

Communication Etiquette

Knowing what to say

Honesty is, indeed, a great policy, but it has its limits, especially when a student speaks to college staff or professors, or any authority figure. Sometimes, students with social or language-based difficulties do not understand the need for discretion. For instance, they would be ill advised to approach a professor and say, “I can’t come to your office hours because it’s too early in the morning, and I like to sleep in. Can I call you at home tonight to ask about my paper?” It’s better, instead, if they can honestly say, “I have to be at work [or I have another class] at the time that you hold your office hours. Is there another time that would be convenient for you during which I could contact you with questions about my paper?” While they are in high school, students should be encouraged to interact with teachers, administrators, and other authority figures (e.g., coaches) in order to hone their communication skills, in a somewhat more forgiving environment.

Knowing how to say it

Rehearsal and “teachable moments” should be used while students are in high school so that they can receive concrete feedback on their communication style (e.g., “When you cross your arms, it makes you look angry or unapproachable”). Smith and colleagues (2002) suggest that students learn to use “I” language instead of “you” language when speaking to authority figures (e.g., “I experienced a problem when my professor did not give me my accommodations” rather than “He didn’t do what he was supposed to do!”) They should be provided with examples of clear requests or complaints and practice communicating them with an adult who can provide feedback. They should also be asked to rephrase things that they have said in different words so that it sounds less sarcastic, or to change a complaint into a question (e.g., “Is my professor allowed to tell me that I cannot use a calculator on my exam even though you approved it?”).

Knowing when to say it

Students need to know that all their interactions with university personnel are governed by general etiquette rules and more formal protocols. If DS says that students have to make an appointment to see their coordinator, they should not march into the office demanding an immediate appointment. They need to

www.tooloftheweek.org
Copyright 2011

Council for Exceptional Children • www.cec.sped.org
 All rights reserved

know that, sometimes, they will simply have to leave a message and wait for a response. It's equally important to find the "right moment" when the communication is less formal. The time to raise personal issues (e.g., "I wanted to ask about my grade on the last paper") is during professors' office hours, not during class time. Communication skills include being cognizant of the needs and schedules of the people with whom one needs to communicate, as well as the needs of other students who might have more urgent issues. Does the professor need to rush out after class to start another class or catch a bus? If not, the polite approach is to say, "Professor, I have a question. Do you have a minute?"—and know that they may still have to wait for office hours anyway.

In a stressful situation (e.g., denial of accommodation or a bad grade), it's often better to wait before responding. In fact, with the exception of a situation where a professor interferes with an exam accommodation or there is a safety issue, students should know that they are always better off not expressing their thoughts immediately. Students—especially those with impulsivity problems—should seek some feedback from a friend, parent, or appropriate member of staff on what they want to say and how they plan to do it before they respond. Allowing time to collect themselves and expressing their viewpoint in a calm way can help to prevent other parties from becoming angry or upset, which can in turn keep the conversation civil and productive.

Knowing whom to contact

Students may be accustomed to having had a case manager handle their difficulties with faculty and administration in high school. At college, most DS coordinators will not run this kind of interference. Students need to know whom to approach for help for different kinds of situations (e.g., DS will not help them change dorm rooms because of a roommate problem). They should understand that it is their responsibility to communicate with professors or administrators, and that DS staff is not obligated to do this for them because they are shy or intimidated. Students should also know that it is incumbent upon them to identify the right contact person for each situation (e.g., a dean, the registrar, etc.). In the case of a complaint, an e-mail or phone call to the university president is not usually the appropriate way to handle a problem: There are procedures in place that must be followed, such as the DS grievance process.

www.tooloftheweek.org
Copyright 2011

Council for Exceptional Children • www.cec.sped.org
All rights reserved