



Civil Discourse at Cincinnati Country Day School

As a school preparing its graduates for “college and life,” Cincinnati Country Day School is devoted to the practice and development of civil discourse on campus. Civil discourse, in which conflicting ideas are brought together with the aim of finding common ground, is not necessarily the norm in our society and requires community commitment and practice.

In developing a collective capacity for civil discourse, Country Day must consider its purpose, how to best engage in such exchange, and what resources can be used to come together when discussing complex but important ideas.

Why is civil discourse important?

Discourse, at its heart, promotes learning and growth of one’s mind. The philosopher [Montaigne](#) said that we gain wisdom “by rubbing our minds together.” No person is an island and to make our own meaning in the world, we are informed by both those who have come before us and also those with whom we live, work, study, and play every day.

Civil discourse should not be confused for politeness, although treating others with respect is an important tool in effective communication. Rather, the most effective discourse challenges our own beliefs and opinions because it helps us hone our own ideas, shift them to adapt to new understanding, and not bend to the loudest voice. The best discourse happens when one learns from another and strengthens one’s own convictions.

To engage in challenging discourse, one must have trust in and a sense of belonging to the community in which the discourse occurs. Individuals will only engage in challenging, positive discourse if they believe the other person cares for them and welcomes them to the table for the discussion. Trust and belonging can be very difficult to achieve but are crucial to genuine and meaningful discourse.

Hateful speech, speech that attacks or discriminates against individuals based on their identity, corrodes both trust and the sense of belonging, disrupts learning, and is not tolerated at Country Day. This is not to say that discourse that challenges our beliefs is hate speech, but

civil discourse must never abuse or threaten an individual for any reason. Civil discourse involves challenging ideas, not attacking each other.

How do we engage in civil discourse?

Civil discourse requires specific emotional and cognitive skills that can be learned and practiced.

Character traits – At Country Day, we ascribe to a culture of character in which we commit to fostering and growing our school’s character virtues within each individual student as modeled and led by our faculty and staff members. Compassion, Courage, Integrity, Respect, and Responsibility. These values are the foundation upon which decency and empathy for others is formed. At the end of the day, an exchange without these values is likely devoid of positive intent and does little to help the participants grow.

Empathy – The golden rule states that we wish “to treat others as we would have them treat us.” To do so requires us to understand their condition and what makes them tick through the practice of empathy. “Walking in someone else’s shoes” is not an easy task and requires effort and genuine care for another but, done authentically, allows individuals to embrace ideas from all corners and thereby enrich their own.

Listening – The phrase “put an ear on your heart” captures the idea that listening is an expression of care for another person. To listen deeply and well is not a passive skill — active listening takes considerable effort and patience. But it is through this effort that one allows one’s mind to reflect upon different views and test one’s own. As [Stephen Covey’s](#) 5th habit states, “seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

Open and Flexible Mind – Having an open and flexible mind when listening to others helps prevent the “zero sum” outcome of much discourse these days. Instead of defining a “win” as convincing the other of their point, both individuals in discourse can make their arguments stronger and fuller if they open themselves to the possibility that there is room for growth in their own beliefs.

Acceptance of discomfort and lack of closure – Discourse does not have to be easy; in fact, some of the best discourse tests our resolve and makes us work hard. There are times when, despite the best efforts of both sides, common ground may not be found. The phrase: “we have to agree to disagree” captures the idea that, at the end of the day, both individuals may still not agree and that is acceptable as long as they gave it a earnest and serious effort to see each other’s point-of-view.

What are specific tactics for good listening?

The [Riverdale Country School](https://www.riverdalecountry.org/) in New York has written extensively on ways to establish civil discourse on a K-12 school campus. Below are skills the school has suggested to help develop strong abilities to engage in civil discourse.

- Show gratitude
- Watch your airtime and don't interrupt
- Give intellectual support
- Acknowledge your confusion
- Make space for grace and repair mistakes
- Walk away or seek help if a conversation feels unsafe or if you can't participate constructively
- Be curious about why someone isn't speaking
- Seek to understand someone's ideas by asking questions
- Offer evidence for what you believe and acknowledge what you don't know
- Notice and respond to people's emotions as well as their intellectual arguments
- Embrace complexity
- Patiently accept a lack of clear-cut resolution

Source: <https://www.riverdale.edu/2020/02/27/campus-discourse/>

What resources can I use to learn about engaging in civil discourse?

Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org/>

Teaching History and Ourselves:

https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Fostering_Civil_Discourse.pdf