Teaching civil discourse

Source: Chuck Stamper, extension special projects coordinator

Arguments, finger pointing, derogatory comments and rudeness have become far too common in our culture, particularly when debating sensitive issues. In 4-H, we believe it is important to teach our young people to address potentially controversial issues in a way that is respectful and thoughtful. At the same time, we want 4-H’ers to develop their own views and learn ways to peacefully defend them. This is called civil discourse.

Debates can be a healthy part of youth development, if they are conducted in a productive manner. They allow young people to explore their belief system and learn different opinions on the same topic. Youth can learn to use logic, persuasion, evidence and argumentation to make a point or defend a position without personally attacking another person.

To teach young people how to engage in civil discourse, first examine your beliefs, political opinions and emotional responses to each. When faced with responding to a controversial topic, do you handle yourself in a way that young people can use as a model? By gaining a better understanding of ourselves, we can help young people explore their unique identity and experiences. Encourage them to reflect on their experiences and beliefs. Writing in a journal is a great way to allow young people to explore and express their opinions in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental manner.

Next, we must encourage youth to build relationships with others, even with those who have differing opinions and backgrounds. Often, we can learn a lot about another person and better understand their viewpoint, if we share a little about ourselves and backgrounds with each other first. Sharing and building relationships develops a trusting atmosphere where people are more likely to respectfully engage with others.

We must teach young people to be respectful and take responsibility for their actions. This includes respecting others’ opinions, even if you disagree, and admitting when you are wrong.

Civil discourse is not easy and takes a lot of intentional practice to maintain and master. More tips on teaching civil discourse to young people are available at (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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