



Teaching Character & Civility

Seminar: I had just completed my 40-minute talk urging teachers and other school personnel to focus on the character development of students in their classrooms and schools: *“What is it?” “Why do we need it?” “Where do we find the time to do it?” “How do we do it?” “How do we know if it’s working or not?”*

After the presentation, I opened it up for questions. A middle-grade teacher asked: “For now, I just want to know how to I teach my kids to be civil to one another in and out of my classroom?”

On the FIRST day of classes my mentor said to me:

“You asked me how do you teach students to be civil to one another?”

Character is about relationships – emotional and social. It is about teaching your students skills such as sharing, participating, following directions, and listening. It is about helping them to recognize their own emotions (self-control), how to recognize the emotions in others (listening and questioning), and how to motivate oneself (grit and perseverance). It is about learning how to be a friend, how to care for others, how to appreciate others, how to be polite, respectful, courteous, civil, and how to resolve conflicts peacefully.

On the SECOND day of classes my mentor said to me:

“I want you to think about the implications of this survey and read this article. Notice we are talking about skill development that students can and must learn in your classroom (and elsewhere).”

A survey of 8,000 teachers done at Vanderbilt University identified these top 10 skills that students need to succeed: *“Listen to others—follow the steps—follow the rules—ignore distractions—ask for help—take turns when you talk—get along with others—stay calm with others—be responsible for your behavior—and do nice things for others.”*

Read: 7 Ways To Teach Children Civility, Matthew Lunch, The EDVOCATE, 2-23-18. He says that *“our children desperately need someone to teach them civility and show why it is important.”* His seven ways include: 1) manners matter, 2) show tolerance, 3) give examples, 4) listen well, 5) apologize regularly, 6) encourage empathy, and, 7) practice what you preach.

On the THIRD day of classes my mentor said to me:

“We should discuss the curricular and teaching implications of these two studies. The Pew Research Center lays the foundation for your question about how to teach students to be civil.”

They report that of the ten skills Americans say kids need to succeed in life, communication skills, was selected by most of the respondents. In another report about 21st century skills, respondents noted that there is a need to teach children and youth two very important skills: communication and collaboration. In one sense, these make up a skills curriculum that you and others should be implementing to teach students oral, written, and nonverbal communication skills, including the emotional and social skills that we talked about.

On the FOURTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

"I do not know where I read this—it was in my notes without a reference. The author suggests ways 'to help students learn to engage in productive, civil discourse in the classroom.' You might try this with students in your classroom."

First, *begin with yourself—be the model in your classroom.*

Second, *monitor your classroom climate.*

Third, *state your dialogue expectations/boundaries clearly from the start.* The author notes that *the basic rule of civil discourse is to be respectful and don't make it personal.*

Fourth, *start small and build as skills develop.*

Fifth, *have students watch civil debates and begin classroom debates using non-threatening topics.*

Sixth, *have your students use a "private journaling" strategy in which you provide a debatable statement and have them decide whether or not they strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree and write out the "why" to their selection.*

On the FIFTH day of classes my mentor asked me to try this activity::

"When you get a chance, try out this quotation activity with your students. I hope that after this lesson your students will be able to compare and contrast quotations, find information about the author of each quote, determine the meaning and implications of each quote, write and draw how the quote may apply to what they do and say, and, discuss the meaning of the quotes with classmates, friends, family."

1. *"Civility includes courtesy, politeness, mutual respect, fairness, good manners, as well as a matter of good health." —P.M. Forni*
2. *"I think civility is important to getting things done." —Amy Klobuchar*
3. *"You can disagree without being disagreeable." —Ruth Bader Ginsburg*
4. *"Civility costs nothing, and buys everything." —Mary Wortley Montagu*
5. *"Civility is the art and act of caring for others." —Deborah King*

On the SIXTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

"It's the holiday season. Take a break. Go see the movie A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood. Next, watch a couple of episodes of the TV program Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood."

Have your students see the movie and a few of the TV programs. Develop a teaching unit and other activities in your classroom that build on a relationship of care (one of FR's themes). For example, have your students create posters of what Mr. Rogers says to them – followed, of course, by classroom discussion.

"You are loveable.

I like you just the way you are.

There is only one person like you in the world.

You are my friend; you are special."

On the SEVENTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

"I am a proponent of teaching students the why and how of asking questions. Teaching your students the skills of question-asking helps them clarify what others are saying or doing in a situation. I suggest you access The Right Question Institute and examine their Question Formula Technique, a strategy to teach your students how to formulate their own questions."

(<https://rightquestion.org>)

On the EIGHTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

"I suggest that you consider being the 'character education leader' in your classroom and school. To do that, you should know this about the character development."

Character is taught to our youth through the media, the Internet, the environment they live in, their peers and role models, and by parents, teachers, schools, youth agencies, and religious institutions.

Character is about **strengths** and **virtues** that guide us “to act in an ethical, pro-social manner.” It is about **choices**—the ones we make daily (good or bad, ethical or unethical); about **relationships and social skill**; and about “emotional” **self-discipline**.

On the NINTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

“I want to tell you a story that I read written by 7th grade language teacher, Justin Parmenter, from Charlotte, N.C. He created an assignment called Undercover Agents of Kindness. He had each student draw a random classmate’s name from a bowl. In pairs, they had two weeks to perform an unexpected act of kindness. Then he had each pair of students write a missions report detailing what they did and how it went. Why don’t you try a similar activity with your students? Maybe call it Mission Civility.”

JP writes: “It was my students’ reflections on the kindness activity that revealed its impact most. Again and again, they acknowledged that it was difficult and felt awkward to approach someone they didn’t know well and do something for them. But almost every time they added that they were proud of themselves for doing it anyway and felt the power in brightening someone else’s day.”

On the TENTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

“I found an interesting article written by Melissa Benaroya titled How to Teach Civility During Divisive Times, Committee for Children, Feb. 24, 2017.”

She writes: “Civility goes beyond being polite and courteous; it involves listening to others with an open mind, disagreeing respectfully and seeking common ground to start a conversation about differences. Acting with civility requires children to be respectful, reflective and self-aware. Learning the skills of perspective taking, empathy and problem-solving helps children understand that their actions and words affect individuals as well as their entire community, encouraging them to rise up and act with civility in tough situations.... By teaching skills like empathy, problem- solving and perspective taking, we can help nurture civility in our children.”

On the ELEVENTH day of classes my mentor said to me:

“Here are four resources to help you teach your students the positive behaviors of being civil and people of good character.”

- Nine Lessons on Peer Relationships
- Class Meetings: Creating a Safe School in Your Classroom
- Behavior Problems in the Classroom: What to know, What to do.
- 3 Steps to Civil Discourse in the Classroom

On the TWELVETH day of classes my mentor said to me:

“I have three gifts for the new year for you (no, not gold, frankincense, and myrrh). They are PEACE, HOPE, and LOVE!”