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Guide To Improving Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Using the Self-Assessment for Middle/High School Students

This guide, developed by the American Psychological Association's [Coalition for Psychology in Schools and Education](#) and [Ethics Committee](#) is designed for educators and includes a self-assessment for students ages 12 to 18 to reflect on and improve their civil discourse skills. The tool targets five values related to civil discourse and their associated skills: (1) caring, compassion, kindness; (2) honest perspective taking; (3) humility; (4) integrity; and (5) mutual respect. Instructions and ideas for educators to help students use the self-assessment are included. There is also an additional document called the "Civil Discourse Self-Assessment for Middle/High School Students" that is just for students and doesn't include the additional instructions, resources, and context this document contains.

Please note: The Civil Discourse self-assessment tools are designed for personal reflection and development. They are not intended to be a formal evaluation or screening. We encourage practitioners to share their experiences with us and welcome any feedback. We encourage Researchers seek appropriate Institutional Review Board review, and share their findings with us.

Definition: *Civil discourse is conversation about important but challenging issues that incorporates the values of caring, compassion, kindness; humility; integrity; mutual respect; and the ability to engage honestly with others' perspectives..*

INSTRUCTIONS TO EDUCATORS FOR USING THE STUDENT SELF-ASSESSMENT:

1. Explain that there are five core values of civic discourse: (1) caring, compassion, kindness, (2) honest perspective taking, (3) humility, (4) integrity, and (5) mutual respect. Check to make sure students understand these terms. Definitions are provided with each section of the self-reflection tool.
2. Explain that students should rate themselves on the degree to which they show the skills associated with each of the five core values. You can ask students to fill out the self-assessment for all of the core values at once or, if the lesson focuses on one, they can answer the questions for that core value.

3. Read through the text and ask students if they have any questions. Make sure they understand each skill (e.g., what it means to provide feedback) and question (e.g., what it means to have bias). Consider providing examples of bias.
4. Explain the response format and the meaning of each response – ask students to underline the most appropriate response for them. Explain that there are no "right" or "wrong" answers.

INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR CLASSROOM IMPLEMENTATION:

Below are some ideas for using the self-assessment with students. You should feel free to adapt the following suggestions to your context:

1. **Individual Reflection and Discourse:** Students complete the self-assessment individually. Afterwards, follow up by asking questions such as:
 - » What are other ways you show caring, compassion and kindness/perspective taking, etc.?
 - » How can you improve your ways of showing caring, compassion and kindness/perspective taking, etc.?
 - » How can you be more caring, compassionate, and kind/show perspective taking, etc., in our school community?

Students can do this as homework, individually in class, or in a group. You can use student responses to have a broader discussion about each skill and how it contributes to civil discourse. You might do this with each of the core values or separately with all of them together.

2. **Self-Assessment and Peer Review.** Ask students to leave their names off the self-assessment and then collect their answers. Redistribute the self-assessments and use the answers to discuss reactions to others' responses.
 - » Self-Assessment: Ask students to complete the Civil Discourse Self-assessment *anonymously*, to reflect on each core value and rate themselves honestly.
 - » Collection: Once everyone has completed the self-assessment, collect all responses.
 - » Redistribution: Redistribute the responses to the class. Explain to students that they will receive a response that is not their own.
 - » Class Discussion: Lead a class discussion on each of the core values: Ask students to engage in the discussion, share their thoughts, and learn from one another. Here are some sample questions to ask:
 - How does caring, compassion, and kindness influence our interactions with others?
 - Can you share an example where you observed

these qualities in a discussion?

- Why is it important to take an honest perspective in a discussion?
- How can we practice honest perspective-taking in our daily conversations?
- How does humility contribute to our conversations with others?
- Can you share an instance where a demonstration of humility made a difference in a conversation?
- What role does integrity play in our discussions with others?
- Can you share an example where integrity was upheld or compromised in a discussion?
- How does mutual respect influence the quality of a discussion?
- Can you share an example where mutual respect was evident in a conversation?
- » Reflect on the responses collected multiple times a year
 - For year-long courses, administer the self-assessment 2-3 times if there is at least a two-month gap between administrations (e.g., beginning-of-year, end-of-first-semester, end-of-year)
 - Explain that their responses may or may not be consistent depending on recent interactions and personal growth.
 - Have upper grade students calculate what percentage of their responses were the same across administrations to observe changes over time.

3. Identifying Patterns:

- » Share anonymous summary data with students, showing the percentage of each response category. Be mindful of small sample sizes to avoid the risk of re-identification.
- » Initiate a discussion based on the summary data, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the class in terms of their skills.
- » Collaborate with the class to create a list of specific skills that everyone would like to see more of during discussions.
- » Design a poster featuring this list of skills and display it on the wall.
- » During discussions, point out when these skills occur to reinforce their importance.
- » At the end of the class or semester, use the same instru-

ment to gather data again and share anonymous summary data with the students, showing the percentage of each response category a second time. Be mindful of small sample sizes to avoid the risk of re-identification.

- » Compare the results to see if the intervention has led to any changes in skills.

4. Identifying Examples of Civil Discourse From Current News

The objective of this project is to have students identify examples of positive and negative instances of civil discourse in our society. This will help them understand the impact of our words and actions on others and the importance of respectful communication. Ask students to:

- » Research different forms of discourse and what makes them civil. This could be in the form of speeches, interviews, debates, social media posts, etc. Look for both positive and hurtful examples.
- » Select at least three examples of positive civil discourse and three examples of negative discourse. These examples can be from local, national, or international contexts, fiction and nonfiction.
- » For each example, write a brief analysis. Explain why that particular example was selected and how it represents positive and/or negative discourse. Discuss the impact of the discourse on the audience and the wider society.
- » Prepare a presentation of their findings. This could be in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, a poster, a video, etc. Remind students to be creative in how they deliver their presentations!
- » Write a reflection on what was learned from this activity. How has this activity changed their understanding of civil discourse? How will it influence their own communication in the future?

5. Class Discussion Activity:

- » After a discussion on a complex or challenging topic, students should reflect on the discussion and rate their own skills using the Civil Discourse Self-Assessment. This could be completed for one or all of the core values.
- » After completing the self-assessment based on their individual skills, students complete the assessment again, this time assigning ratings to each of the skills based on their perception of the class's overall performance. This could be conducted for one or all of the core values.
- » Tally and average the responses. This could serve as a practical lesson on statistics (i.e., mean, median, mode) for high school students.
- » Initiate a class discussion about potential strategies to

increase the frequency of desired skills. This could lead to a deeper understanding of psychological constructs like motivation and behavior change.

- » Encourage students to design a poster campaign that promotes the desired behaviors or describes their benefits for class discussions. Students could do this individually or as a class.

See the two documents on the APA Civil Discourse Website that have additional information on resources: [Context Needed for Civil Discourse](#) and the [Civil Discourse References and Civil Discourse Resources list](#). Other resources for teaching civil discourse within specific content areas can be found at the [American Federation of Teachers \(AFT\) Share My Lesson website](#).

Civil Discourse Self-Assessment for Middle/High School Students

Definition: *Civil discourse is conversation about important but challenging issues that incorporates the values of caring, compassion, kindness; humility; integrity; mutual respect; and the ability to engage honestly with others' perspectives.*

Instructions: On each of the following pages, read each item and reflect on how often you use each skill. Underline the response that is best for you. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; this is your self-evaluation. You can expect at least some of your answers to change over time.

CARING, COMPASSION, KINDNESS

We show caring, compassion, and kindness when we do something for the benefit (good) of someone else, without expecting anything in return. Here are some skills that reflect caring, compassion, and kindness. How often do you show these skills to others?

Instructions: Read each item and reflect on how often you use each skill. Underline the response that is best for you. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; this is your self-evaluation which you can expect to change over time.

1. I look for ways to help and cooperate with others.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

2. When someone is upset, scared, or angry, I try to think of how I would feel if it were me.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

3. I notice who is left out of discussions and invite them to join.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

4. I draw attention to other people’s point of view if their ideas are being ignored in a discussion.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

5. I step in and stop someone who is insulting another person or saying hurtful things about their ideas.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

HONEST PERSPECTIVE TAKING

We engage in honest perspective taking when we are open to listening, thinking about, working to understand, and considering ideas, opinions, and values that might be different from our own. Here are some skills that reflect honest perspective taking. How often do you show these skills to others?

Instructions: Read each item and reflect on how often you use each skill. Underline the response that is best for you. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; this is your self-evaluation which you can expect to change over time.

1. I listen to other people and let them tell their story.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

2. I show that I understand there are multiple perspectives on many topics or issues.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

3. I talk to and work with people who are different from me.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

4. I know that opinions are different from facts.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

5. I tell others that I can agree to disagree when we cannot reach an agreement.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

HUMILITY

We show humility when we value the strengths, viewpoints, and wisdom of others. We work to be aware of our biases, are open to learning from others, and acknowledge that we all make mistakes. Here are some skills that reflect humility. How often do you show these skills to others?

Instructions: Read each item and reflect on how often you use each skill. Underline the response that is best for you. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; this is your self-evaluation which you can expect to change over time.

1. I work to identify my biases.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

2. I acknowledge my biases when talking with others.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

3. I continue talking to others whom I disagree with, even if it makes me uncomfortable.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

4. I accept “not knowing” as an incentive to learn more, not an indictment of my intelligence.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

5. I accept that my voice is one of many and that I must listen to others before we can come to an understanding.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

INTEGRITY

We show integrity when we are honest, true to our values, and demonstrate a high standard of trustworthiness. Here are some skills that reflect integrity. How often do you show these skills to others?

Instructions: Read each item and reflect on how often you use each skill. Underline the response that is best for you. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; this is your self-evaluation which you can expect to change over time.

1. I am honest and tell the truth.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

2. I use “I think” or “I feel” statements when I share my ideas.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

3. I give people credit for their ideas when I use them instead of calling their ideas my own.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

4. I take responsibility for what I have said or done, even when I’m not proud of it.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

5. If I say or do something that offends someone, I apologize and try to repair the harm.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

MUTUAL RESPECT

We show mutual respect when we give and receive feedback that is constructive, helpful, and considerate of others, and show high expectations for ourselves and the group. Here are some skills that reflect mutual respect. How often do you show these skills to others?

Instructions: Read each item and reflect on how often you use each skill. Underline the response that is best for you. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers; this is your self-evaluation which you can expect to change over time.

1. I praise others for their effort and improvement.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

2. In a discussion, I comment on other people’s ideas rather than on their personal characteristics.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

3. I want others to do their best, and I recognize their accomplishments.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this

4. I assume that every person acts with good intentions, and I ask for clarification if it appears otherwise.

I rarely do this

I do this sometimes

I almost always do this