

## When Talk Gets Tough

It can be helpful to practice difficult conversations. Read the following scenario. Then imagine the conversation you would have with Travis. Write what you would say in the blue text boxes on the left. Write what you think he would say in the green boxes on the right. Try it once with a cooperative response from Travis. Then try writing your responses as if Travis had become upset, angry, or defensive.

### *Trouble with Travis*

Travis teaches toddlers in your program. He seems to always have a cold. You often hear him laugh and say, "You know these kids. You just can't avoid 2-year-olds' germs." After spending some time in his classroom, you are starting to think that he *could* avoid more 2-year-olds' germs. In fact, you're worried that the 2-year-olds are having trouble avoiding his germs. You were startled to see him pull a dirty handkerchief out of his pocket, blow his nose, and continue playing with the children. He washed his hands at obvious times (like after diapering, before serving snack, after coming indoors), but he seemed completely unaware that he was coughing, sneezing, and blowing his nose without washing his hands. He reminded children to wash their hands when they sneezed, but he did not seem to follow the directions himself.

Step 1: Write your part of the conversation. Use Travis' first response as an example to guide your conversation.

You say: *Travis, I know you are so conscientious about washing your hands throughout the day, but I noticed you using a handkerchief and am concerned that it cancels all of that out. Reusing a cloth here at work keeps reintroducing the germs every time you touch it.*

You say: *The best thing is to do exactly what I've seen you ask the children to do: wash your hands anytime you blow your nose into a tissue, sneeze, or cough into your hand. It's also a good idea to sneeze and cough into your shoulder.*

Travis says: *I had never thought about it that way. I figured I was helping the environment by not throwing away all those tissues! I'd do anything not to have a cold all the time. What should I do differently?*

Travis says: *Ok, I'll leave my handkerchief at home.*

Step 2: Now imagine the conversation took a negative turn. What would you say or do differently? What could you do to keep the conversation from escalating?

You say: *Travis, I know you are so conscientious about washing your hands throughout the day, but I noticed you using a handkerchief and am concerned that it cancels all of that out. Reusing a cloth here at work keeps reintroducing the germs every time you touch it.*

Travis says: I wash my hands all the time. You must not have been paying attention.  
OR  
I've got a kid who bites three times a day, and you're worried about my hand washing? What does that have to do with anything?!?!

You say: *I know you've got a lot on your plate. It's my job to help you juggle it all. First let's talk about the handkerchief and then tell me about the biting.*

Travis says: *Fine. What's the problem with the handkerchief?*

Think about how you started each conversation. What phrases, styles, or conversation techniques make it less likely for Travis to get angry or defensive?

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Now imagine you are visiting the school-age program. You stop into the staff restroom on your way into the building. Children have not arrived yet, so several of the female staff members are in the restroom at the same time. While you are washing your hands, you notice Tish walk out of a stall, check her hair in the mirror, and walks towards the door. She did not wash her hands.

You say: *Tish, I think you forgot to wash your hands.*

Tish says: Oh my gosh. I'm so embarrassed. I swear I wash my hands all the time! I just stepped into the stall to fix the zipper on my pants. I'm so sorry. I'll wash them.

You say: *Thanks, Tish. It's always a good idea to wash anytime you're in the restroom. If a parent or manager were in the restroom, we wouldn't want them to get the wrong idea about our standards.*

Now imagine Tish did not respond as positively. How does that change the interaction?

You say: *Tish, I think you forgot to wash your hands.*

You say: *I know this is an uncomfortable situation, but proper handwashing is part of our job. It's a requirement and an expectation.*

Tish says: What? You're watching me in the restroom now? I'm not even on the clock yet.