



Six Ways You Can Foster Respectful Conversations Within Your Troop

When your girls are upset with a situation at home, within the troop, or in the world, they're going to want to talk about it. And it's not a matter of *if* it happens, but *when*.

No matter your girls' ages, they need a space where they feel comfortable and safe to have those conversations and to process what they're feeling. For many troop leaders, it's an honor—and a major responsibility—for your girls to put their trust in you, and that's why it's so important that you also feel comfortable mediating conflicts or challenging conversations.

“I believe the sharing process starts when you have set a positive rapport from the beginning,” says Trina Floyd of Girl Scouts of Western Ohio. “The girls need to know that you are there for them, which means you need to tell them they can talk to you.”

With some advice from our volunteer experts, here's how you can build up your confidence as you foster respectful conversations with your troop.

1. Create ground rules.

In keeping the conversations girl-led, ask the girls to set the ground rules, such as not repeating what is said in the space without permission, avoiding labels, or listening without laughing or interrupting. And in the process, your girls will see firsthand what it means to be what it really means to be respectful of one another.

“We always would bring up the facets of the Girl Scout Promise and Law that were our 'rules,' such as being a sister to every Girl Scout and what that meant,” says Dylan Newton of Girl Scouts of West Central Florida. “As I tell girls when they don't get along, it's not necessary for you to agree with one another, but it is necessary for you to be kind.”

2. Listen carefully.

Listening carefully, of course, is essential, but it's more than simply allowing the girls to talk and reaffirming what they said. Always ask questions or for a specific example if you're not sure exactly what your girls mean. Don't make assumptions about the girls' understanding of or feelings on a topic—getting clarity is key!

“I find that I need to process the situation in my mind and the proper response before I start speaking,” admits Cheryl Lentsch of Girl Scouts Spirit of Nebraska. “Don't say the

first thing that comes to mind unless it is the most suitable response. Allow the girls to speak and say both sides of the situation. Try not to take a side in front of the other girls. If possible, try to speak with a girl privately if the other girls are not involved in the situation.”

3. Start with the facts.

Read the room with this one! If your girls seem unsure of how to start the conversation, you can introduce the topic and ask each girl to share what she knows about it. If she’s comfortable, the girl who raised the subject can start by sharing what she knows about the situation or issue.

And, of course, if a girl mentions something that makes you worry for her safety, follow up with her family, her school counselor or a medical professional for resources or additional help.

4. Welcome and acknowledge all feelings.

It’s so important for girls to know that their feelings are valid and that they shouldn’t apologize for or gloss over what they’re feeling. And you’ll play a role in supporting them as they learn to express their emotions in a healthy, constructive way. Encourage your girls to listen to one another with empathy, even if they feel differently about a situation.

“We had an issue, once, where one girl in our Cadette troop had a meltdown in a meeting,” says Dylan. “All of the girls could relate to her feelings and we went around the room and discussed how we’ve all felt so angry and frustrated that we wanted to lash out. When she returned the next week, nothing was said about her outburst . . . but the girls all supported her upon her return. Needless to say, I was a proud leader!”

It’s often validating for girls to hear their feelings reflected back to them. Listening and following up with “You seem frustrated” or “I can tell you’re really sad” can go a long way.

5. Find balance in the conversation.

Pay attention to how much time each girl gets to speak and step in where needed. “Whenever girls begin to interrupt each other, I give a reminder that we need to wait until our turn and that we need to keep our part of the conversation to about three minutes,” says Trina.

But there’s more to a balanced conversation than ensuring everyone gets their say. Encourage your girls to think positively and be future-forward: What resolutions do they

see? How can they contribute to solving the problem? How have others resolved similar situations? Knowing that potential solutions are out there will help your girls feel empowered to take steps to settle the issue.

6. Embrace her urge to take action.

Do your girls see a way to resolve the conflict or make an impact on an issue that upsets them? In true Girl Scout fashion, ask how they might explore solutions or help others through a Take Action project that addresses the issue. A Take Action project will be a confidence booster for your girls—they'll feel they have more control over what might've been viewed as an overwhelming situation, and they can be a real part of a solution!

Remember, troop leader: It's OK to admit that you don't have all the answers or that you're frustrated too. Your girls will respect your honesty and, in some instances, being the first to open up can encourage your girls to share their feelings too.

Ultimately, learning how to navigate difficult conversations will help your girls confidently take on future challenges. "Even though it might take time away from what you 'planned,' it's what happens on the journey of learning!" says Dylan.