooted in reliable information and that we treat each other with dignity and respect while discussing contentious topics? How can we engage in productive conversations with those whose beliefs conflict with our own? And how can we help our children develop these critical skills?

This resource provides six tips for parents and family members to support teens in building and practicing skills that are fundamental to having productive conversations across different points of view. Review these tips before engaging in a challenging conversation with your teen, especially one in which you hold different or conflicting points of view on issues in the news or current events. We also encourage adults to read our [Current Events Strategies for Parents and Teens](#), which has helpful tips, reflections, and resources to help guide these discussions.

01

SET YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

Be sure to set aside enough time for your conversation and preview any materials you want to review with your teen before you begin talking. Conversations about difficult topics can take time, especially if you or your child need time to reflect or take a break. Your child also may need time to gather their thoughts and think through ways to articulate their ideas before continuing your conversation. Allow time for this, and for any follow-up questions your child might have.



02

WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE **GUIDELINES FOR THE CONVERSATION**

Setting clear guidelines for a challenging conversation with your teen can not only help make space for a respectful, productive conversation, it can help your teen practice skills that are critical for engaging in future conversations with people from different backgrounds and who hold different points of view. Working with your teen to create these guidelines can help build their buy-in and help them stay engaged in the conversation. Ask your teen what they think they need

to feel comfortable during a challenging conversation. You can share your own experience with guidelines that help you feel comfortable and can look at the common classroom norms below to get started.

Jot down your list of guidelines and keep them handy during your conversation. This can help ensure that the conversation remains productive and can help your teen feel comfortable rather than defensive.

COMMON CLASSROOM NORMS

- Challenge ideas rather than each other.
- Assume good intentions and “listen generously.”
- Take responsibility for your impact on each other.
- Expect and accept that the conversation may not feel “finished” when it’s over. It’s likely that you’ll leave with questions. That’s ok.
- Stay engaged, even when it feels difficult.
- Try to avoid sweeping generalizations. Remember that there are wide variations within and between different identities and backgrounds.
- Consider what responsibilities you are asking others to bear and who you are asking to bear them.
- Remember that people likely have varying levels of familiarity with the topic(s) at hand.
- Remember that mistakes are normal and are useful learning opportunities.
- Try to engage constructively with views that may conflict with your own. “Call in” rather than “call out.”

03

ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Leading questions or questions that lead to specific conclusions can be counterproductive to talking across different points of view. Instead, ask open-ended questions, such as:

- What do you think about this text/topic?
- What are the most significant ideas in this text?
- What could a different perspective on this topic/text be?
- What assumptions do you think the author is making?

04

ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING & FACT-CHECKING

Encourage your teen to critically evaluate the sources of information that they use to form their opinions and to fact-check their assumptions before engaging in a discussion. This can help them develop a more nuanced understanding of the issue and avoid misinformation or propaganda. When evaluating a news source, you might ask:

- What do you know about the source of this news? What can you find out about how trustworthy this news source is?
- What does the source claim as facts and how do you know they are facts?
- What are the opinions expressed in this piece?
- What is the context of the piece?
- What messages are missing?
- What points of view are missing?

Our [Current Events Strategies for Parents and Teens](#) resource has additional recommendations for finding reliable news sources.

05

FOCUS ON COMMON GOALS & SHARED VALUES

Encourage your teen to identify common goals and shared values that you both have, even if you disagree on certain issues. This can help create a sense of common ground and make it easier to find areas of agreement or compromise.



06

DEBRIEF & REFLECT

At the end of a discussion, take time to reflect with your teen on the experience of discussing the topic and any new insights you both gained from the conversation. Check in again after a few days to see if they have continued to process your talk.

Questions might include:

- What biases and assumptions did you both bring to the conversation?
- How might these have shaped your opinions on the issue?
- Did either of you have an emotional response to the issue?
- Did you learn anything new during your conversation?
- Did you unlearn anything?
- Complete the sentences: "I came into this conversation thinking/feeling..." and "I'm leaving the conversation thinking/feeling..."