



# Spectrum Podcasts

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## Constructive “Differencing”: How to Disagree and Still Maintain Contact

**Guests:** Jared Scherz, Ph.D.

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**Background and Bio:** Dr. Jared Scherz holds a Masters degree in education and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. He has been working as a psychotherapist for over twenty years in private practice. Dr. Scherz is also the author of several books, including *Considering Therapy* and *Intimate Relationships*. He has also written books dealing with issues in schools, such as *Harnessing the Power of Resistance: A Guide for Educators* and *The Truth about School Violence*. Scherz is primarily interested in the peaceful resolution of conflicts. He consults with systems to help increase awareness of the multiple factors that influence student violence in particular.

**Program Description:** Help children or all ages learn to explore and express their own opinions while respecting difference in how others think and feel. This podcast examines why disagreeing can be so threatening, plus cultural and digital influences and the role of adults (and schools) to help children learn to differ peaceably and respectfully, with specific strategies and ideas to reduce conflict, build problem-solving skills, and prevent disagreements from escalating or becoming violent.

### Highlights of Podcast:

One of the most stress-producing obstacles in any relationship is the need to be right when it requires others to be wrong.

Differences in school systems occur on so many levels (philosophies, theory, opinions, attitude, practice, modeling, etc.).

We often don't pay attention to these difference although they can definitely impact the culture of the school system.

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Children are often not asked for their opinion much less taught to respect difference in opinions.

We are often taught that our ability to be accepted and valued depends on our ability to agree with people.

Generationally: We (adults) were raised to see respect in terms of follow directions, doing what's expected and not questioning authority. Young people now base respect on whether they are heard and listened to, whether their opinions will be valued.

### **Why is the idea of disagreeing so threatening?**

The nature of disagreement: suggests that a disagreement can leave a child feeling disempowered, ostracized or excluded from the group. If children anticipate negative responses, how likely are they to stand up to the group, voice a different opinion, and risk the negative attention being turned their way?

Being true to yourself carries a risk when it is different from the prevailing opinion of the group.

This likewise occurs on the adult level if teachers feel that they will be perceived as not being team players.

Talking about our differences is important to our getting our needs met.

Even adults standing up and voicing opinions or setting boundaries with kids can be frightening. Good modeling depends on our ability to do this, also necessary for showing others alternative ways of thinking, speaking, perceiving (believing), or behaving.

Critical point: It's so important for people to feel safe and know that they won't be judged. That becomes such a powerful force for inhibiting self-expression or to be willing to be different. If we're likely to be labeled or criticized or judged in some way as wrong or silly, then our social status can really be jeopardized (as well as our ability to learn, open up, or change).

### **What can a teacher do when he or she sees this type of disagreement?**

Scherz encourages teachers to become aware of their own insecurities and frailties, and to "invite exploration." By being curious about how children formulate an opinion, how they come to their conclusions,

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they teach children a process to build an opinion and an argument. (Debates tend to stay on the surface.)

### **Most prevalent models available offer:**

Black and white thinking: The danger in believing that there is only one way to think about something. There are different perspectives on the same issue. There are very few clear absolutes, but we tend to polarize our thinking on issues. The further you get toward one end of the continuum, the greater the limitations are going to be.

We even have little tolerance for people who get new information and change their mind, interpreting flexibility and the ability to evolve as being wishy-washy. We tend to punish people for being more open in their perspective.

### **What can adults do:**

Listening and developing an appreciation for differing opinions.

Developing empathy for others, being able to listen and understand what someone else's perspective is.

Look inside and understand self better rather than just standing firm on one side of an argument.

Constructive differencing (see below).

### **Defensiveness:**

Safety helps prevent defensiveness.

Different types of defensiveness: Outright walls, swallowing things whole and becoming confluent to protect oneself.

Real openness comes from a place of security and adequacy, being OK with not knowing everything, and the desire to learn, evolve, and grow.

### **Constructive differencing:**

Rather than blaming or splitting, promoting more learning and self-discovery. "See if you can understand why you've chosen this particular side... How did you evolve into that particular mindset?"

If people can pay attention to their method of interacting, we can redefine conflict as an exploration of differences as opposed to a battle

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of wills or a power struggle. This approach helps people explore how they can enjoy the process and get closer to each other, appreciating the differences that we have, and gaining a better overall perspective, gaining from others something that we didn't see. Expanding individuals' perspectives.

Paradoxical theory of change: If we really want to promote anything that's different in a sustainable way, we can't just make it different on the surface, willing somebody into making a difference. Explore differences and identify starting point.

Allow others to have their own reality. Can disengage without attacking or taking away from their experience.

Language: "That wasn't my experience." "How interesting." "Wow, I hadn't thought of that." There are ways of staying connected when you don't agree or don't have a great argument.

Adults working (or living) with children are often tempted to jump in and resolve conflicts and disagreements between children. We solve or advise in a way that takes away the power from the kids to resolve the problem themselves.

Language, process, and introspection combine to help build problem-solving skills and allow people to express desires and opinions.

Adults need to ask, "How can we solve this problem (in a way that doesn't cause harm to anyone or anything?)" Magic sentence: "How can we each get what we want?"

Recognize that expedience will be appealing but does not allow for the process of learning to resolve conflict and respect different needs and opinions.

Consider asking, "How did you do this (last time)?" "What was successful in the past?" People often already have answers and solutions that have worked for them if guided back through this process.

Even simple, unintentional lapses in communication (or assumptions about what others understand) can lead to stress, doubt, and mistrust in relationships. Misunderstandings can come from not communicating intentions or information, or from not asking questions or expressing concerns (which can be a big risk).

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**Building resilience**, where kids are more apt to tolerate the risk of not being right or standing up for themselves, and learn to tolerate a certain degree of discomfort (which puts us at risk for drugs or alcohol [or other substances or behavior] to minimize discomfort): helping kids learn to experience this discomfort without being overwhelmed by it:

Listening and understanding

Sharing some of our experiences

Expressing our appreciation of the strengths we see (that kids already possess)

Lending the kids language, giving them the opportunity to practice and rehearse strategies to resolve differences

Helping kids learn to take ownership and express needs

### **Schools role in helping kids develop negotiating skills.**

Kids are already used to these interactions outside of school (peer-to-peer, through the internet, for example). Educators can no longer say that this topic is beyond our purview. Scherz gives an example of a child who was being harassed online and not supported by the school (getting the message that the school does not value the importance or potential harm of such interactions).

Even if we can't take definitive action, let them know how much we value their safety and their sense of space and freedom, and that we can appreciate the pain that they're going through.

Help them brainstorm goals and intentions and explore the choices and options they have, thinking through some of the potential outcomes.

Many children shy away from taking action (asking adults for help or sitting down with the other person to resolve the conflict) for fear of making things worse.

Validate and provide understanding for their experience as this increases the likelihood that they are willing to lend the same kind of perspective to the person they're in conflict with. "You really can't sit down and negotiate with somebody unless you really have a sense of their experience and their wants..." Without that appreciation, solutions tend to be superficial and short-lived.

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Ask questions like, “Where do you imagine where this person is coming from?” “What drove that behavior for them?” to help them develop a sense of empathy.

### ***More Information, prepared by Dr. Jared Scherz***

*Why is disagreeing so threatening?*

- a. For children in particular, disagreeing means potential for ostracism
- b. Haven’t developed the self worth to be ‘wrong’
- c. Too much focus on right/wrong as opposed to perspective
- d. Being viewed as on the losing side can feel like piling on for some children
- e. For teachers, it can reinforce not feeling supported by admin
- f. We have lost tolerance for ambiguity and our curiosity has suffered (i.e. political system that dichotomizes our views)

*What are the various factors that influence the tendency toward violence?*

- a. Aggregation of feeling ‘wrong’ or being picked on for being different
- b. Greater pressure to succeed/ Competition for resources
- c. Greater dis-inhibition of students
- d. Less accountability, increased sense of entitlement
- e. Increased anonymity of interactions through social media
- f. Underdeveloped empathy
- g. Use of shame as a behavior modification tool for educators
- h. Social ostracism
- i. Decreased capacity for distress/ tendency toward immediate gratification/ low frustration tolerance

*How has the internet influenced the way we interact, conflict?*

- a. Need to have a high number of friends/followers
- b. Less face to face exchanges increases freedom to speak
- c. Increased intensity of attacks

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- d. Pack mentality
- e. Risk taking leads to greater social rewards

*What is the school's role in helping children become better negotiators?*

- a. A critical skill set for success in adulthood
- b. Increased self-reliance academically and socially
- c. Didactic and experiential learning
- d. Internet based learning
- e. Greater integration of mediums into education

*What tools are available to help students learn to differ peaceably?*

- a. [www.ufeud.com](http://www.ufeud.com) and uFrames (private, monitored engagement)
- b. American Humanist Organization: [http://www.americanhumanist.org/What\\_We\\_Do/Education\\_Center/HELP/6\\_Peace\\_and\\_Social\\_Justice/6.1\\_A/Conflict\\_Resolution\\_Lessons](http://www.americanhumanist.org/What_We_Do/Education_Center/HELP/6_Peace_and_Social_Justice/6.1_A/Conflict_Resolution_Lessons)
- c. <http://facs.pppst.com/conflictresolution.html>
- d. <http://www.teachervision.fen.com/classroom-management/activity/2922.html>
- e. <http://www.pbs.org/teachers/thismonth/conflict/index1.html>
- f. Book: *The Truth About School Violence*
- g. Book: *Creating Emotionally Safe Schools*

The key to these activities with students is a broadening of perspective and the development of empathy, creative conflict approaches, and the increased capacity for distress

The key to improving conflict resolution among adults is a cohesive school culture that promotes direct, open, and meaningful negotiation of differences from the top down. Curiosity is the key.

### **Additional Resources:**

**Parenting Press Problem Solving Series for young children:** Three series of choose-your-own answers to a number of familiar problems or

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issues children encounter. For young children, there is the problem solving series, including books such as *I Want to Play*, *I Want It*, and *My Name is not Dummy*. They also offer a “Kids Can Choose” series to help young children see that they have choices about how they handle conflict. [http://parentingpress.com/b\\_cps.html](http://parentingpress.com/b_cps.html)

**Parenting Press: “The Decision is Yours” Series for school-age children:** Five books to help adults discuss common problems and explore strategies for handling issues such as peer pressure, achievement, bullying, and moving to a new school. Each book has different options for children (age 7-11) to choose and see what happens next. [http://parentingpress.com/b\\_diy.html](http://parentingpress.com/b_diy.html)

**Free Spirit Publishing** has a number of books on bullying and conflict resolution for kids of all ages, starting at <http://www.freespirit.com/bullying-conflict-resolution/>

***With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies***, by S. Morris Engel, St. Martin’s Press, 1999.

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