

Teaching Them to Read the Room — Activity Plan

Plan one age-matched activity that grows perspective-taking — the skill of stating the other side fairly before you answer it — and know what to do when your kid resists.

The skill you're growing

Perspective-taking is the ability to state someone else's position well enough that they'd recognize it as fair, before you respond to it. It doesn't require agreement, and it doesn't soften conviction — it makes disagreement land on the real argument instead of a strawman, and it's the muscle that keeps kids from turning disagreement into contempt.

Early (~5–9) — your plan

The moment

Pick something small and real from your child's actual day — a sibling, a friend, or a book/show character who felt differently than your child did about the same thing.

The question

"Why might they feel that way? What might it look like from where they're standing?" Follow a wrong or thin guess with a nudge, not a correction.

What a good answer sounds like

A feeling or a want, not a verdict. "Maybe she was scared" is good; "because he's mean" is a conclusion, not perspective — redirect gently.

Middle (~10–13) — your plan

The disagreement

Pick a real, low-stakes disagreement your child has had or heard about — a friend, a sibling, or something from a book or news story you've discussed.

The exercise

"Say it so they'd agree." Have your child state the other person's view in their voice, 3–4 sentences, convincingly enough that the person would say "yes, that's what I think."

The test

"If they heard you say that, would they say you got it right?" If no, that's the assignment — try again. Then ask your child's own honest response now that they've stated it fairly.

Older (~14–18) — your plan

The person

One specific person, real or a composite, who holds the opposing view in good faith — smart and sincere, not a strawman.

The letter

A page-long letter making their case to that person — but the first paragraph must state the other person's position so fairly they'd say "yes, exactly" before any argument begins.

The stretch (optional)

Show the letter to someone who actually holds something close to the opposing view and ask directly: "Did I get your side right?"

Facilitation reminders

Model it yourself first — say "I think X is wrong, but here's the best version of their reason" out loud, in front of your kids, on a real disagreement

Watch for a strawman disguised as a steel-man — the tell is a version that's suspiciously easy to knock down or delivered with a smirk

Grade the reasoning, not the conclusion — if honest steel-manning changes their mind, that's the skill working, not a loss

Expect resistance and treat it as a conversation, not a rule to enforce — resistance looks different at 5, 13, and 16

Keep all of it off the platform — letters, drafts, and answers stay on paper or in a private file, not shared anywhere public