

Gen X has left the chat

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Setting: A group discussion between parents and children following an incident at school, led by teacher Jasper, based on the principles of Non-Violent Communication.

The box buzzes.

FRAUKE Oh, that might be me. Sorry, I didn't turn it off.

JULIA Too late.

FRAUKE Oh well. That was it then, I think. I don't get messages all that often.

NICO Once the box is shut it stays shut.

DRAGO There are always more messages.

ROBERT Wouldn't you do better to ask for the phones to be switched off? Just to airline mode? Before they go into the box?

CHARLIE Dad...

EDWIN Well, very jolly all this. Strikes me it might be a good idea to concentrate on what we're here for now?

JASPER Yes, certainly. And I'll lead the conversation through the four phases of nonviolent communication. But first, very briefly: what is nonviolent communication? What are we trying to achieve with nonviolent communication? The key word is empathy. We want to communicate in such a way that it binds us together. First there's 'self-empathy', and we'll also listen empathetically to each other, and thirdly we'll express ourselves with empathy.

During the exchange of words between their parents that follows, the young people watch with increasing surprise and embarrassment.

EDWIN I think they ought to apologize in front of the class.

GIOVANNA But first we have to find out who needs to apologize to whom!

Edwin looks at his son, astonished at such injustice. Jesse reacts rather defensively.

ROBERT It's already getting a bit violent, in my opinion.

GIOVANNA Well, I'm sure you'll find a way to distract us.

Nico gets to their feet and starts pacing up and down. The parents glance at them, but nobody knows how to react.

NAOMI Hey, come on. Let Mr Meerwijck say what he has to say.

JASPER Thanks. And I'm Jasper, by the way. With NVC there are four phases to a conversation.

GIOVANNA Sorry to interrupt one more time, but what was NVC again?

EVERYBODY Nonviolent communication!

GIOVANNA Oh yes, of course.

JASPER Good. That's sunk in nicely.

ROBERT It's nothing new, of course, just to be clear. Marshall Rosenberg published books about it back in the sixties. Bestsellers. The term originates with him.

JASPER That's right, Robert! And the four phases of nonviolent communication are probably familiar to you as well... One: observation of the facts. Facts that we'll formulate non-judgementally. Two: we'll state our feelings, making a distinction between the facts and our interpretation of the facts. Feelings arise out of our interpretation of the facts.

FRAUKE *enthusiastically* And the interpretation can also arise out of the feeling!

Brief confused silence

JULIA Don't go making it more complicated than it already is.

JASPER *to Frauke* We'll bear that in mind. *to all* Next – the third phase – we'll put our needs into words (...) Nico, would you like to go and sit in the tent?

NICO No, I'm okay.

Nico stops pacing and goes back to sit on their chair.

JASPER And the need that lies behind a feeling can of course differ from person to person.

ROBERT The number of needs can differ greatly from person to person as well.

EDWIN As can the nature of those needs. A huge difference from person to person. But sometimes you get the consequences of someone else's needs flung in your face.

Robert and Edwin exchange hostile looks. Both Charlie and Jesse look uneasily at their fathers, then at each other's father, then briefly at each other. Jasper is a little more guarded now, but he continues in a positive tone.

JASPER Okay, interesting reflections. (...) But then comes the fourth phase of nonviolent communication. It takes us to where we actually want to go, where we want to end up this evening. We want to express a request.

EDWIN I can express a request right here and now. My son and I want apologies for throwing his property out of the window and for the earlier bullying by this group.

GIOVANNA Let's just start with the facts, okay?

JASPER In nonviolent communication, what we mean by a request is a positively formulated proposal. If you can't answer 'no' to a request, then it's not a request but a...

He looks expectantly around the group.

JESSE Demand.

Edwin looks at his son, betrayed. Jesse shrugs and makes a small, irritated gesture meaning 'sorry'.

JASPER Very good, Jesse. A request you can't refuse is a demand. Agree, or decline to agree and carry on negotiating – those are our options.

ROBERT And we've got one hour.

Everybody is rather nervous. Jesse looks at his watch.

JESSE A little under fifty minutes left.

While Jasper speaks, Jesse, Charlie, Nico, Drago and Julia go to the front of the stage and adopt the positions Jasper describes.

JASPER So, let's launch into phase one straight away. The facts. What happened. I should probably say first of all that Jesse's phone was thrown through the window in between lessons. I came into the classroom at the point when a number of students were looking out of the window into the playground. Jesse was one of them. Charlie, Nico and Drago were at three different places in the classroom. Julia was the only one anywhere near the window. And Jesse was expressing his anger.

NICO Fucking cunts!!!

Charlie and Julia snigger. All the children, even Jesse, laugh in spite of themselves.

DRAGO Your humour is so totally random!

NICO I'm just saying what Jesse said. That's not random. That's informative.

More laughter

GIOVANNA It doesn't strike me as all that random, no. And I don't find it funny, either, language like that.

JASPER I asked what had happened, and Jesse told me that Charlie took his phone out of his hands.

JESSE Well, 'took'. 'Snatched' more like.

CHARLIE *cynically* Snatched, bro! Eyeroll!

JASPER That Charlie then tossed the phone to Drago and he in turn to Nico, who tossed it to Julia and Julia then threw it out through the open window.

FRAUKE How odd that the window was open.

Everybody looks at her with incomprehension.

NICO Now this really is random humour! Hahaha.

FRAUKE Yes, no, Julia shouldn't have done that, but it's strange that the window was open. It's winter.

JASPER Since Covid we've had a fresh air policy at our school. But back to the facts, to my own observations. I then allowed Jesse to go outside and fetch his phone, and I invited all the others to put their phones in the box.

The box buzzes. Frauke laughs.

FRAUKE As if it can hear! (...) The box.

JULIA Mum, just be quiet.

JASPER While Jesse was outside retrieving his phone, these four students, supported by three others, expressed their displeasure about Jesse filming them, and said he often did that.

EDWIN These don't seem like facts to me.

NAOMI They expressed their displeasure, he said. I'd say that seems factual enough.

EDWIN My son earns a fair bit as an influencer. It's jealousy of his living standard, not 'displeasure' about being filmed. Let's talk about the facts behind the facts too.

JASPER I'm afraid we've ended up at judgements and interpretations again. We'll return to that. (...) When Jesse came back into the classroom, the two of us together – he and I – determined that his phone was still working but that there was a slight scratch on the screen. Is what I'm saying correct, Jesse?

JESSE Yes. No. Slight scratch but still a scratch.

GIOVANNA So the phone still works?

NAOMI Someone asked that in the WhatsApp group, asked what the damage was, but we didn't go into it.

EDWIN Because it's not relevant. This is about bullying and the fact that, out of jealousy, somebody's property was thrown. And that damage occurred. That's vandalism.

ROBERT Which floor is your classroom on?

JULIA The ground floor. And there's grass outside the window.

DRAGO And the scratch was already there.

JESSE What would you know about that?

Robert snorts with tormented laughter. The parents produce various noises and sighs. Jasper tries to interrupt the conversation that follows, but fails.

GIOVANNA Lots of ado about nothing, in other words.

ROBERT Much. Much ado about nothing.

Giovanna Whatever.

NAOMI Still... They shouldn't go throwing his things around, of course.

FRAUKE But it means there's nothing to reimburse, fortunately.

EDWIN That's not what matters! This isn't about material things!

GIOVANNA That's what it's always about with influencers, I thought?

JESSE Well, really!

EDWIN Unbelievable. So you know all about it, I suppose. Ever looked at my son's YouTube channel?

NAOMI We did a bit of homework last night, yes.

GIOVANNA There's the YouTube channel, then there are stories on Instagram and videos on TikTok. Labour-intensive, for sure, all that advertising.

EDWIN I can already see where the jealous tendencies come from.

GIOVANNA Oh no, nobody should be jealous of that. The boy's had his YouTube channel since he was four, when he filmed himself unwrapping fast food or games consoles.

EDWIN *in a huff* So what? What business is it of yours? What are you actually insinuating?

JASPER Try not to be judgemental of each other but...

FRAUKE Unboxing that's called.

Everyone looks at Frauke, Julia fiercely ('don't say a word').

NAOMI Unboxing?

FRAUKE Yes, that's what it's called. You unpack gifts from your sponsors in front of the camera. I did it for a while with Julia, when she was six. We had lots of followers and we got several serious contracts. At first she thought it was fun.

JULIA *tears in her eyes* Why did you have to say that? I asked you not to tell anyone about it.

For the others this is clearly new information

FRAUKE Sorry, poppet. *to the others* She really wanted it, at first, a family channel. I thought well, then I should go along with it. I'm a single mother and it does indeed bring in a bit of income, so then I'd have more to offer her. Her father skedaddled when Jules was two and my parents are dead and they didn't have any money either. So, well... And she wanted it. But it's really not nice at all for a child after a while, it brings a lot of stress and costs you a huge amount of time.

JESSE It's not for everyone.

FRAUKE No. It certainly wasn't for Julia. She started wetting the bed again. So after a year we stopped. Went into therapy together, too.

JULIA Now just shut up! Fucking bitch.

A heavy silence falls. Parents and children are shocked. Julia starts to cry. Tears come to Frauke's eyes too. Nico stands up and disappears into the tent, then zips up the entrance.

FRAUKE Sorry, I thought... I thought it was relevant information.

GIOVANNA She's surely not allowed to call you that?!

JULIA Sorry!

JASPER Julia, that's not the kind of language we use with one another here.

JULIA I said sorry, didn't I?

FRAUKE No, it's all right. I went on far too long about it. Sometimes I don't take any account of her privacy, I keep realizing that too late, even though I do try to watch out. Really, Jules, sorry. Poppet?

JULIA Don't call me that.

JASPER Okay. I think you can pick this up again at home. Let's not stray too far off track. *searches for words* I think we need to ground ourselves for a moment. I need to ground myself for a moment. I'm finding this really quite overwhelming. A short breathing exercise to calm ourselves down. Can I invite everyone to stand up. Nico, will you meditate with us?

NICO *from the tent* Aight

Robert bursts out laughing briefly. Restrains himself.

DRAGO Jasper... You okay?

JASPER I certainly am. Thank you. It's very kind of you to ask and I appreciate it enormously, but you're not responsible for how I feel. You can let that go.

EDWIN This is a long way from what I envisaged by an apology.

The box keeps buzzing. Then there's a ringtone.

NAOMI Shit, that's for me.

Jasper waits for it to stop. Then the ringtone starts up again. Naomi looks worried.

NAOMI Maybe I could just answer it and join you again after the meditation?

DRAGO No, you can't do that.

GIOVANNA No.
