



School-Age NOTES
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Taking steps to create a more civil planet
Activities can help children learn how to interact politely with others

By Amanda Skinner and John Wood

Visitors from another planet on a mission to Earth would think we're mad. They would see us walking down the street with wires coming out of our ears talking to invisible people, visiting coffee shops to plug in our PCs and not talking to anyone. They would see us cursing at strangers, shouting into boxes to get food and gesticulating wildly as we aggressively drive our cars.

Assuming we couldn't communicate effectively, they would fly back to their planet armed with YouTube clips of politicians, pop stars and athletes losing their cool. "Earthlings have good technology," they would report, "but it makes them aggressive."

Mission aborted, they would decide.

Quality and quantity

Modern life has a lot to answer for, but so do we. If we can't put down our phones while we pay for groceries, how do we expect children to react when we tell them to put theirs away in class? If we blow up at drivers who cut us off, what behaviors are OK when a child in the program whispers a rude comment? If we don't set and maintain standards of acceptable behavior with strangers, what example are we setting for our children?

We need to make our time with young people more meaningful. That doesn't mean lecturing or through short bursts of engagement. It means quantity and quality. How can it be done?

More of/less of

What would extraterrestrials see if they visited your after-school program? Are staff members always respectful when they greet each other and the children? Beginning and ending the after-school experience with courteous greetings can set your program's parameters for civil discourse.

Then dig deeper. What happens when people at your site get upset or stressed? Do they remain civil?

Rather than simply dictating to your staff members and the children how to speak appropriately to one



Adults may be sending messages to children through everyday actions — such as interrupting a conversation to take a phone call — that can fly in the face of civility.

another, involve them in the process. Encourage them to assess what they want to see more of and less of in terms of daily conversations.

Once you've completed the more of/less of activity and have buy-in from staff members and youth, set simple procedures. What are polite ways to greet each other? Some students may never have been taught good manners and they will need to learn them and how to respond.

Role-play a visit by an extraterrestrial. How should students respectfully greet a visitor from another planet? Fun activities like this can reduce the pressure of the situation and put children at ease.

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to give a demonstration of the game by playing it yourself with a few of the children while others watch.

When playing games with children, it is important for staff members to:

- be enthusiastic and join in;
- wear appropriate clothing so they can be involved;
- balance out fast and slow games;
- don't overemphasize winners;
- start physically active games with a warm-up activity;
- play a variety of noncompetitive games;
- change the game as interest wanes; and
- encourage participation through simple games that break the ice — minimum rules, random movement, a little confusion and lots of laughter.

Cassandra McBurnie is project officer for OOSH (Out-of-School-Hours) Development at the Network of Community Activities in Surry Hills, New South Wales, Australia, the primary resource for OOSH in New South Wales.

She can be reached at cassandra@netoosh.org.au.



Group games can help children learn to work well together, get along and offer opportunities to be physically active and exercise.

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T.E.A.M.

A more comprehensive approach is the T.E.A.M. method advocated by Michael Josephson, founder of the nonprofit Josephson Institute of Ethics based in Los Angeles. "Whether you're a manager trying to instill values in employees, a coach trying to teach positive life skills to athletes, or a parent trying to build good character in your kids, you'll be more effective if you consistently Teach, Enforce, Advocate and Model the desired behavior and attitudes."

Civility doesn't stop at greetings. It must infuse your program's entire fabric. One fun way to implement the T.E.A.M. strategy for civil discourse is through debate.

"This house believes"

Debating is a centuries-old practice with numerous benefits. It helps participants organize their thoughts and boost their self-confidence, encourages children who might not normally speak up to participate, promotes civil discourse and helps control impulses.

Choose controversial, fun and interesting topics to engage the children, such as:

- This house believes life exists on other planets.
- This house believes children should spend their allowance on whatever they want.
- This house believes skateboards should be allowed on sidewalks.

Select "for" and "against" teams and have them research their arguments. One of the great aspects of debating is putting oneself in the shoes of another.

CharacterCounts! features free lesson plans on its Web site. The lessons incorporate the organization's six pillars: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Lesson plans can also be searched by age or subject.

To explore CharacterCounts! lesson plan bank, go to <http://charactercounts.org/lesson-plans/index.html>.

Arguing for something you don't necessarily believe helps give you a broader perspective. Explain to the children that they don't have to believe what they're arguing.

Once the teams have done their research, instruct them how to deliver their arguments in an engaging and convincing way. Typical debate format consists of a seven- or eight-minute presentation in favor of the house resolution. The position is clearly stated, evidence is introduced and concluding remarks are given.

Then the opposition argues against the resolution using the same format. Each team must listen carefully to the other, taking notes if necessary, until the presentation is finished. They can't react to what's being said and must wait their turn before arguing any points made by the opposition.

After the presentations, both sides ask questions of each other. A moderator oversees the procedure by selecting people to ask questions and keeping each team within its time allocation.

You can choose the factors that will determine the winning team. Will you deduct points for uncivil behavior or for taking too long to present argu-

ments? Will you award points for how well questions are answered or for how well the arguments are presented?

Mission accomplished

Debate strengthens behavior skills by encouraging impulse control, listening skills and empathy. It also develops language skills, research techniques and organization processes. All this translates into after-school interactions in which civil discourse is taught, enforced, advocated and modeled.

Don't expect changes overnight. Habits take time to develop and more time to change. Be consistent in applying debating skills. Remind the children and youth of the skills they're practicing and learning in debating and how they'll be able to apply them to other areas of their lives.

Following this strategy can make your after-school program one where even extraterrestrials would want to hang out. How awesome would that be?

Amanda Skinner (askinner@jethics.org) is manager of curriculum and professional development and John Wood is senior editor at the Josephson Institute. The Institute is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that administers the national office of CHARACTER COUNTS! (the Center for Youth Ethics). CHARACTER COUNTS! is the most widely implemented approach to character education, reaching millions of youth. For more information on CHARACTER COUNTS! and the T.E.A.M. approach, go to <http://charactercounts.org/index.html>.