

Speaking Kindness in Democratic Classrooms

For educators who hope to create a democratic classroom, one of the first steps is to co-create classroom rules with students. This lesson invites students to reflect on student-to-student verbal interactions and develop a set of guidelines for speaking to each other with kindness and respect.

Objectives

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- identify ways that they want others to speak to them.
- develop guidelines for kind speech.
- revisit their guidelines to reflect on their implementation and success.

Essential Questions

- Why is speaking with kindness an important classroom rule?
- **Enduring Understandings:**
 - Classroom rules are part of a democratic classroom. There are ways that citizens are to speak with each other even when they disagree. Speaking to each other with kindness is necessary for respectful citizenry.

Materials

- Post-It stickers (3-4 packets)
- poster paper
- markers

Vocabulary

- **abide** [uh-bahyd] (verb) to follow or accept something, such as a rule
- **non-verbal communication** [non-vur-buhl kuh-myoo-ni-key-shun] (noun) the use of gestures, postures, eye contact, facial expressions, and conversational distance to convey meaning
- **verbal communication** [vur-buhl kuh-myoo-ni-key-shun] (noun) the use of words and intonation to convey meaning

Suggested Procedure

1. Inform students that they're going to put together a list of the ways in which they want to be spoken to. Break the class into groups of three or four. Give all students a packet of Post-It notes and instruct them to discuss together the ways they like to be addressed. Every time a student mentions a preference, he or she should write the statement on one of the Post-It notes. At the end, every child should have his or her own stack of Post-Its. If you want to model this activity beforehand, use 8 1/2-by-11 sheets of paper and write each statement on one sheet, then tape the sheets to the front board.

To take a positive approach, ask students to identify ways in which they like to be addressed. (It's often counter-productive to start students dialoguing about the ways that others speak to them offensively.) This positive approach sets the right tone in your classroom. It may at first be difficult for students to frame their responses positively. The examples below may help. When students falter, just ask them if they can reframe their statements using positive language. Answers will vary, but these examples will give you enough to get students primed:

- "I like it when people use respectful tones with me" instead of "I don't like it when people yell or scream at me."
- "I like it when others share the conversation equally" instead of "I don't like it when people dominate what's going on."

- “It’s nice when classmates just say a simple ‘thank you’ or ‘please’ instead of “I hate it when people are rude.”
- “I appreciate it when people don’t use pejoratives or bias language” instead of “I think people who use racist and sexist language are stupid.”

2. After students feel they’ve exhausted their list, have them begin to group statements that seem to go together. You can begin by showing them what to do on the front board with the 8 ½-by-11 sheets of paper. For instance, you may notice that several of the students’ statements have to do with non-verbal communication; you can put those in one row. When students know what to do, have them group their statements into rows by simply rearranging their Post-Its.

When they have their statements in rows, ask students to name each row. For instance, as in the example above, a row might be labeled “Non-Verbal Communication.”

3. Have students make positive action statements that address the concerns mentioned in each row of Post-It notes. For instance, on the “Non-Verbal Communication” row, students might say, “We will be careful that our faces and bodies match the kind words we want to hear from each other.” Write students’ action statements on the board.

After their summaries, let each group take one action statement and make a poster of it to hang in the classroom.

Common Core State Standards: W.4, SL.1, SL.4

Extension Activity

Once students have identified and created posters of these positive principles of speaking with each other, have them make it contractual. Ask each student to come up and sign the posters with their names, agreeing that they are making a contract with others to abide by these rules of speaking with good

intent.

As all educators know, ways of speaking to each other in classrooms need to be revisited often. As an extension activity, have students reflect on whether they are abiding by the principles they've listed. Ask students: "Why or why not? What seems difficult about it?"