

# COMMUNICATING CONSTRUCTIVELY

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## AGENDA

- Starter
- Easy Talk, Tough Talk
- I-Messages
- Controlled Debate
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

### Objectives

Students will explore what makes some conversations easy and others difficult.

Students will develop techniques to communicate their feelings and encourage open dialogue in difficult situations.

Students will practice communicating in a constructive manner, even when they disagree.

### Materials Needed

- One copy of the “I-Messages” activity sheet and one copy of the “Vocabulary of Feelings” activity sheet for each student (Part II)
- One copy of the “Topics for a Controlled Debate” activity sheet (Part III)
- Activity rules written on the board, a transparency, or a piece of poster paper (Part III)

**Starter (3 minutes)**

Write the following list where everyone can see: talking on the telephone, joking with friends, conversing with an adult, quarreling with a sibling, asking to borrow money, discussing a homework assignment. Ask students what all of these conversations have in common. (All require verbal communication.)

On a scale of one to five, with five being extremely important and one being not important at all, ask students to rank the importance of verbal communication in their daily lives. (Most students will rank communication high.)

Ask for a show of hands to check the students' rankings from one to five. Write their rankings where everyone can see.

Explain that verbal communication is very important. Ask whether students believe that some types of verbal communication are more difficult than others. Explain that this lesson will help them make difficult conversations easier and more effective.

**Part I Easy Talk, Tough Talk (10 minutes)**

Purpose: Students explore what makes some conversations easy while others are more difficult.

**1. Students classify conversations as easy, average, or difficult.**

Instruct students to take out a piece of paper and fold it into three columns. Have them title the left column "Easy," the middle column "Average," and the right column "Difficult."

Explain that this activity will have them classify different conversations according to their difficulty. Ask them to list, for example, a conversation with a close friend about what to wear to a party (easy), a telephone conversation to schedule a dentist appointment (average), and a request to a boss for a raise (difficult).

Divide the class into pairs. Tell students that they have three minutes to list as many examples of verbal communication in each column as they can think of. Tell them that their goal is to have at least three examples in each column. If needed, prompt students by asking questions such as the following:

- Think about conversations you have had with your parents. Are some more comfortable than others?
- How would you rank conversations with members of the opposite sex?
- Where would you rank confrontations with peers?
- How do you feel about conversations with teachers?

While students are writing, draw the three columns in a place where everyone can see.

When the three minutes are up, ask volunteers to fill in the columns on the board. Discuss which conversations are easy, which are average, and which are difficult.

## **2. Students analyze what makes some conversations easy and others difficult.**

Ask students to form groups of four to five. Have each group select a note taker/reporter. Tell the groups that their task is to determine what makes certain conversations easy and others difficult. Allow about three minutes for the discussion.

## **3. Students recognize that difficult conversations often involve strong emotions.**

Call on each group to share its analysis with the rest of the class. Write important points where everyone can see. Reinforce observations that difficult conversations often involve conflict. They may arouse emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, insecurity, and hurt feelings, while easy conversations tend to evoke more positive emotions. There may also be some risk in a difficult conversation, like the possibility of rejection.

Explain that an awareness of each party's emotions can help make a difficult conversation easier.

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## **Part II I-Messages (10 minutes)**

Purpose: Students use an activity sheet to develop techniques to communicate their feelings and encourage open dialogue in difficult situations.

### **1. Students learn the purpose of an I-Message.**

Say, "An I-Message is a technique you can use to express yourself when you are upset or angry that will lead to open discussion and will not escalate conflict. When you use an I-Message, people are more willing to listen to you and respond to your requests without becoming defensive. I-Messages encourage discussion and help reduce friction."

Explain how an I-Message works:

- Tell students that an I-Message begins with a statement of feelings (e.g., "I feel afraid, tense, worried...").
- It is followed by a statement of what the problem is (e.g., "...when you don't take out the garbage, when you are late picking me up, when you skip class...").
- An I-Message ends with your reasons for feeling the way you do. It tells how the observed behavior affects you, and it avoids using the word "you."

Provide students with a sample I-Message. Say, “I feel tense when you ditch English class because I can’t ignore your absences, and attending English class is a requirement for graduation.”

## 2. Students create their own I-Messages.

Distribute the “I-Messages” activity sheet and the “Vocabulary of Feelings” activity sheet to students.

Tell students that they are going to write their own I-Messages. Explain the proper format for filling out the “I-Messages” activity sheet:

- Line 1: By beginning with “I feel...” students explain their feelings and do not accuse the other person. Though students may feel mad or angry, they should not use “mad,” “angry,” or other aggressive or accusatory words on this line because such words do not encourage dialogue. Students should use the “Vocabulary of Feelings” activity sheet to find words other than “mad” or “angry” to describe how they feel. Remind them to avoid using the word “you.”
- Line 2: This line should be a description of what the other person does that upsets the student. It should describe the other person’s specific action, but not label or accuse the person. For example, students should write “when you don’t return my things” (describes the action). Students should not write “when you are inconsiderate” (broadly labels the person). Lead students to the understanding that when a person acts in a way that seems inconsiderate, it is the specific behavior that is causing the negative feeling; that person is not always inconsiderate.
- Line 3: This line should explain in detail why the student is feeling how they are feeling. For example, a student might write “because they are important to me.” This line explains the importance of the action or behavior to the other person.

Instruct students to fill out the remaining I-Messages on their activity sheets.

## 3. Students discuss their I-Messages.

When students have completed the activity sheet, ask them to share their I-Messages with the class.

Discuss the value of I-Messages by asking the following questions:

- Why are I-Messages a valuable tool for communication?
- When could you use an I-Message?

Remind students that when their sentences begin with “I,” they are not accusing the other person, and the other person will not become defensive. I-Messages allow students to express how they feel, encourage open discussion, and can help resolve a conflict quickly and easily.

You may wish to tell students that using I-Messages is an important skill that requires practice. It takes a while to get used to wording feelings this way. It is important to understand the technique and practice using it. Over time, using I-Messages will become natural.

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**Part III Controlled Debate** (25 minutes)

Purpose: Students participate in a controlled debate to practice communicating in a constructive manner, even when they disagree.

**1. Students prepare the classroom for the activity.**

Have students arrange all of the classroom chairs in two rows that face each other. Students will be moving back and forth between the rows, so make sure that there are no obstacles to block them.

**2. Students choose the topic for the controlled debate.**

The debate topic can be an issue discussed in class, or you can choose another topic of interest to students. Consider presenting students with a choice from among four controversial topics that are relevant to their lives, using the “Topics for a Controlled Debate” activity sheet.

Write each topic as a statement where everyone can see. To the right of the statements, create two columns labeled “Agree” and “Disagree.” Write the number of students who agree and disagree with each statement. The best topic for the debate is the topic that has the most even split between those who agree and those who disagree.

**3. Students prepare for the debate.**

Have all students who agree with the statement sit in one row of chairs and all students who disagree sit in the other row.

Refer students to the rules of the debate that you have previously written:

- Only one person may speak at a time.
- Speakers from the two sides will alternate.
- To make a point, raise your hand.
- Do not raise your hand until the person who is speaking is finished.
- If someone on the opposing team makes a point you agree with, get out of your seat and move to the other row. This does not mean that you have changed your mind about the debate topic; it means that you agree with that one point.
- Move back to your original side when someone on your team makes a point with which you agree.

**4. Students engage in the controlled debate.**

Begin the debate by flipping a coin to determine which team begins. Remind students to use the techniques of effective verbal communication (including active listening) that they have learned.

Explain that the debate will last 10 minutes.

The following are some suggestions for facilitating this activity:

- It is important that you act only as a referee and avoid offering your opinion.
- If students stray from the topic, help them bring the discussion back to the debate.
- Enforce the rules, allowing only one student to talk at a time, calling only on students who wait until others finish talking before raising their hands, and encouraging students to change sides when strong points are made by the opposing team.
- Remind students that agreeing with a specific point (and therefore changing sides) does not mean that the student has completely changed their mind on the topic. It signifies that they are able to see the merit of a point made by the opposing side.
- Ensure that students remain respectful of each other's opinions.

Keep the class apprised of the time remaining in the debate.

### 5. Students discuss the debate experience.

When 10 minutes have passed, have students remain in the rows and ask them the following questions:

- How was this debate different from disagreements you have in everyday life?
- What was difficult about this activity?
- How did you feel when you wanted to say something but couldn't? How about when you wanted to raise your hand, but someone else was speaking?
- Did you resist switching sides? Why? Did you have all of the information on this topic before the debate? Have any of the points you heard caused you to take a closer look at the issue? Which points did you find most effective?
- How well did you and others use techniques for good listening and good communication?
- What can you apply to "real life" from this debate?

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### Conclusion (3 minutes)

Have students discuss recent situations that could have been improved through the use of I-Messages. Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- Effective communication is important in people's lives.
- An awareness of both parties' emotions in a conversation can help make communication more effective.
- An I-Message is a technique that helps people to communicate when they are upset or angry, without escalating conflict.

## Student Assessment

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1. Why are some conversations more difficult than others?
2. Write three angry or accusatory statements, and then rewrite them as I-Messages.
3. List three reasons why I-Messages are often a more effective communication tool than angry or accusatory statements.

## LESSON EXTENSIONS

### Using Quotations

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“Speech is power...to persuade, to convert, to compel.” –Ralph Waldo Emerson

Have the class give examples of how speech might empower people in everyday situations.

### Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

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Provide students with texts of historical speeches. Have small groups of students analyze the speakers’ styles and messages. Possible subjects for analysis: historic events leading up to the speech, the audience, possible controversy, desired outcome, and notes on the historical accuracy of the text.

Have groups share their analyses. Discuss the role that effective, careful communication played in the speeches.

### Writing in Your Journal

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Have students write about a disagreement they’ve had. Have them write a paragraph that explains the situation and an I-Message that might have helped them get their point across.

Have students share their I-Messages (with identifying details omitted) in small groups, suggesting changes as needed.



## Using Technology

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Have students observe one segment of a television show (commercial to commercial) that includes a disagreement between characters.

Have students write a summary of the scene and rewrite the dialogue using I-Messages. If desired, have students role-play their scenes for the class.

## Homework

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Have students read “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros (from *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*). The 11-year-old narrator of this short story is embarrassed by her teacher in front of the class.

Have students write a paragraph about how the narrator might have maintained her dignity, and strategies for using I-Messages with authority figures. Discuss students’ work as a class.

## Additional Resources

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Have students read *Mad: How to Deal with Your Anger and Get Respect* by James J. Crist, PhD.

As a class, discuss how anger can get in the way of constructive communication. Have students brainstorm ways to control their anger. Reiterate that I-Messages allow people to effectively share their anger without escalating conflict.

# I-MESSAGES

I-Messages are a great way to explain yourself when you are upset. When you use I-Messages, people are more willing to listen to you and respond to your requests without becoming defensive. I-Messages encourage open discussion and can help resolve a conflict quickly and easily.

## EXAMPLE

One of your friends often borrows things from you and doesn't return them.

I feel upset  
 when you don't return my things  
 because they are important to me.

Fill in the blanks for the following I-Messages:

1. Your closest friend is telling others about your personal life.

I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
 when you \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_

2. You haven't been called on all week, even though you've raised your hand.

I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
 when you \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_

3. Someone in your family keeps forgetting to give you messages.

I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
 when you \_\_\_\_\_  
 because \_\_\_\_\_

# VOCABULARY OF FEELINGS

## A

Afraid  
Aggressive  
Annoyed  
Anxious  
Apathetic  
Apologetic  
Apprehensive  
Ashamed  
Audacious

## B

Bashful  
Bold  
Bored  
Brave

## C

Calm  
Cautious  
Cheerful  
Comfortable  
Competent  
Confident  
Confused  
Curious  
Cynical

## D

Decisive  
Depressed  
Determined  
Disappointed  
Disapproving  
Disgusted  
Distressed

## E

Ebullient  
Ecstatic  
Embarrassed  
Energetic  
Enraged  
Enthusiastic  
Envious  
Excited  
Exhausted

## F

Friendly  
Frightened  
Frustrated

## G

Grateful  
Greedy  
Guilty

## H

Happy  
Helpless  
Hopeful  
Horrorified

## I

Impatient  
Incompetent  
Indecisive  
Indifferent  
Innocent  
Insecure  
Inspired  
Insulted  
Intimidated  
Irritated

## J

Jealous  
Joyous

## L

Lazy  
Listless  
Lonely

## M

Marvelous  
Mischievous  
Miserable  
Morose

## N

Negative  
Nervous

## O

Oblivious  
Optimistic  
Overwhelmed

## P

Paranoid  
Peaceful  
Perplexed  
Petrified  
Proud  
Puzzled

## R

Reckless  
Regretful  
Relaxed  
Restless

## S

Sad  
Satisfied  
Secure  
Serene  
Shocked  
Shy  
Silly  
Skeptical  
Sleepy  
Sluggish  
Smart  
Stimulated  
Stupefied  
Subdued  
Sullen  
Surprised  
Suspicious  
Sympathetic

## T

Tense  
Tentative  
Timid  
Tranquil  
Trusting

## U

Uncomfortable  
Undecided

## W

Wary  
Whimsical  
Worried

## Z

Zealous

# TOPICS FOR A CONTROLLED DEBATE

- Students who get in trouble with the law should be expelled.
- Healthy people should become organ donors.
- People should be banned from talking on their cell phones in public places.
- Animals should live in their natural habitats, not in zoos or circuses.
- Boys and girls should be allowed to try out for and play on any high school sports team they want, including basketball and football.
- Squirt guns, laser pointers, and other toys that look like guns should be banned from schools.
- Policies banning homework should be established in school districts.
- All schools should require uniforms.
- All students should be required to learn a foreign language.
- Athletes should be required to graduate from college before playing professional sports.
- Schools and libraries should block certain websites on computers used by high school students.
- Student government should have the power to change school policy.