

Discussing Sensitive Topics

Students sometimes unexpectedly raise sensitive topics in school. When this happens, educators often feel unprepared to acknowledge and address the situation in the moment, and unsure of how to facilitate conversations with students about these topics. The scenarios below provide some examples.

Markia's teacher was informed earlier in the week of the fire in Markia's apartment. During an Open Circle lesson on feelings, Markia disclosed to the class that there had been a fire in her apartment. She felt scared when she woke up to smoke everywhere and couldn't find her parents.

Julia wants to be identified as a boy. She wants her classmates to call her "Cam" and refer to her as "he". Julia's parents want to support this transition and make sure the school does, too.

During an Open Circle Meeting some of the students began talking about a recent, highly-publicized school shooting, when asked for an example of a dangerous or destructive behavior.

Aarav's mom has cancer and has been open about her treatment with Aarav's teacher. Recently Aarav has been talking about it with students during center times in his classroom.

Educators might hope that by not directly acknowledging and addressing these topics, they will not be brought up by students at school. Yet even when educators don't engage students in these conversations, they do still occur without the benefit of adult guidance in venues such as during recess, in the lunchroom or on the bus. What can you do if a student brings up a sensitive topic?

Be proactive

Most adults within the school community are often aware of current events and difficult situations before they are known to students. This can be an opportunity for the adults to set

the tone for having conversations with students, and provide a framework for addressing sensitive topics in a prepared and proactive way. By doing so, they communicate a willingness and openness to discuss sensitive topics and can help students feel safe and contained, while demystifying topics that might otherwise seem taboo. Proactive conversations also ensure that students get more accurate information.

The *Open Circle Curriculum* provides lessons to help educators facilitate proactive conversations using the familiar Open Circle Meeting structure. When students consistently participate in Open Circle Meetings, they learn the skills necessary to develop positive relationships within the context of a safe learning community.

When faced with challenging situations, students are more able to tap into their prior knowledge and use the skills they have learned. The following are some examples of Open Circle lessons that can be proactively taught and then later referenced to further support students:

- Listening
- Being Calm
- Recognizing and Naming Your Feelings
- Getting Calm When You're Feeling Upset
- Positive Self Talk
- Speaking Up
- Expressing Angry Feelings
- Dangerous and Destructive Behaviors
- Teasing
- Problem Solving
- Being a Positive Leader
- Community Building Activities
- Mindfulness Practices

We recommend that you first consult your building administration to discuss protocols and develop a consistent script of what you might say to students, as well as to parents and caregivers. It might be important to consult with district

administration and, when necessary, call in support personnel such as your school counselor to assist with conversations with students. The following are some best practices and guidelines to keep in mind when having conversations with students about sensitive topics.

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Be prepared

- Get the support you need and try to educate yourself on the topic.
- Keep the content developmentally appropriate.
- Stick to the facts - be honest, simple and brief.
- Validate and listen to your students' feelings and offer reassurances.
- Pay attention and be aware of students' reactions during the conversation.
- Be available for follow-up conversations with students.
- Inform parents or caregivers of what was discussed.
- When available, provide resources for students and caregivers.
- Let caregivers know when their child raises a question or concern at school.
- Ask the other adults in your school to be mindful of the conversations that children have during unstructured times of the school day.
- Try to stick to your daily classroom routine and twice-weekly Open Circle Meetings.

Acknowledge, contain and follow-up

Even with a prepared and proactive stance to sensitive topics, there still may be times when children disclose new and sensitive personal information during Open Circle Meetings, or at other times during the school day. In these

moments it is important to calmly acknowledge the situation and try to contain the information. For example, a teacher might say, "What you are talking about is personal, and important for me to hear. I think it's best that you and I continue this conversation privately after our Open Circle Meeting." These types of disclosures often require informing and seeking support from specific school personnel such as your administrator and/or school mental health professionals. The information provided in this article can then serve as a foundation for prepared follow-up conversations with the student and the class.