



Civility: Time for a Comeback

A recent experience literally made me stop in my tracks in disbelief. While on my nightly walk, I noticed a group of grade school children arguing in a neighbor's yard. Their voices were extremely angry as they stood face to face poised for physical combat. Unmistakably, a line had been drawn about something and no one was willing to back off.

The rage escalated until a parent stepped out of the house. At the sight of the parent, half of the kids scattered in all directions. I was waiting for the parent to tell the kids to cut it out when the unbelievable happened. The parent launched verbal attacks at those fleeing. Following her lead, the remaining kids bellowed obscenities until the runners were out of sight.

Civility – oh civility, where have you gone?

Situations like this are happening all too frequently. Local, national, and international news cover daily incidents of civil unrest and disobedience. If one was to keep score, opposition has replaced kindness in the world's arena. This really concerns me and has me asking, "Is civility really out of style?"

What exactly is civility? The dictionary definition tells us that it involves formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech. In my humble opinion, three words need to be added at the end: *in all situations*. Civility is the ability to stay mannerly and always cultured when the circumstances are calm or escalating or out of control.



Civility is the way that we disagree with respect, seek common ground when differences exist, listen past one's assumptions, and teach others to do the same. Civility is the hard work of staying present even with those with whom we have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements. It makes it possible for us to keep God's second great commandment; love one another.

One reason civility has become a lost art is that people find it acceptable to adopt an "eye for an eye – a tooth for a tooth" philosophy if you feel belittled, threatened, or at a disadvantage. Situations such as these give you permission to engage in combative speech and react with anger. Civility can (and should) be jettisoned and replaced with rudeness if one is opposed.

This may seem like the right course of action. But it is not. When we match fire with fire, we step into the dark side of humanity.

The best way to return to civility is through parental modeling that follows a *I do – we do – you do* format. When parents expect and model civility in all situations (*I do*) they teach their children to follow in their footsteps (*we do*). Over time, the children will naturally develop the habit to be civil (*you do*).

Employing the *I do – we do – you do* model parents teach their children to discuss their differences and listen past their opinions. It sets an expectation to listen and be present to someone with a different viewpoint, to seek understanding when someone is oppositional and to explain one's position assertively rather than in anger.

Let's take a look at how the model in more detail.

- In the *I do* phase, show your children what civility looks like. Explain its importance in and outside the home. Show them how manners, listening without interruption, and speaking calmly during discussions demonstrates civility. Consider reading the New Testament that point out how Jesus and his disciples were civil – especially when opposed.
- In the *we do* phase, work on civility together. As a family, set up “civility” standards that everyone follows (e.g. saying please and thank you, no swearing or vulgarity, talking calmly during discussions, paying attention to the needs of others, asking questions before stating one's position...) Once the standards are set, put them into action. Hold all family members accountable.
- In the *you do* phase, expect your children to be civil. This is the longest phase because it takes time to make civility a habit—especially in demanding situations. Be ready to back up and repeat the *I do* or *we do* steps until civility is well established in and outside your home.

For civility to mount a comeback in society, you get to decide what type of parent you will be. Will you be a parent who rises above the civil unrest and show your family and friends how civility and politeness can be normal and attainable? Will you raise your children to be civilians and not combatants? Will you Leave a legacy of love and respect in society. Will you help civility to return?



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