

## **Nurturing Civility in Our Children in an Uncivil World**

**Robert Brooks, Ph.D.**

This month's article has been co-authored with my friend and colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein. It was prompted by our next scheduled appearance on the parent webinar series ParentEd Talks, sponsored by ParentMap. The webinar, which is titled "The Lost Art of Civility: Raising Respectful Kids," will be broadcast live on Tuesday, February 25, 2025, from 4:00-5:00 p.m. ET <https://www.parentmap.com/talks/parent-ed-virtual-parenting-speaker-series>

### **A Parable**

Two farmers, Ben and Luke, resided in a village nestled amidst undulating hills. Ben's demeanor, with his fiery temper and cutting remarks, was strikingly different from Luke's, who was known for his serene disposition and gentle speech.

One spring, both farmers planted their crops. Impatient and irritable, Ben often lashed out at his workers, many of whom lived close by. He believed that strictness and harshness would motivate his employees and yield better results for his crops. Luke's approach was noticeably different. He always spoke with respect and gratitude, encouraging those around him with his gentle words.

As the season progressed, the effects of Ben's harshness became evident. His workers became increasingly disheartened, anxious, and careless as they struggled under his constant criticism. Weeds grew unchecked, and the crops began to wither. In contrast, Luke's workers, inspired by his civility and kindness, worked diligently and cheerfully. They took pride in their tasks, ensuring the fields were well-tended and the crops flourished.

Ben's fields bore a meager crop when harvest arrived, barely enough to sustain him through the winter. In comparison, Luke's fields offered a beautiful sight, brimming with abundant produce. Perhaps not surprisingly, Ben refused to take any responsibility for his meager crops, blaming his "lazy, unmotivated" workers and vowing to use different workers for the next harvest.

Ben maintained the same demeanor the following year with new hires. He staunchly believed that his interactions with his workers were correct, and if his field continued to yield poor crops, it was because he needed to hire more motivated people. Similar to the previous year, his land yielded few crops. Luke's fields blossomed, providing ample food for the villagers.

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Witnessing this stark difference between Ben and Luke, the villagers became increasingly turned off by Ben's constant barrage of blame. They came to appreciate, as never before, the impact of kindness and civility—attributes that foster cooperation, care, and responsibility. They also observed that being harsh and degrading bred discord and neglect.

These observations began to produce a notable transformation. Even to the strongly opinionated Ben, it became apparent that villagers were not inherently lazy and unmotivated. Instead, the seemingly negative behaviors of those who worked for Ben resulted from the demeaning ways he treated them. Drawing from the same "pool" of villagers, Luke did not encounter any problems with them. His workers displayed energy and enthusiasm in completing their responsibilities, and Luke constantly voiced his gratitude to them. The power of civility was evident. Harmony flourished in the village, accompanied by prosperity and contentment.

**A Vision We Wish to See**

We share this story as a vision of what we wish to see in our world—a world where the virtues of civility are adopted and thrive. Unfortunately, a lack of civility intensifies in many areas of our lives and is very apparent in politics. An absence of civility is typically associated with a lack of empathy and compassion and dehumanizing others.

Vivek Murthy, the U.S. Surgeon General, in a report issued a year ago, warned that the experience of loneliness and isolation posed significant risks for our emotional and physical health. A more recent report focused on the dangers of children spending more and more time on social media platforms. We believe another report is warranted, one that places the spotlight on the assault on civility, the consequences of such an assault, and most importantly, steps that can be initiated to strengthen civility in our children and ourselves.

Our interest in civility is rooted in our ongoing efforts to understand and promote the development of resilience, self-discipline, and civil behaviors in children. Our research emphasizes the intertwined nature of resilience and civility, offering insights into why civility is declining and proposing strategies to reverse this trend.

Our collaboration has focused on identifying the key traits and behaviors contributing to resilient individuals—those who can effectively cope with stress, adversity, and change while displaying empathy and compassion. We have highlighted the importance of creating nurturing

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environments, positive role models, and supportive relationships in fostering resilience. Our work has demonstrated that resilience is not an innate trait but a set of skills and attitudes that can be cultivated. This cultivation process reinforces a sense of self-worth, problem-solving skills, and a positive outlook on life. We have published numerous books and articles offering practical advice for parents, educators, and mental health professionals on nurturing these qualities in children.

**The Relationship Between Resilience and Civility**

As noted earlier, civility and resilience are deeply connected. Civility is often defined as polite and respectful behavior in social interactions. When individuals demonstrate civility, they help create an environment where positive communication can thrive, conflicts are minimized, and relationships are strengthened. These elements are crucial for building a caring, resilient community.

Resilience involves the ability to navigate challenges and adversity. We have described resilient people as possessing such qualities as empathy, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills, which are also fundamental components of civility. Empathy allows individuals to understand and respect the perspective of others, producing polite and respectful interactions. Self-regulation helps to manage emotions, prevent or minimize conflicts, and promote harmonious relationships. Problem-solving skills enable individuals to address issues constructively rather than resorting to uncivil behavior.

In essence, nurturing civility in children contributes to their overall resilience. Teaching children to be civil helps them develop the skills to manage life's challenges and build supportive relationships successfully. Fostering resilience equips children with the emotional and social tools necessary to engage in civil behavior.

**Reasons for the Decline in Civility**

The decline in civility is a growing concern in contemporary society, impacting social interactions and community cohesion. Several key factors contribute to this distressing trend, including:

***Digital Communication:*** The rise of digital communication, especially social media, has transformed how people interact. The anonymity and distance provided by digital platforms can lead to a lack of accountability, resulting in uncivil behavior such as cyberbullying, trolling, and

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disrespectful comments. Many people feel free to demean, dehumanize, insult, and attack others on social media, behaviors that they typically would refrain from in a face-to-face encounter.

***Stress and Time Pressure:*** Modern life is often characterized by high stress and time pressure levels. As we struggle with multiple responsibilities, a likely outcome is an intensification of frustration and impatience. This stress can manifest as uncivil behavior since individuals with limited emotional bandwidth are less likely to engage politely and respectfully with others. Their qualities of empathy and compassion are depleted.

***Cultural Shifts:*** There have been significant cultural shifts towards individualism and competition. These shifts can diminish the emphasis on communal values such as respect, empathy, and cooperation, which are essential for civil behavior. Different opinions are quickly perceived as threats and as invitations to confrontation.

***Media Influence:*** Media, including television, movies, and news, often highlights and sensationalizes conflict, aggression, and disrespect. This portrayal can normalize uncivil behavior and influence individuals, especially impressionable children, to mimic such actions. It does help that some TV news programs set aside a few minutes, most often at the end of the broadcast, for "positive" news depicting people displaying kindness, empathy, and civility. Perhaps all TV newscasts should include such a segment and for more than a few minutes. However, it seems that **accounts of incivility** attract more viewers than stories of actions housed in civility.

***Lack of Role Models:*** Children learn behavior by observing adults. When they witness uncivil behavior in their families, schools, or public figures, they may perceive such behavior as acceptable. Without positive role models who consistently display civil behaviors, it is difficult for children to learn the attitudes and **practices** associated with civility.

### **Strategies to Nurture Civility in Children**

Fortunately, strategies exist that can be used to strengthen civility in children and counteract the opposing forces that contribute to its decline. These include:

***Modeling Civil Behavior:*** Adults can and should model the behavior they wish to see in children. As noted above, children are acute observers of the behaviors of adults in their lives. When adults display respect, kindness, and empathy, they offer children concrete examples of **civility**. The converse is also true; when children observe significant adults in their lives losing

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control, demeaning others, and showing a lack of respect for people with different opinions or from different ethnic or religious groups, they are more likely to adopt uncivil behaviors.

**Teaching Empathy:** Empathy provides a foundation for civility and positive relationships. Parents and educators can encourage children to consider the feelings and perspectives of others. Activities such as role-playing, reading stories that highlight different viewpoints, and discussing the impact of actions on others can help cultivate empathy. To strengthen empathy in ourselves and our children, it may be helpful for parents, educators, and other caregivers to consider several questions we often pose in our writings, including,

"What words do you hope your children (students) use to describe you?"

"What do you intentionally say and do regularly so that they are likely to use the words to describe you that you hope they do?"

"What words do you think they will use?"

**Promoting Empathic Communication:** Closely aligned with teaching empathy is promoting communication skills based on empathy and essential for civility. These include active listening, expressing thoughts and feelings respectfully, and resolving conflicts constructively. Parents and educators can provide opportunities for children to practice these skills in a supportive environment. We recommend that parents and other adults in a child's life reflect upon the following questions as they attempt to use empathic communication:

"Would I want anyone to say or do to me what I have just said or done with this child?"

"What do I hope to accomplish in anything I say or do?"

"Am I saying or doing it in a way that allows the child to listen to my message without feeling criticized or judged, knowing that we care about them?"

**Encouraging Problem-Solving Skills:** Resilient and civil individuals are skilled problem solvers. Encouraging children to think critically and creatively about solutions to problems, both personal and social, helps them develop the ability to handle conflicts in respectful and civil ways. Children who are effective problem solvers are more likely to think before they act and less likely to demonstrate impulsive behaviors that are characterized by **incivility**.

**Reinforcing Positive Behavior:** Positive reinforcement can be a powerful tool in nurturing civility. Praise and acknowledge children when they display civil behavior, thus encouraging them to continue such actions. Positive feedback can take different forms depending on the

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child's age and the particular situation in question. Verbal praise, tangible rewards, or recognition in front of peers can all be effective. Feedback should be precise in terms of identifying the behaviors being recognized.

***Creating Supportive Environments:*** Environments that promote a sense of belonging and support are crucial for fostering civility. Schools and communities should strive to create inclusive and respectful atmospheres where children feel valued and heard. When children and teens feel isolated and unwelcome and believe there is no one they can turn to for support, they are more prone to engage in self-destructive behaviors and/or behaviors that lack civility.

***Limiting Exposure to Negative Influences:*** Monitoring and restricting children's exposure to negative media influences can help mitigate the impact of uncivil behavior they might witness. Parents and educators can guide children towards positive content, reinforcing respectful and kind interactions. If children witness uncivil behaviors, parents can use this situation as a learning experience, asking children about what they observed and discussing other, more civil ways of handling the situation.

***Encouraging Positive Community Involvement:*** We have found that an essential component of resilience is when children and adults feel a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. One proven way of reinforcing a sense of purpose and creating prosocial behaviors is to provide children with opportunities to engage in what we have called "contributory" activities in which they enrich the lives of others. Participating in such activities can help children understand the importance of responsibility, cooperation, respect, and empathy and reinforce civility.

**Conclusion**

In an era of escalating incivility, there is an urgent need to foster resilience and civility in our children. The consequences of neglecting these qualities are serious, threatening the very fabric of our society. We must act now to identify and counteract the forces eroding civility, implementing targeted strategies to reverse this alarming trend. The time to strengthen respect, compassion, and empathy is not tomorrow but today. Parents and caregivers are on the front lines of this struggle, possessing a critical responsibility to model and instill these essential attributes in children. The future course of our society hinges on our immediate action—ensuring that the next generation is equipped to confront life's challenges with kindness and respect, qualities that are vanishing much too rapidly from our world.

