



## **Relationships First- Middle School & High School**

### **Overview**

In Living Room Conversations, a small group of people (e.g. 4-7) people come together to get to know one another in a more meaningful way. Guided by a simple and sociable format, participants practice being open and curious about all perspectives, with a focus on learning from one another, rather than trying to debate the topic at hand.

### **The Living Room Conversation Ground Rules**

#### **Be Curious and Open to Learning**

Listen to and be open to hearing all points of view. Maintain an attitude of exploration and learning. Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking.

#### **Show Respect and Suspend Judgment**

Human beings tend to judge one another, do your best not to. Setting judgments aside will better enable you to learn from others and help them feel respected and appreciated.

#### **Look for Common Ground and Appreciate Differences**

In this conversation, we look for what we agree on and simply appreciate that we will disagree on some beliefs and opinions.

#### **Be Authentic and Welcome that from Others**

Share what's important to you. Speak authentically from your personal and heartfelt experience. Be considerate to others who are doing the same.

#### **Be Purposeful and to the Point**

Notice if what you are conveying is or is not "on purpose" to the question at hand. Notice if you are making the same point more than once.

#### **Own and Guide the Conversation**

Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation by noticing what's happening and actively support getting yourself and others back "on purpose" when needed.

Though feedback is consistently positive, some people are concerned about managing people that dominate the conversation as well as off-topic, or disruptive situations during the Living Room Conversation. We offer these tips:

- Everyone shares responsibility for guiding the conversation and is invited to help keep the conversation on track.
- The group can decide to keep track of time in some way to help people remember to keep their comments similar in length to others. Soft music when the time is up is a great reminder.
- If an area of interest has arisen that has taken the group off topic, ask the group if they would like to set aside the new topic for a separate Living Room Conversation.
- If someone is dominating, disruptive or has found their soapbox, respectfully interrupt the situation, refer to the Ground Rules and invite everyone to get back on track with the current question
- If the group opts to shift from the format of the Living Room Conversations, please provide us with feedback for future learning. There are many ways to have a great conversation! Thank you!

[feedback@livingroomconversations.org](mailto:feedback@livingroomconversations.org)



**Heart and Head:** Relationships First - Human dynamics that affect the way we work in the world

**Emotion vs. Intellect-** Experiments have revealed that often our intellect is in service to our emotions. In other words, first we have a gut reaction and then we justify it. Heart and intellect impact how we hear each other. If you like someone you will listen to them with greater openness and an inclination to believe them. If you hear the same thing from someone that you do not know or do not trust for political or cultural reasons, you will be far less likely to hear or believe what they say.

**Our natural drive to conform to community norms-** There are basic instincts that reinforce our tendency to listen to people in our community and dismiss information from people outside our community. In ancient times people that promoted ideas considered dangerous or too different were shunned or ejected from their community. Ejection from the community could lead to death. The instinct to conform to community norms is hard to overcome for most people.

**Confirmation bias**, also called **confirmatory bias** or **myside bias**, is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities. It is a type of cognitive bias and a systematic error of inductive reasoning. People display this bias when they gather or remember information selectively, or when they interpret it in a biased way.

**Listening** is one of the most powerful ways to develop rapport and ultimately be heard. People that feel respected and heard tend to listen well in return.

**Respect** is key for good relationships and problem solving. Eye rolling, talking over people and other forms of disrespect dramatically diminish the ability for people to work together for a common goal.

**Build on shared values-** The reason Living Room Conversations start by asking individuals to share some personal values is that most of us share core values. Once we recognize we share key values we tend to listen to each other with greater interest and empathy.

**Holding the tension of our differences** is a discipline that is worth developing. People may disagree strongly on some topics yet be able to work together productively in other areas. And when we are able to understand viewpoints that are different from our own this sometimes reveals opportunities to solve problems in ways we had not thought of. In fact at times different priorities may create opportunities for people to craft win/win outcomes.

**Cognitive Dissonance-** In psychology, cognitive dissonance is the mental stress or discomfort experienced by an individual who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas. (Liking someone you disagree with can create some discomfort.)

**Benefitting from everyone's best ideas-** When we listen with respect to people that have different perspectives we often find that our collective intelligence is better than even expert opinion.

**Collaborative problem solving produces more win/win solutions-** Working collaboratively there is more flexibility and room to be creative in efforts to meet everyone's core needs. Adversarial problem solving tends to produce lose/lose solutions where everyone feels they have lost.

## Relationships First

How we treat each other is the difference between a great place to live and a bad place to live. We shape our world through relationships. Most people agree we want communities where all people have dignity and respect. Yet respectful interactions are often not what we see modeled in the media and in politics. And far too many people feel disrespected in their lives. What is our role in these dynamics? This Living Room Conversation is designed to flow through 3 rounds

**Round One: Deepening our Connection.** Prior to talking about the issue at hand, the focus of our first round is really just getting to know each other on a deeper level - establishing some rapport and common ground. Answer **one or more** of the following:

- What sense of purpose, mission, or duty guides you in your life?
- What would your best friend say about who you are and what makes you "tick"?
- What are your hopes and concerns for your community and/or the country?

**Round Two: Hearing Each Other Out..** Answer **one or two** of the following questions:

- Have you ever seen or been in a conversation where people were not listening to each other? How did that turn out?
- Have you ever taken a position or voiced an idea that was very different from a group you are part of? How did that feel? Or have you ever decided against speaking out because it just wasn't worth the repercussions?
- Can you remember a time when you and a friend interpreted the same information very differently? Why do you think that happened?
- Describe a friend or relative with whom you are able to talk about hard things in a respectful way and "hold the tension of your differences." What is the difference you have with this person - and why do you find it worthwhile to talk in this respectful way together?
- When have you used respect and listening to resolve a problem? Did it work?
- Has knowing the needs of others around you ever helped you find a good solution to a difficult problem? What happened?

**Round Three: Reflection & Take-away's. What Came Up for You?** Answer **one or more** of the following questions:

- In one sentence, share what was most valuable to you in this Living Room Conversation.
- What new learning or appreciations do you have about the quality of relationships?
- Have you found common ground or areas of interest that surprised you?
- What is one important thing you thought was accomplished here?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?
- Would anyone be interested in continuing this conversation or starting a new one?

**Closing**– Thank you! Please complete the feedback form to help improve Living Room Conversations.



## Sharing your Feedback?

*Thanks for participating today! We'd love to hear what you thought:*

**1. You just had a conversation about how people talk to and listen to each other. How would you describe this experience?**

- It was really valuable
- It was somewhat valuable
- It was not valuable.

**2. Can you tell us one thing you learned from the conversation today?**

**3. Can you tell us one thing you liked?**

**4. Is there something you would change about the conversation?**

**5. After this conversation about relationships, are you going to do anything differently in your life? Check all that apply:**

- I'm going to listen more carefully to people around me.
- I will be more likely to notice when two people are interpreting information differently.
- I will see whether respect can make a difference in solving a problem.
- I may see more value in differences and try to "hold the tension" better.

**We would appreciate if you fax (971-230-5850) or e-mail ([feedback@livingroomconversations.org](mailto:feedback@livingroomconversations.org)) us the feedback forms!**

**School name and Location \_\_\_\_\_**