

Nonviolent communication and democratic education

A theoretical introduction

What is “nonviolent communication”?

NVC stands for “Nonviolent Communication”. In Germany, nonviolent communication is also known as “mindful communication”, “respectful communication”, “heart communication” or – especially for children – as “giraffe language”. The nonviolent communication method was developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg and is rooted in the tradition of client-centred psychotherapy, which was created by Rosenberg’s teacher Carl Rogers. It is intended to help people to express themselves honestly and clearly as well as to listen to others with empathy. The aim is to encourage people to contribute to each other’s wellbeing. It is not a communication pattern but more so an attitude which mainly consists of four steps:

1. **Observation:** This first step includes describing a specific situation or action in as much detail as possible without evaluating it. Some questions that may help in this context: What did you see with your own eyes? What did you hear?
2. **Feelings:** This observation has triggered a feeling, which oftentimes points to a need that has not been met. Some helpful questions include: Look inward. Which feeling can you identify? Is it X (for example, sadness, anger,...).
3. **Needs:** Through identifying the feeling, it is possible to discover the need tied to this feeling. You can ask: Do you recognise which need is behind this feeling? Do you long for X (for example, security, understanding, fun,...)?
4. **Requests:** Once you have recognised the need behind this feeling, a request or a wish can develop. This may involve a concrete action (“Please put away your socks.”) or a state (“Could you try saying it with more respect?”). Requests and wishes should be phrased in an affirming way, which means expressing what you need instead of saying what you do not need.

What does nonviolent communication have to do with democratic education?

Taking children seriously in the sense of nonviolent communication and communicating with them in this way can make an important contribution to democratic education. Children can repeatedly experience that they are being listened to – and can practice listening to others at the same time. They experience that they can solve their problems and that they can feel contentment and inner peace – even if this is not immediately the case. Practicing these four steps and the attitude of nonviolent communication therefore always includes educating children and adolescents to act in a peaceful manner: Children are enabled to get to know this attitude and to act peacefully in their life without acting from a self-centred perspective. They learn that they do not have to “fight against something”, but instead to peacefully stand up for their own interests and needs. At the same time, they learn to listen to the other’s interests and needs, to accept them and to include them into their ideas for a solution.

Of course, it is not possible to fulfil the needs of all people in every moment, however, all needs should be recognised and respected. Unmet needs can oftentimes cause suffering. Therefore, it should be a mission of politics and society to minimise this suffering. What extent of “suffering” can we tolerate in our society? Whose “suffering” is necessary to encourage a change in society? What

are the consequences for which groups? To this end, we need people who are able to offer their ideas in democratic processes and who are used to acting according to the principles of nonviolent communication.

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