**Strategies for Tough Conversations and Techniques for De-Escalation**

*Seek to defeat injustice and ignorance, not people.*

**Strategies for Engaging in Tough Conversations**

1. **Start, stay, and end open-minded.**
   * Assume good intentions and that everyone believes they are acting in the best interests of their children.
   * Steer the conversation towards mutual understanding rather than irreconcilable differences.
   * Suspend judgement and remember that this is a sensitive topic for everyone—including you. Become aware of your preconceived notions to avoid jumping to conclusions prematurely.
2. **Listen to understand.**
   * Let people speak and don’t assume you know what they’re going to say.
   * Be an active listener. Pay careful attention to what the other person says, look them in the eye, and avoid interruptions.
   * Reflect your understanding, clarify what they are saying, and summarize their perspectives before sharing your own. This limits misunderstandings.
3. **Use “I” Statements.**
   * Use “I” statements so you only speak to your own experiences.
   * Share your message and knowledge from your experience, but be mindful not to make broad generalizations, speak on behalf of other groups and identities, or mention any names or identifying information of individuals.
4. **Ask questions.**
   * *What would be most helpful to you?*
   * *What would help you understand?*
   * *What else do you need to feel more comfortable?*
5. **Avoid “Right” and “Wrong” Statements**
   * Let go of the moralist dichotomies of good or bad, true or false, right or wrong. These are destructive notions in productive conversations.
   * Do not tell people that they are wrong, or reject their ideas, opinions, or feelings as unimportant or irrelevant. People consider their perceptions and experiences as reality whether they are accurate or not.
6. **Use Facts to Further the Conversation**
   * Share the information you have and be generous with what you know.
   * Remind yourself and others that within conversations everyone’s personal experiences matter. Although you and others should be encouraged to share information which deepens the conversation, don’t use information to shut down the conversation.
7. **Don’t Become Defensive.**
   * Keep the conversation productive and respectful by remembering to engage what is said rather than criticizing either who says it or the way something is said.
   * If needed, explain when you disagree and focus on challenging the statements and its assumptions rather than the person who said it.
8. **Anticipate Strong Emotions** 
   * Recognize feelings and personal experiences for what they are when they are expressed without diminishing their validity.
   * Conversations about racial identity and injustice often provoke a range of responses due to people’s personal experiences with the topic. Addressing strong emotions respectfully and effectively is vital to continue conversations in productive manners.
   * If strong emotions such as interruptions, shouting, sarcasm, or harmful use of language do arise, remain calm and assess the situation. If the situation is caused by discomfort, it may be best to allow the discussion to continue to use the situation as a moment for dialogue and learning.
   * If the situation jeopardizes someone’s emotional or physical safety, work to diffuse the situation in a calm manner. This may mean pausing the conversation for now with a commitment to continue at a later time.
9. **Call For Help When Needed**
   * Ask a colleague to join you for in-person meetings that may be charged, and make sure your teachers have an administrator or staff member they can bring into their meetings with family members.
   * Anticipate the need to call for support by informing others within your team early of their need to potentially help you within the conversation.
   * Ensure your team is well-equipped by sharing these conversation and de-escalation strategies so your approaches are aligned.

**De-Escalating Heated Conversations**

**The Do’s**

1. Move out of a crowded area into a calm space with no distractions.
2. Maintain a 5–6-foot distance, to keep everyone safe and avoid people feeling trapped. If needed, position yourself within a space close to an exit.
3. Assume that the person has a real concern, they are understandably upset, and they have a right to their feelings.
4. Use a clear and consistent voice and tone, at a calm and low volume.
5. Use a realized, well-balanced, and non-threatening posture.
6. Use reflective, active listening to help them feel heard.
7. Reflect back what they are saying to you through their words and body language.
8. Ask open-ended questions (“*What can I do to help?”* “*Tell me what you’re concerned about.”*) and clarifying questions. Give brief, direct statements.
9. Ask for their opinion: “*How would you like to see the situation resolved?”* or “*How can we work together?*”
10. Offer choices and alternatives.
11. Offer common ground you can agree on together.

**The Don’ts**

1. Don’t threaten the person or argue with the person about the facts of the situation.
2. Don’t offer lengthy explanations or excuses.
3. Don’t tell the person they have no reason to be angry or tell them to “calm down.”
4. Don’t become defensive and insist you are correct.
5. Don’t dismiss their anger or frustrations.
6. Don’t use your title or authority to dismiss their concerns.
7. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.
8. Don’t come too close to the person or stand or hover over them.
9. Don’t take the person’s anger or frustration personally.