Holiday Table Dialogue Guide: You've Planned the Menu. Have You Prepared for the Conversation?

Holidaygatherings bringopportunities for connection, but sometimesdifficult conversations arise. INVLA Days of Dialogue invites you to explore this practical guide featuring seven suggested dialogue agreements, thoughtful ways to navigate differences, and a creative Holiday Conversation Bowl activity.

Because meaningful connection doesn't require agreement—only a willingness to make room for one another.

Explore the Guide. Share It. Keep the Dialogue Going.

HOLIDAY TABLE DIALOGUE GUIDE

We don't have to agree on everything to make room for one another.

The menu is planned. The invitations are out. The table is nearly ready. But have you thought about the conversations your guests may bring?

Holiday gatherings can be joyful and complicated at the same time. Political differences, generational perspectives, familiar family roles, unsolicited advice, and unresolved tensions may surface alongside gratitude and celebration. The goal is not to eliminate disagreement—or to insist that everyone reconcile before dessert. It is to create space for dignity, understanding, and meaningful connection.

Before guests arrive: set a welcoming tone

A little preparation can make a difference. Consider whether any topics or family dynamics may need special care. If appropriate, ask guests what would help them feel comfortable, and think thoughtfully about seating, accessibility, and opportunities for quieter conversation. Invite shared responsibility for the atmosphere without turning the gathering into a formal meeting.

You might begin with: "We may see some things differently, and that's okay. Let's make sure everyone has room to speak, listen, or simply enjoy being together."

Seven agreements for the holiday table—andbeyond

1.Speakfromyour own experience. Use "I" statements rather than assuming you know what someone else thinks or feels.

2. Listen to understand. Give people a chance to finish before preparing your response.

3. Choose curiosity overassumptions. Ask a genuine question before reacting to something that surprises you.

4. Make room for every voice. Invite participation without putting anyone on the spot; passing or remaining silent is always acceptable.

5.Disagreewithoutpersonal attacks. Challenge ideas respectfully, without insults, ridicule, or dismissive language.

6.Noticewhenitistimeto pause. If emotions rise, take a break, redirect gently, or revisit the topic in a more appropriate setting.

7. Honor boundaries and relationships. No one is required to agree, disclose personal experiences, forgive, or reconcile in order to belong.

These are invitations to practice—not rules to police one another. They can help create an environment where guests retain choice and dignity.

When a conversation gets difficult

Even with good intentions, an exchange may become personal or heated. Hosts and guests can redirect with warmth and clarity. Consider language such as:

- "I hear that this matters to you. Could we slow down and make sure we understand one another?"
- "I'd like to share my experience without debating whose experience is more valid."
- "This feels important, but I don't think we can do it justice at the dinner table. Could we return to it another time?"
- "I'm going to take a pause. I want us to be able to continue with respect."

Some issues deserve a separate conversation, advance preparation, or a skilled facilitator. Changing the setting is not the same as silencing a concern. It can be a way of taking the concern seriously.

Create connection: The Holiday Conversation Bowl!

Looking for a simple way to bring a little more laughter, discovery, andmeaningful connection to your holiday gathering? Try something different - a **Holiday ConversationBowl!**

Consider sending a brief email or message to your expected guests inadvance,inviting them to think about questions or conversation topics they'd enjoy exploring together.Thissimple invitation helps guests feel included in planning the gathering and lets them know their presenceandperspectives are valued.

As guests arrive, have a clear glass or transparent bowl and slips ofpaperavailable in a central location—perhaps an entry table, family room, or kitchen counter—where theycancontribute their questions. Throughout the gathering, invite guests to draw a question from thebowlandshare their responses. **Participation is always voluntary, and anyone may choose to pass.**

Encourage questions that invite laughter, discovery, and reflection, suchas:

- What is a favorite family or community tradition, and why doesitmatter to you?
- Who taught you something valuable this year?
- What is a memory that still makes you laugh?
- What is something you wish another generation understood about your experience?
- What is one act of kindness you noticed recently?

Consider beginning with lighter questions before moving into more reflective topics, allowing conversations to unfold naturally.

The purpose isn't to put anyone on the spot or create another obligation during the holidays. It's to offer opportunities to laugh, listen, learn, and perhaps discover something new about people we think we already know.

Connection does not require consensus

A successful holiday is not measured by how many disagreements are resolved. Sometimes progress looks like someone feeling heard, a boundary being respected, a new perspective being considered, or a relationship remaining open to future conversation.

Days of Dialogue, a signature program of the Institute for Nonviolence Los Angeles (INVLA), encourages individuals, families, workplaces, schools, book clubs, and community groups to practice listening and constructive engagement wherever they gather. Organizations interested in a more structured dialogue may contact INVLA to explore facilitation support, subject to availability and resources.

This Thanksgiving—and throughout the year—make room for the conversation, not just the meal.

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