

LEADING VALUES AND MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSIONS

Learn step by step how to lead engaging and animated discussions of character, values, and moral issues using hypothetical, curriculum-based, or real-life dilemmas.

Having regular (3-6 times each month) dilemma discussions with students over time (a semester or year) promotes their reasoning and understanding of moral and values issues and enhances their critical thinking and speaking abilities.

This teaching strategy is effective, widely used and widely researched

WHAT IS A VALUES OR MORAL DILEMMA?

We all face situations every day that require us to make choices or decisions. Sometimes these are uncomfortable or awkward and demand difficult decision-making. Situations that generally require asking the age-old question, “What is the ethically **right** thing to do?” are called values or moral dilemmas.

Moral reasoning is a process that helps individuals think through possible implications and consequences of actions in response to values or moral dilemmas.

WHAT IS A VALUES OR MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSION?

After reviewing a dilemma of values or morality, individuals discuss possible action choices that the central character in the dilemma has. Discussion group members decide what they believe the character **should do** and consider **why** they believe certain choices are right or wrong. As members of the discussion consider the implications of such actions on other characters and review how personal opinions with the group may have changed during the discussion, they recognize and practice decision-making based on ethical principles and values in a non-threatening, safe, and inviting environment.

WHY.....

WHY USE VALUES AND MORAL DILEMMAS IN THE CLASSROOM?

Children and young people today are faced with more character development challenges than ever before. Responding successfully to these challenges requires children and youth to have solid reasoning and decision-making skills. This teaching strategy was created to help students of all ages to develop these skills and confidence in their abilities to make the best, right, or good choices when faced with their own daily values and moral dilemmas.

Values and moral dilemma discussions in the classroom or embedded in other school activities provide safe environments in which students may consider, sometimes for the first time, what they actually believe is right or wrong, good or bad, and why. Some children and even adolescents may not have thought much or at all about why they do the things they do, what effect their actions have on other people, or how they came to certain decisions. Or they may not understand why others make the decisions they do,

Through values and moral dilemma discussions, students consider situations, grapple with decision-making, and assess implications of their decisions. They also are encouraged to think through situations and actions from another person's perspective. Most adults learn these skills through life experiences and observations. Dilemma discussions in low-risk, "what if" situations are designed to ease this learning process for children and young people and to encourage their moral growth.

Real-life application of dilemma discussions comes when children and young people face similar values or moral dilemmas in their daily lives. When that happens, through their experience with dilemma discussions, they will have already practiced moral reasoning and thinking about values and they will have developed the confidence to determine and act upon what **should** or **should not** be done and to know their reasons why.

WHAT ARE THE DESIRED OUTCOMES?

Through your involvement as a teacher with your students, you will help them, and yourself, grow and learn in several areas, such as:

- Increased understanding of child and adolescent development and ethical decision-making
- Enhanced discussions of ethical issues in your classroom
- Stronger communication skills to serve as a vehicle for the development of values and emotional support for your students
- Skills and knowledge for students to make better life choices and to become aware of the ethical dimensions and implications of their and others' choices

DURING VALUES/MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSIONS, WHAT ARE THE KEY CONCEPTS STUDENTS WILL LEARN?

Morality---Focus the discussion mainly on issues of right and wrong, not on issues of probability or psychological predictions. It is fine to allow such tangents or digressions periodically, but when it happens, gently guide students back to the question of what **should** be done.

Justification---Encourage students to give and discuss reasons for their decisions and to reflect on the reasons given by others.

Peer Interaction---Peer interaction is the most powerful aspect of the dilemma discussion teaching strategy. Don't get caught up in discussions between yourself and an particular student; this is not productive. The ideal discussion occurs when students not only talk to each other but listen to, understand, and challenge the views of each other.

HOW and WHEN.....

HOW AND WHEN ARE VALUES/MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSIONS USEFUL AND APPROPRIATE?

Integrate dilemma discussions into your curriculum and lesson plans in meaningful ways. Once you have led a few dilemma discussions, your students will become comfortable with the discussion procedures. Establishing a comfort level is important because students, especially older students, are often reluctant to discuss their views and feelings with an adult or "in public." From then on, initiate values/moral dilemma discussions as **planned** and be open to having **spontaneous** dilemma discussions as well.

Books, movies, and television shows can contain or provide ideas for dilemmas. Use dilemmas that present a **variety of issues for discussion**; for example, dilemmas that focus on honesty, respect, integrity, drug use, or other values and/or problems.

Real-life dilemmas, such as an incident at school or something in the news may be appropriate and very interesting to students. However, be aware that dilemmas that are too personal to your students may arouse feelings, such as embarrassment, and/or may not be appropriate in any case. You should use your good judgment.

Real-life dilemmas that students face daily include:

- Seeing the starting quarterback steal a computer and knowing that he would not be able to play and help the team win if he were turned in.
- A friend wanting to copy homework.
- A man approaching students outside school and saying he knows how they can make some fast money, but they cannot tell their parents.

FIVE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD VALUES/MORAL DILEMMA

Ingredients:

- **Focus**---A genuine situation that is possible in the lives of individuals, contemporary society, or the curriculum content
- **Central Character**---The character or group centrally involved in the dilemma. Students must decide what the character(s) should do.

- **Choice**---Each dilemma must have a conflict that causes the central character to make an action choice. There are no right or wrong choices, but the reasons given in support of choices can vary along a dimension from less adequate/good to more adequate/better. Adequate or better reasons take account of more aspects of the dilemma and have fewer negative and/or more positive consequences and implications.
- **Values/Moral Issue**---Dilemmas revolve around values and moral issues such as social norms, property, civil liberties, life, authority, personal conscience, punishment, promises, truth, role responsibilities, and others. Each dilemma identifies an issue, such as those just given. While discussion may touch upon several issues, the identified issue should be the central topic.
- **A “should” question**---A dilemma ends with a question that asks what the central character **should** do in the situation. It is important to ask what the character **should**, rather than **would**, do.

Should keeps the discussion centered on moral or values-based judgments and reasons. Most students will feel comfortable sharing their thought on what someone else should do.

Would (prediction) questions ask students to predict what the character might may easily move the discussion outside the moral realm. In addition, students most likely will want every detail possible about the character before they predict his/her action choice.

“What would **you** do in this situation?” questions may become an exercise in psychology instead of morality. Moreover, many students may be reluctant to share predictions of their own behavior unless they feel they have the “right” answer.

WHAT ARE THE LEADER’S RESPONSIBILITIES?

As a dilemma discussion leader, your main role is to keep the discussion moving and to encourage participation by all students but not to force it. At the close of the discussion, the leader should summarize choices and supporting reasons as well as raise further or related issues or questions for consideration. A leader should not give students a “right” answer, which will shut down students’ curiosity and work against promoting their moral reasoning development.

As a teacher, you have a responsibility to represent your own values as well as those of your school; thus, being a values/moral dilemma discussion leader means balancing a facilitating role to encourage open discussion with modeling values by appropriately suggesting reasons for or questions about the action choices offered by students.

HOW MUCH PREPARATION TIME IS NEEDED?

Initially, it will take about one-half hour to read through a values/moral dilemma and study the suggested probe questions. As you become more comfortable with this teaching strategy, this step should take 10 to 15 minutes.

HOW MUCH TIME DO VALUES/MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSIONS TAKE?

Depending upon the age of your students, each discussion may take 15 minutes (with elementary students) to one class period (with high school students). Students' involvement and the use of dilemma changes or alternative dilemmas as well as the number of probe questions used will determine the length.

WHAT KINDS OF SETTINGS AND MATERIALS ARE NEEDED?

Values/moral discussions can be held in any setting from a classroom to an outdoor gathering. By deciding ahead of time how to present the dilemma, you will be able to determine what materials you will need. The following are some items to consider:

- Puppets
- Pencils, pens
- Paper
- Movable chairs and small tables
- Flip chart, chalkboard, or whiteboard

SEVEN STEPS OF LEADING VALUES/MORAL DILEMMA DISCUSSIONS

Following these seven steps will help ensure the process runs smoothly. After you become familiar with the process, you will think of variations to introduce.

STEP ONE---PREPARE FOR THE DISCUSSION

Before the discussion.....

- Read and become familiar with the dilemma. Determine that the dilemma is appropriate for your age students, the curriculum, and specific circumstances.
- Read and know the probe questions and be clear about the moral or values issue in question (e.g., honesty, cheating, peer pressure, etc.).

- Practice the dilemma discussion with family, friends, or co-workers—ask what they would do in specific situations.
- Determine how you facilitate the discussion.
- Prepare materials.

At the time of the discussion, once students are assembled....

- Explain to the class what they will be doing and why. For example, “Today we will discuss a problem. We will then work together to try to find a solution.
- Help your class establish rules and a positive classroom climate for student interactions. For example, stress the importance of everyone’s opinions, that there is not one right or wrong answer, and that there should be active listening.
- Arrange the students in a circle so all can see each other.
- Join the students by sitting in the circle.

STEP TWO---PRESENT AND CLARIFY THE DILEMMA

Present the dilemma....

- There are several ways to present a dilemma, so you will want to use a method that best matches your talents and available resources. Use a presentation style that best fits the maturity level of your students.

First introduce the dilemma by simply reading it slowly and clearly or allowing students to read it for themselves or try a more creative approach. Here are some ideas to consider for various age groups.

For ages 5 to 8:

- Read the dilemma as a story. Use different voice tones for each character, including the narrator. Express emotion while telling the story.
- Use puppets to tell the story. Ask young students to listen carefully because one of the puppets needs their help with a problem.
- Use the chalkboard, flip chart, etc to illustrate the story, placing or drawing the characters as the story is told.

For ages 9-14:

- Ask volunteers to read the story to themselves and then role-play the dilemma for their class.
- After the initial responses to the dilemma, ask the same or different volunteers to role-play what **should** be done.
- Use a segment from a movie, television series, or book that presents a dilemma and have students discuss what **should** be done.

For ages 15 and older:

- Have one or more students read the story aloud.

- Ask each student to read part of the dilemma.
- Have students read dilemma to themselves and then present summaries of the story and issues.

Clarify the dilemma....

- Make sure that all students fully understand the dilemma.
- Review characters to make sure that students understand the characters' roles in the dilemma.
- Ask younger students—which character has a problem and to describe the problem.
- Ask older students—to clarify and summarize details in the dilemma and to state the main point.

STEP THREE---DISCUSS POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO THE DILEMMA

Once you are confident all students understand the dilemma, ask each to think about possible choices or solutions.

Always phrase questions in terms of what each person thinks the character **should** do, not what students think they or the character **would** do.

- Ask students to think about the dilemma and the choices available to the character(s) to solve the problem.
- Ask each student to choose a course of action. If students are older, ask them to write down their solutions on a paper; if younger, ask them to write on a chalkboard or whiteboard.
- Ask each student to report his/her choice to the class by a show of hands or by voicing their choices.

STEP FOUR---DISCUSS THE DILEMMA IN SMALL GROUPS

The goal of this step is to increase peer interaction and exchange, active listening, and a safe environment in which each student can voice his/her views

This step should take about 10 minutes.

It may not be necessary small classes or appropriate with younger children.

When dividing into small groups, the following tips help to create the most effective groups:

- Have only two to five students in each group depending upon the developmental level of your students. For example, put kindergartners in pairs and older adolescents into larger groups.
- Consider students opinions expressed in Step Three when assigning groups. Groups may be comprised of students with similar or differing opinions. Be sure to have a place for those who are undecided or have unclear choices. They may be grouped together if there is a sufficient number or scattered and assigned to different groups.

Give specific, clear, and manageable instructions to each small group.

- Instructions should be specific. Students should know exactly what they are expected to accomplish during the small group discussions.
- Assign each group its task with clear, well-defined goals. The three most common goals are:
 1. A group consensus on the best choice of action
 2. A group consensus on the best reason for each choice of action
 3. A ranking of choices in order of desirability (“Which is the best reason?” “Second best?” etc.)
- Set a time limit of 5 to 10 minutes. Let the class know when time is about up.
- Circulate among the groups to listen and suggest ways to complete the tasks if needed.

When working with older students (12 and above), consider using one of the following two strategies:

- Assign, or ask the group to assign, one student to each of the following roles before the discussion begins---
 1. A recorder to write down the group’s decisions.
 2. A reporter to report the group’s decisions to the whole class.
 3. A coordinator to coordinate the small group’s activities.
- Use a debate format instead of a discussion format. Place two to six students on each side to debate the action choices they have decided exist for the character in the dilemma. After the debate, allow the full group to discuss what was debated. Students should be encouraged to offer support or rebuttal. This format is optional and recommended only for groups that have adequate time for discussion after the debate is over.

STEP FIVE---CONDUCT A FULL-GROUP DISCUSSION

Reunite all students for a full-group discussion.

This is the **main activity** of the values/moral discussion. The time spent in full-group discussion should be determined by the students’ ages, attention span, and interest in the topic. Full-group discussion usually follows discussion by small groups; however, if the small group process is skipped, the full-group discussion follows presentation of the dilemma.

If the small-group process has been used, reports given by each small group should bridge to the full-group discussion. The reports may be given orally or the major issues may be recorded on a chalkboard or whiteboard. As the leader, your role is to guide the full-group discussion of the dilemma.

STEP SIX---CONCLUDE THE DISCUSSION

Do not simply allow the clock, school bell, etc. to abruptly and arbitrarily end the discussion.

Use the following guidelines to bring the discussion to a definite close....

- Ask students to reflect privately on the dilemma and on the discussion they just completed.

- Ask each student to choose the best moral action for the dilemma's main characters. Assure them it is fine to have changed their thinking. If students wrote their action choices on a paper at the beginning, ask them to write down their action choices on the reverse side of the paper at the end of the discussion.
- Ask students to choose the best reason for their chosen course of action. Again, assure them it is fine to have a different justification at the end of the discussion than they did at the beginning. Ask them to record their justification, even if it has not changed.
- Ask for volunteers to tell how the discussion affected their reasoning about the values/moral issues, or ask each student to privately write down his or her own answers to this question.

+ For students 9 years old or younger, have them write their choices and justifications on the chalkboard or whiteboard so you can help in their composition..

STEP SEVEN---MAKE FOLLOW-UP ASSIGNMENTS

Provide a follow-up assignment.

If appropriate for your class, it is an excellent idea to continue the lessons of the dilemma discussion by assigning follow up tasks.

For younger students....

- Ask them to draw a picture about the dilemma/story.

For older students....

- Suggest they discuss the dilemma with family members.
- Suggest they watch a particular movie or television program or read a book that continues the theme and issues of the dilemma.
- Assign a project in which they must interview others (family, community leaders, neighbors, older or younger people, etc.) about the dilemma and or its values/moral issues.
- Ask students to find examples of the dilemma situation and/or its issues in current events, history, or literature.
- Ask students to write an ending for the dilemma.

Finally, enjoy the values/moral dilemma discussion teaching strategy. It varies your teaching and allows you to better understand and to promote the thinking and reasoning of your students. Remember, the process spelled out in this teaching strategy along with interesting dilemmas encourages students to become interested and invested in thinking through moral issues and using their best thinking to solve them; thus, it naturally promotes their moral development.

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