

Alpine County Choose Civility Campaign

(An initiative of the Child Abuse Prevention Council and County Superintendent of Schools)



January Focus:

Respect Others' Opinions

Dr. P.M. Forni in his book, “Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct says, “Respecting other’s opinions is part of the larger attitude of respect—respect for the whole person—that we are expected to develop as we grow up. Respect for opinions is not an easy art at all. It requires self-esteem, self-control, sensitivity, tolerance, fairness and generosity.”

Since this is a pretty complicated “art” to master, let’s break this month’s principle into its component parts. First is the idea of opinions. Opinions aren’t fact. Opinions are personal beliefs and views such as my opinion that chai tea is so much tastier than coffee. Even better is strong chai tea sweetened with vanilla syrup. To be even more opinionated on the topic, I think Tazo Chai beats Oregon Chai hands down. To be honest, I haven’t met many people who agree with my “chai is better tasting than coffee” opinion.

Now, a discussion about the virtues of chai tea versus strong black coffee over the kitchen table with my husband is a much easier debate to navigate than an emotionally charged political argument with a colleague in the office. Here’s where things get tricky and we need to react to differing opinions in a civil manner. This is the second part of the “respecting other’s opinions” concept: respect. Rather than telling a person with an opposing opinion that he or she is crazy or their opinion is stupid, we should remember to at least recognize that others are entitled to look at the world differently and they can expect a fair hearing when they share their views.

To be sure, we will encounter lots and lots of opinions that differ from our own such as:

Chocolate is tastier than vanilla.
Dogs make better pets than cats.
Sunrises are more beautiful than sunsets.
Snow sports are more fun than water sports.
Autumn is a prettier season than spring.

How can we handle ourselves in a civil manner when another person has a very different opinion than the one we hold? How can we show respect for others while disagreeing

with them? According to Dr. Forni, one way we can help the other person not feel hurt or rejected is by reacting civilly with *qualified disagreement*. These are less disrespectful ways to react to someone whose view is different from your own.

1. You can save the core of someone else's opinion while qualifying your acceptance: "Yes, I agree that what you say may be true in general, but there are other circumstances when..."
2. You can recognize that although you don't agree, what they are saying isn't unreasonable: "I see how that idea can be appealing; however..."
3. You can allow that if you knew more about the subject, your opinion might change: "I don't know, it doesn't seem right, but maybe there is more here than meets the eye."
4. You can use the concept of different perspectives: "Yes, but if you look at it from a different point of view..."

By showing your respect to another person in this way, you make room for disagreement while still inviting feedback and conversation. If, however, you strongly disagree with an opinion and find it to be offensive, you should feel confident to reject it outright: "I'm sorry, but I don't agree." or "This really goes against my principles." or "I don't think we can come to an agreement on this so I'd prefer not to discuss it."

Another point to think about is where we are when a difference of opinion surfaces. For instance, I do not find political or religious discussions to be appropriate for the workplace or in public meetings. In my opinion these locations don't allow enough time or privacy for a civil discussion where there are often vastly different political or religious views of right and wrong. Sometimes people may not really consider that everyone else around them doesn't necessarily share their opinions. Taking a strong political stance in a public meeting or at the office may put other people in an uncomfortable position of stating their own convictions in a public forum. When people speak as though everybody around them shares their opinions, they are being presumptive and lack sensitivity.

Here are some tips for showing that you respect the opinions of others:

- Present your opinions as opinions, rather than absolute truths.
- Invite feedback. One of the most respectful things you can do is to ask, "What do **you** think?" This takes down barriers and opens you up for new ideas and to understand different perspectives.
- This is a good one for kids: realize you aren't the only one in the world. There are lots of other people out there with different backgrounds, from different places and in different age groups. We're bound to have different opinions from time to time.
- Remember to use our past Choose Civility principles when discussing opinions like paying attention to the points being made, listening actively to understand the other point of view and try to think the best of the other person's intention.

As you can see, respecting other's opinions is complicated and needs to be taught to children through modeling, stories and direct lessons. According to Elizabeth Erwin, Ph.D. and Leslie Soodak, Ph.D., "When children learn to value people who are different from themselves, they are better prepared to live peacefully in a diverse world." One great way to help our children learn these important lessons is to point out positive examples in stories, TV shows and advertisements.

Children's Books About Respecting Other's Opinions:

The Sneetches and Other Stories, by Dr. Seuss

This is a classic book about the star-belly Sneetches and the plain-belly Sneetches. It's great for all ages.

Why Am I Different? by Norma Simon

Children from 4-10 years old will enjoy this book about the many ways people can be different from hair color to the language they speak.

We're Different, We're the Same, by Bobbi Kates

This is another great book for children ages 4-10 years.

Whoever You Are, by Mem Fox

Children from around the world share their dreams and hopes. Children ages 5-12 will enjoy this book.