

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Civility

axis

Feeling Tense? This Could Be Why

Our culture is experiencing a decrease in civility. We see it in the news media, on social media, in our political discourse, during rush hour, and even in our homes. . . . A [2016 study](#) found that 74% of Americans think manners and behavior have deteriorated in the U.S. over the past several decades. We remember former president George H. W. Bush's "[kinder, gentler nation](#)," Rodney King's "[Can't we all just get along?](#)" or Michelle Obama's "[When they go low, we go high](#)" with nostalgic regret. Everyone—the public, the press, politicians, parents, and anyone on social media—agrees we're becoming more calloused and rude.

Overall, [people are in general agreement](#) about what sort of behavior is unacceptable (though age and gender do create variances): share, speak kindly, introduce yourself, don't interrupt, don't call people names, answer the phone in the proper way. Yet, despite this agreement, rude behaviors are becoming more prevalent. Conversations, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and [storefront displays](#) are filled with four-letter words, yet no one seems to question it. Politicians don't just insult each other; they attack each other, run smear campaigns, and even [take to Twitter](#) to call out anyone who disagrees with them. Newscasters argue with talking heads. Customers deride restaurant staff. Schools struggle to handle disrespectful students.

As our children see these interactions, they might believe civility is unimportant and archaic. We hope this Guide can offer some understanding of how we got here, as well as some practical ways for you and your family to live out the Gospel by staying civil in an increasingly uncivil culture.

What exactly is civility?

Civility is a code of public conduct, a baseline of decent behavior. Former director of [The Emily Post Institute](#) Peggy Post [writes](#) that civility and courtesy are "in essence the outward expression of human decency."

There's also politeness and courtesy, chivalry and gallantry—all codes of conduct or modes of behavioral management—all of which boil down to good manners. [Talk to the Hand](#), a book about the collapse of civility, says there's really only one good manners rule to follow: "Remember you are with other people; show some consideration." That's the basic rule—The Golden Rule.

So what's changed?

Many things have contributed to our decrease in civility: our deeply polarized political environment, the advent of new technologies, a lack of rest, etc. Language itself has become depleted, devalued, and contaminated. Even the rhetoric we use to talk about rude people contributes. What we used to call pushiness, aggression, or someone who's "in your face" is now referred to in more positive-sounding terms. We call these people real go-getters, no nonsense, unfiltered, daring, taking life by the horns, off-the-cuff, cutting edge, strong. And we celebrate them because they get results.

But perhaps most influential is our loss of connection with others. Instead of feeling like we're "all in this together," we live in an "us vs. them" society: Democrats vs. Republicans, gay vs. straight, black vs. white, citizens vs. immigrants, Christians vs. Muslims. Anything that's deemed to be "other" or "different" is considered bad. This dualistic thinking is a way of

seeing life in terms of comparison. And once we begin comparing or labeling people or things, we almost always conclude that one is good and the other is bad. The dualistic mind, [according to author Richard Rohr](#), “compares, competes, conflicts, conspires, and condemns.”

Unfortunately, entertainment reinforces this mentality. For example, the post-apocalyptic shows [The Walking Dead](#) and [The 100](#) often pit humans against each other, with the highest good being protecting one's people, even if it means killing someone else's people. In more realistic terms, [American Sniper](#) and myriad other nationalistic films reduce the world to ultimate good guys and ultimate bad guys.

In fact, in his TED Talk “[How to Have Better Political Conversations](#),” Robb Willer likens America to a World War Z environment, especially since the 2016 election: “Some of us trudged through the last two years like we were in a zombie apocalypse movie: People wandering around in packs, not thinking for themselves, seized by this mob mentality trying to spread their disease and destroy society.” He says we think we're Brad Pitt: courageous, idealistic, and trying to fight off the “other” guys (zombies).

[The Wall Street Journal](#) characterizes what we're living through in America as “not only a division, but a great estrangement”—one between Donald Trump supporters and those who despise him, between left and right, between religious and atheist, progressives and conservatives. “We look down on each other, fear each other, increasingly hate each other.” And this boils up in our disagreements, which have become more polarized, virulent, embittered, and uncivil.

When we can no longer connect with the people with whom we cross paths each day, when they begin to look like odd or offensive strangers to us, when we forget that we are all children of the same Creator, we have a real problem. ***Disconnection breeds incivility, and incivility leads to dehumanization.***

Exacerbating this incivility is the epidemic of outrage we find in America, something RZIM calls the [Outrage Industry](#): “Being offended seems to be the new national pastime. Righteous indignation is on the upswing.” We are offended by people's political views, their environmental stances, the food they eat (or don't eat), the way they raise their children, their exercise routines, the vehicles they drive, the bumper stickers on those vehicles...

But this outrage stems from our loss of connection. We become outraged when we become judgmental of others. We become judgmental when we have no empathy. We have no empathy because we have no understanding. And we have no understanding because we have no real relationships with others.

Many Americans have replaced opportunities to connect with other commitments they feel compelled to add on because we live in a culture that promotes constant activity while devaluing rest. Sadly we're kind of like fidget spinners: We're in constant motion, though we don't really accomplish anything, and we're constantly swatting away that still, small voice pleading with us to slow down.

The Bible outlines an appropriate lifestyle for us, with six days of work and one day of rest. We know this, but we don't follow it. And human greed combined with the messages of Western culture doesn't allow us to follow it. Instead of work and rest, we have toil and leisure.

[Andy Crouch](#) defines **toil** as the fruitless labor of creating something that's really nothing. And so many of us resonate with that. We work long hours each day to produce...what exactly? For centuries, work produced beautiful, tangible things—new livestock, handmade furniture, food, clothing, cathedrals, crafts, and tools. Much of today's work doesn't offer that satisfaction; we are left instead with Sisyphus pushing the rock up the mountain each day, simply toiling.

And we have turned our moments of rest into leisure, which is a fruitless escape from labor. This “fake sabbath” provides no actual rest and no real restoration, but is instead filled with Netflix, social media, and texting.

And in this busy, disconnected, outraged state, civility goes out the window.

— Does the technology we use affect our civility?

Absolutely! We face an onslaught of invasive technologies, from smartphones to social media to digital assistants to whatever the next invention is. There are many wonderful things these technologies can do and have done for us, but they’re also creating new problems. We’ve become increasingly isolated, even with all this technology connection.

MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle calls this phenomenon being [Alone Together](#). She writes that social media gives us the “illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship.” We begin to expect more from technology and less from each other. Through our phones, we can access humor, meaning, joy, belonging, validation—all things actual people used to provide us.

The iPhone is more than a decade old, so many of our children have lived their entire lives in the [world of smartphones](#). Generation Z (b. late 1990s to late 2010s) is coming of age having to negotiate both the normal ups and downs of adolescence and the new demands of online life. Andy Crouch writes in [The Techwise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in its Proper Place](#), “To be a child, teenager, or young adult these days is to have to navigate a minefield of potentially life-altering choices, often with strangely little guidance from older adults, who are, after all, glued to their own screens.”

Our online behavior and commentary can also differ from what we’d do and say in face-to-face conversations. We give ourselves permission to be [a little ruder online](#). And because our exchanges are increasingly occurring online or through texts, we are losing the subtext of conversations that happens through tone, eye contact, and body language. We misinterpret meaning on social media and texts because these forms of communication, though helpful, cannot replace face-to-face interaction.

Technology has become a poor, but go-to substitute for real connection. It can be a huge blessing, but we have to be conscious of the alterations it makes in how we interact.

— Why should we be civil and kind to others?

First and foremost, we should treat others well because God says to ([the fruit of the Spirit](#), [love your neighbor as yourself](#), [be kind and compassionate](#), etc.). But He doesn’t just tell us to do this for no reason: He wants us to be kind because [He Himself is kind](#). He wants us to love others because He also loves them. He wants us to not only draw others into His love by being loving, but also to be transformed and become more like Him ourselves.

And there are many clear benefits of being polite, civil, and kind. Recent studies show that kind and polite people are [more liked](#), [happier](#), and [better leaders](#). Being polite is important for our society’s good as well. If we eliminate the social contracts of manners and civility from our interactions, we will sink into a war of all against all, making life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” as English philosopher Thomas Hobbes [put it](#). He argued for a covenant among people: Each would give up certain freedoms and restrain certain impulses. Why? To achieve peace, order, and civic longevity.

How can I teach my children to be civil in this brave new world?

Most likely, our kids already know the ground rules of civility because we taught them as they were growing up. But what's less likely is that they know the ground rules for being civil online or on their devices. This is because kids usually learn how to use these devices and apps long before we even know they exist. In fact, [teenagers often complain about their parents](#) committing certain faux pas online or having to be the ones to teach digital manners to their parents. But that doesn't mean we don't still have a responsibility. We are still the adults, so we need to keep up in order to train them in [the way they should go](#).

The most important way we can do this is to first do it ourselves. While they are still under our roofs, we need to **model civility for them**, showing them what it looks like to disagree well and to be respectful even when emotional, both online and off. Gen Z is quick to point out frauds, so if we're telling them to be kind to others, but we aren't doing this ourselves, they'll sniff us out. Civility won't take for them unless they see us authentically living it out at home and in our communities. We have to practice what we preach. And while modeling isn't rocket science, it's often difficult. Here are a few suggestions.

Be gracious. How we speak to others, whether online or in person, is important. God's Word is chock full of reminders of this: "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" ([Col 4:6](#)); "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips" ([Col 3:8](#)); and "The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint, and whoever has understanding is even-tempered" ([Prov 17:27](#)).

The words we use in a conversation—or a disagreement—with someone are supremely important. We often casually throw out statements that are off-putting at best and quite insulting at worst. Things like:

- I can't believe you would vote for that candidate!
- Anyone who would support this is a moron.
- How could anyone...
- Why would you ever...
- I would never...
- I'm just amazed that you/anyone...

What if we practiced changing these openings to something softer, less opinionated, more gracious? Like:

- That's fascinating...
- That's not entirely what I believe...
- In my opinion...
- I have found that...
- I'm curious how you came to that conclusion.
- I hear what you're saying. I believe differently...

The hope is that if we are better at showing grace, our children, friends, families, communities, even our nation will grow better at it, too.

Avoid echo chambers. We need to grow our empathy toward others by broadening our perspectives. We tend to stick to our own tribes. Once there, we find our views are in the majority and our proof points are unchallenged. We become a little more haughty and a little less gracious toward those who believe or look or live differently. For that very reason, we need to intentionally not do that. We must intentionally hang out with people who disagree with us. We must intentionally read things that don't support what we already believe. We must

intentionally watch different channels while also having the courage to name and tune out voices we might even agree with if they are insensitive, rude, violent, and dehumanizing. If we don't, it only becomes easier and easier to villainize others, which is the opposite of how Christ lived His earthly life.

This applies to social media, too. Sadly, social media no longer shows us things in chronological order. Instead, [they use algorithms to customize feeds](#), displaying what they think we want to see. In essence, they are the very definition of echo chambers, determining our existing viewpoints and fortifying them with additional information confirming those viewpoints. Because of that, it's important to not only not rely too heavily on social media, but also teach our kids not to as well. (Check out our [Parent's Guide to Social Media](#) and our [Social Media Conversation Kit](#) for more.)

Don't label people. We all know that judging a book by its cover is wrong, but with people, we tend to put them in a whole genre without a second thought. We label them. A commentary about persuading people [explains it like this](#):

Our society loves to simplify and quantify. If we just properly label ourselves and our issues, then perhaps we can figure out how best to get along. But this reductionist view of the human person is antithetical to true dialogue and will never help us emerge from the polarization we're currently experiencing.

Labels can be helpful at times, but they're astonishingly bad at encompassing the whole of a person. Even when they're true, they don't tell the whole story. So we need to avoid using labels (e.g. the rich family, the mean lady, the quiet kid, etc.) while teaching our kids to do the same. Watch and discuss [this powerful video](#) with them.

Choose to believe the best about others. Just because we don't agree with someone about one or two things doesn't mean they're the enemy. So we have to choose, even and especially in the midst of disagreement, to believe good about them. And even if we make someone our enemy that doesn't get us off the hook, either. Jesus firmly commanded us to "[love your enemies](#), do good to those who hate you." This single, incredibly clear command is often the most neglected mandate from Christ by modern Christians.

Be humble. All of us need to be reminded that, although we think we know everything, we don't. Teach your kids to use those gracious little catch phrases: "In my opinion..." or "I haven't considered that before..." A wise person realizes the more they know, the more [they really don't know](#). In addition, show them it's okay to not know or not have an opinion. You want them to have curiosity and wonder and not feel boxed in by what's expected of them or what others think.

Our kids are growing up in an age where anything goes. They see political figures and celebrities ignore all the rules of civility, and their favorite YouTube stars don't know these rules to begin with (see our [Parent's Guide to YouTube](#) and [Parent's Guide to YouTube Stars](#)). Remind them that once they leave the smaller circle of school and friends, many of the people they'll encounter and work with place a high value on civility. Give them opportunities to connect with others who aren't part of their adolescent echo chamber.

Limit technology. The Internet and social media tend to display our worst tendencies, and we don't want our children thinking that's the acceptable norm. One good habit is to say what you're writing out loud to yourself and to someone else before hitting "send" or "post." Does it sound snarky? Rude? Mean? If so, try to write it differently, or walk away from it for a day to give yourself time to think or cool off. In addition, utilize emojis where appropriate! A picture is worth a thousand words, and emojis do add context to our written communication.

Most importantly, remind your teens that in-person interaction is always better than online

in difficult situations. [Matthew 18:15](#) tells us to go to our brother if he's sinned against us. Teenagers need to understand that what they write and post online can and will be seen by more than the recipient.

How can civility help us when we disagree with others or encounter tense situations?

For some reason, disagreement now carries negative connotations. Just even hearing the word can make us cringe. But no two people in the history of mankind have agreed about everything. To be human is to have opinions and to be nuanced, so to be human and in relationship is to disagree. But that doesn't have to be bad! It's through disagreement, argument, and discourse that we learn and grow, *provided that it's civil, calm, level-headed, and humble.*

However, our society has largely forgotten [the art of the disagreement](#). We shy away from opportunities to practice civil discourse, i.e. the ability to talk about polarizing subjects with other people, disagree with them calmly, and still walk away friends, both parties feeling good about the exchange. So we need to reclaim the art of disagreement. **It's okay to have disagreements.**

When you or your kids find yourselves in a disagreement, make civility the goal. We want to demonstrate grace, empathy, and respect, even in the heat of an argument. Here are a few rules for engagement to help you disagree well:

- Make eye contact.
- Nod. Show you are listening to and considering what they're saying.
- Keep your cool. Modulate your voice. Relax your body language.
- Respect the pause. Don't be afraid of a pause in the conversation as you gather your thoughts or think about what was just said.
- Use your gracious catch phrases: "In my opinion..." "Have you ever thought about...?" "I haven't considered that before..."
- Don't take offense. We're all human, fallible, and struggling to do our best.
- Ask more questions. Clarify what's being said. This shows you are truly interested in understanding the other side. Get at the specifics—the reasons behind the emotion.
- Believe the best in people. Find something in common. Be curious, gentle, and loving.
- Be slow to speak and come to conclusions. Our fast-paced society isn't good at this, but by not rushing our responses or our conclusions, we often make room for our assumptions to be exposed and for the truth to shine forth. As [the writer of James admonishes](#), "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." (The character Mr. Carson from *Downton Abbey* is a good example of this.)

But how can we do this when people are so frustrating?

It's true that people can be frustrating. But often they're frustrating because of something that's wrong in our own hearts (and even when it is something wrong with them, we're still called to love them). So the best way to learn to be civil in all circumstances is to **practice**.

Yep, that's right. Just like we practice driving or writing in cursive or typing on a keyboard, we need to intentionally practice disagreeing. Dinner conversations are a great learning ground for civility and manners. Interrupting, insulting, and anger can all creep into family dinner time, providing a simple, safe opportunity to discuss how to be civil.

Beyond that, practice disagreeing with people outside of the family. In order to do that, we have to spend time with people with whom we disagree, so challenge yourself and your kids to break bread with some different folks over the upcoming year and be intellectually hospitable. Hospitality is first and foremost something physical—a place, a setting, an offering of comfort and company. Intellectual hospitality, then, enables others to feel welcome, even when and where they might disagree with us. Perhaps Christians [need this intellectual hospitality the most](#):

There are many who will not be immediately eager to hear more about our Christian faith, the beauty of the gospel, the promises of God. But when we open our homes to them, offer them bread and wine, and give them a place at our table, they may find a peace and solace they struggle to find elsewhere. In that love, in that specific care, they may open their hearts to ideas and values that they'd otherwise discard without thought.

The hosts of the [Dinner Party Download](#) podcast wrote a book a few years ago called [Brunch Is Hell](#). It has all sorts of advice about how to create a stellar dinner party. In the chapter on who to invite, the book outlines its manifesto: Gather the unlikeliest mix of people possible.

In this ever-compartmentalized world, it's too easy to avoid encountering opinions or lifestyles different than our own. That may be awesome for mating and blood pressure, but it's bad for life, democracy, and boredom avoidance. A dinner party is a fine arena for cozy mellowness AND respectful conflict, often in the same night.

Take a minute to make your list of unlikeliest people, then have your teenagers make one as well. If you're struggling, think about people you know with whom you really only feel comfortable talking about the weather or people you're a little intimidated to talk to. This could even be a family member and the "issue" is your different parenting styles or why they keep giving you unsolicited advice.

Once you do find yourself in a disagreement, be [intellectually humble](#). That means recognizing your own fallibility, realizing that you don't really know as much as you think, and owning your limitations and biases. We cannot continue believing we are absolutely right and the other person "is a total idiot, has no idea what she's talking about, and smells funny!"

"[We have to set up](#) more forums for personal encounters between different kinds of people. You detoxify disputes when you personalize them. People who don't have regular contact with people they disagree with become intellectually dishonest quickly." With this humility in your heart and an eye for good conversations with different types of folks, you'll be able to practice disagreeing. Let us know how it goes!

— Teenagers face their own difficult situations. How can civility help?

Gen Z lives a lot of their lives online. On social media and YouTube, they're exposed to cyberbullying, indecency, the anxiety and suicidal thoughts of their friends, and opportunities to be of little use or of great good.

Remind your teens that civility isn't only for face-to-face encounters. The Golden Rule also applies online. They need to bring their grace and humility online so they're prepared to offer kind words or friendly support to those in need. Your teens need to know that, although they can't control the vitriol or angst of others' online comments and videos, they can control their own responses.

If your teen is witness to bullying or self-harm online, help them know that a respectful

defense of a victim or a soft word of encouragement to a depressed friend can often make all the difference. Then stand by them if they receive the online flak that could come back to them from those untrained in civility.

How can my family and I make civility a habit?

Take deep breaths. Start now with a really good one or two. That intentional pause does wonders for your mind, slows your pace. [Thoreau wrote](#), “Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air; drink the drink, taste the fruit...and be thankful.”

Unplug. Get off the crazy online train. Andy Crouch recommends an hour a day, a day a week, and a week a year away from screens. Try this soon and see if you find your family spending more time together, indeed *having* more time to spend together.

Gather your friends. Host a potluck. Don’t worry that your house isn’t just right. People don’t care about that, they just love the opportunity to connect. They want warmth and conversation, not a perfect host.

Connect with your neighbors. Play outside more. Host a neighborhood Easter egg hunt. Start a pick-up wiffle ball game. People often come out of the woodworks for fun activities. Join the [front yard people movement](#). Their motto is [from William Butler Yeats](#): “There are no strangers here. Only friends you have not met.”

WAIT. We don’t know this word anymore. If we live our lives where we constantly feel that we cannot wait behind this person, this car, our children, then we need more margin.

Read the great books. STEM is all the rage—and rightly so—but more business folk are recognizing the importance of the humanities because they teach one to grasp the whys and hows of human behavior. They teach us empathy and understanding of both ourselves and our interactions. Pick up a classic and try it with your teens. They are probably already reading one for school.

Love people without cause. Spend time with them. Choose not to get offended. Give people the benefit of the doubt; perhaps they will return the favor.

The Bottom Line

How we treat others is and will continue to be a mark of our grace and goodness. It matters. Even if civility is not being demonstrated from those in power, on television, or online, we own our own behavior. Demonstrate for your kids what civility can look like. Making our society more civil starts from the bottom, one conversation and interaction at a time. If we ignore the noise and instead hear the still small voice inside telling us to be kind, we can do this.

Related Axis Resources

- [A Parent’s Guide to Tough Conversations](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Shame-Free Parenting](#)
- [A Parent’s Guide to Social Media](#)

Additional Resources

- [“I Disagree! 7 Civil Conversation Skills for Kids, Teens, and Families,”](#) Doing Good Together
- [“3 Ways to Teach My Kids the Art of Civil Discourse,”](#) The Good Men Project
- [How to Disagree without Being Disagreeable,](#) Suzette Haden Elgin
- [Talking Across the Divide: How to Communicate with People You Disagree with and Maybe Even Change the World,](#) Justin Lee
- [“If You Want to Be Civil and Polite This Is How It’s Done,”](#) The Grit and Grace Project
- [“Civility Isn’t Surrender,”](#) *The National Review*
- [“Is Civility Dead in America?”](#) Psychology Today

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