Positive Communication in a Negative Environment

The growing prevalence of negative speech in today’s American culture is worrisome, and counteracting it should be on everyone’s radar. Fortunately, there are ways to train our brains—and our families—to let positive, affirming behavior and language rise above the noise.

Julia Adami, director of home and community-based services at Great Circle, says the particularly contentious recent presidential election campaign tapped a deep reservoir of anger and frustration felt by some Americans, regardless of political affiliation. These emotions translated into negative, hurtful and destructive speech that we see broadcasted daily through the media.

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“People can see this as validation to say whatever they want, with little restraint. The relative anonymity of internet also allows posting, tweeting and blogging with virtually no consequences, so people feel freer to say negative things,” Adami says.

Often children begin to assume it’s normal and acceptable behavior. And that is a challenge for parents trying to teach positivity, Adami says. To counteract angry, confrontational belittling behavior, it’s important to focus on our emotional intelligence, becoming more empathetic and building our self-worth, she notes.

So, how can you cultivate positivity?

1. Understand your feelings – People with high emotional intelligence know how to recognize their own feelings. Adami recommends “addressing your emotions by working through them in healthy and positive ways, instead of turning to anger, guilt and shame.”

2. Cultivate empathy – As part of our self-worth, we can cultivate empathy by affirming that others can have differing views, says Adami. “We’re all worthy of love and belonging, and entitled to our feelings and opinions. Kids need to be reminded of this.” For example, point out that disagreeing on a particular subject can become an opportunity for discussion and understanding, not a reason for anger or defensiveness, she adds.

3. Avoid the blame game – Remember that people with opposing beliefs are as free to express to their views as we are, Adami says: “Good people may support something you don’t agree with. It’s never okay to blame or shame them for their ideas and preferences.”

4. Build self-worth – Self-worth develops by first practicing self-kindness and compassion, Adami notes. Choose activities and creative pastimes that support good health and positive attitudes. “Encourage kids to build empathy by writing down their feelings each day. Discuss them proactively, at the dinner table, on the way to school—whatever works for you. It’s about teaching them to recognize, process and validate all their emotions as human and normal,” she says.

Artistic and creative pursuits also can help. Because physical activity changes our brain chemistry to improve mood and attitude, exercise is another option. Volunteering also can boost our positive self-image.

5. Focus on positives – One-on-one time with your kids is essential to develop positive communication skills, Adami says. Even if it’s just for 30 minutes, turn off electronics and enjoy an activity together. You’ll build your child’s self-esteem and capacity to empathize. Positive, supportive conversation sets a good example that helps develop emotional balance.

6. Seek guidance – Reach out for advice from those in your network who consistently practice positive communication. Or if you’re struggling to rise above the negativity, Great Circle’s counseling services can provide guidance and tools for your family.

Adami reminds parents to check their words and actions first. “Your behavior and language can set a positive example. Making a real effort to communicate positively in our highly contentious world is more important than ever, and helps us take back control of the conversation.”

*Great Circle provides a unique spectrum of behavioral health services, including private counseling for children, adults and families facing personal challenges or difficult circumstances. To learn more about our community counseling services or to schedule an appointment, call 1-844-424-3577 (GCHELPS).*