

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

What Do You Say? Tackling Tough Conversations



Difficult conversations are a part of life. Unfortunately, they can pop up at any time and knock us (and our lesson plans) off course. You may have a parent that does not share your same perspective about their child who is struggling with their behavior in your class. Or a charged current event has shaken up your classroom and you're left wondering: *What do I say? What do I do?*

These types of conversations may not be pleasant, and they can be downright awful, but there are some things you can do to help prepare when those situations pop up. Here are some tips, ideas, and resources to consider when you are confronted with tough conversations.

Difficult Individual Conversations

Are you someone who tackles difficult conversations like a band-aid (just want to rip it off and be done with it) or like a pothole (try to avoid at all costs)? Or do you consider these types of interactions as a work hazard (just part of the job)? Possibly it is a combination of all three. Tough conversations need to happen in order to move forward and there are certain things to keep in mind before you begin them.

Let's set the stage. In this scenario you have just planned a conversation with a parent who does not share your perspective regarding the behavior of their child in your class. After many emails back and forth, you are at an impasse and need to meet to resolve this issue. **As you start planning for this difficult conversation, always keep in mind the overall goal is to participate in a conversation that preserves the relationship.** This goal will guide every decision you make as you plan and engage in the conversation. Here is a process that can help:

• **Difficult Individual Conversations, Continued.**

- **Before the Conversation:** Plan for a difficult conversation by checking in with yourself first. Make sure you are in a good space (not emotionally charged or defensive) before having the meeting. Then, determine your specific goals. Use this [conversation template](#) to help plan your meeting and summarize the events after the conversation has taken place.
- **Starting the Conversation:** Share the purpose of the meeting with the parent. Without judgment, acknowledge your difference in perspectives and how you genuinely want to understand their view and would like to share your own. Also acknowledge that you both share the same goal—to do whatever it takes to support and care for their child to ensure their success. Then, propose that you resolve the issue together.
- **During the Conversation:**
 - *Their Turn to Share:* Be an active listener. Be attentive and show understanding by nonverbal behaviors (head nodding, mirroring body language, etc.). Paraphrase/restate the most important thoughts/ideas. Do not interrupt, offer advice, or give suggestions. Remember that kindness and empathy will go a long way in the conversation. Acknowledge their emotions (i.e. “I am so surprised to hear that—can you tell me more?”) and be sure to ask open-ended questions for clarification.
 - *Your Turn to Share:* Ask for permission before you share your perspective. Share positive observations about the child and give specific examples of the behaviors you have observed. Be sure to acknowledge that you appreciate them sharing their perspective as it has given you new information about the child that has changed your understanding and perspective.
 - *Problem-Solve:* Brainstorm possible solutions together and develop an action plan on how best to support the student. What are the steps you can take in the classroom? What can be addressed at home?

- **Ending the Conversation:** Determine your next steps and how to respond if something like this happens again. Thank them for their time and continuing this partnership.
- **Keeping on Track:** Send a summary of your conversation as well as the action plan and next steps. Decide if you need/want to bring in additional people in order to continue to move forward. Consider having another meeting with the student and parent to discuss the action plan and demonstrate how you and the parent are a united front in the support and care for the child.

This process works for any difficult conversation you may have with an individual, whether it be with a parent, student, or colleague. For additional information on this process, check out the book [*Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*](#) by Douglas Stone.

• **Difficult Classroom Conversations**

Emotionally charged and divisive current events have been unrelenting the past few years. And when these events pop up, you have to greet your students the next day and be ready to react and respond. What do you say? What do you do? Consider the following tips when a challenging and charged current event shakes up your classroom.

- **Start with You:** When terrible news breaks that knocks you (and your lesson plans) off course, you must first check your emotions and take a moment to process and reflect.
 - *What emotions does this news raise for you? What questions are you struggling with?*
 - *What emotions might your students bring to the classroom? How can you respond?*
 - *How will you continue to learn and process the event as it unfolds?*
- **Read the Room:** As you greet your students the next day, check your assumptions about your students’ feelings. Determine what they need.
- **Give them Space and Grace:** At these times it may be best to give them (and you) some space to reflect. They may have questions. They may be angry. They may have differing opinions. Acknowledge those

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feelings, but give everyone time to process. Provide opportunities for your students to check in with themselves. Allow them time to reflect and give them choice in their activities while everyone is processing. Take that time to determine how you will move forward.

- **Talk with Your Colleagues:** Check in with your colleagues. How are they doing? How are they responding? If you are considering a school-wide approach, be sure to coordinate your efforts. Reach out to experts at your school (counselors, psychologists) to help you plan and facilitate discussions if needed.
- **Communicate with Parents:** Be sure to let parents know you will be facilitating discussions around challenging topics. Give them a choice to allow their child to opt out. Encourage them to ask questions regarding your plans for that discussion.
- **Prepare for Your Discussion:** Intentionally prepare your students on how to have productive conversations around sensitive topics with varying viewpoints.

Remember, there is no one “right way” to handle difficult conversations in the classroom. You know your students best. By recognizing what they need and reaching out for help when necessary, you will do exactly what you need to do for your students.

Resources to Prepare Your Students for Difficult Classroom Conversations

Before engaging in a sensitive and challenging conversation, be sure to properly prepare your students to be active listeners, open to new ideas, and critical consumers of information. Here are a few ideas to help your students be ready for a productive conversation:

- **Teach Perspectives:** A great way to teach perspectives is to share [various illusions](#) where students will see images differently depending on the perspective.
- **Teach Mindset:** In discussions with differing viewpoints, a student may have a soldier or scout approach. Check out our [Respectful Debate](#) lessons where students learn how to disagree without being disagreeable. In the Choose Your Mindset lesson, students learn that choosing the right frame of mind

can help them discuss respectfully. In the Honorable Soldier lesson, students practice skills that empower them to stand up for their beliefs with honor, without losing their cool.

- **Teach Active Listening:** Use protocols to help students listen to understand, NOT to be understood. Consider the H.E.A.R. Protocol:
 - **HALT** — pause your own words and really listen to the other person
 - **ENGAGE** — give the other person your full attention
 - **ANTICIPATE** — remind yourself that by really hearing the other person, you will likely learn something new
 - **REPLAY** — summarize what you’re hearing to make sure you understand correctly, and to demonstrate that you were listening authentically

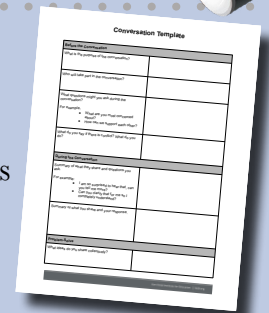
Check out these [additional guidelines](#) to support active listening in your classroom.

- **Teach Information Literacy:** In order to support their viewpoints and perspectives on an event or situation, it is important for your students to have the facts. However, with loads of information at students’ fingertips, sifting through sources can be challenging. Use the lessons found in [Information Nation](#) to teach your students how to become confident information literacy leaders.



FREE CONVERSATION TEMPLATE

Use this [free template](#) as you plan and engage in a difficult conversation. Customize it to fit your needs and your situation!



Project-Based Learning & Tough Conversations

If you'd like to try a project-based learning experience which helps students share their perspectives honorably and with conviction, check out [Take a Stand](#), where students learn about all sides of several topics like education and the environment. Through respectful discourse, they will construct and articulate well-researched positions on a topic of their choice with an inspirational podcast! This project incorporates many of the resources for preparing your students for difficult conversations and is connected to K-8 content standards in ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies.



- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [Recommended Book List](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of respectful discourse.
- Check out [K-8 content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

Conclusion

Having a difficult conversation with an individual or an entire classroom can be daunting and unpleasant, but with these tools and resources added to your collection, you can more confidently and comfortably answer the question: What do I say? You've got this!

[Click here](#) if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:
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