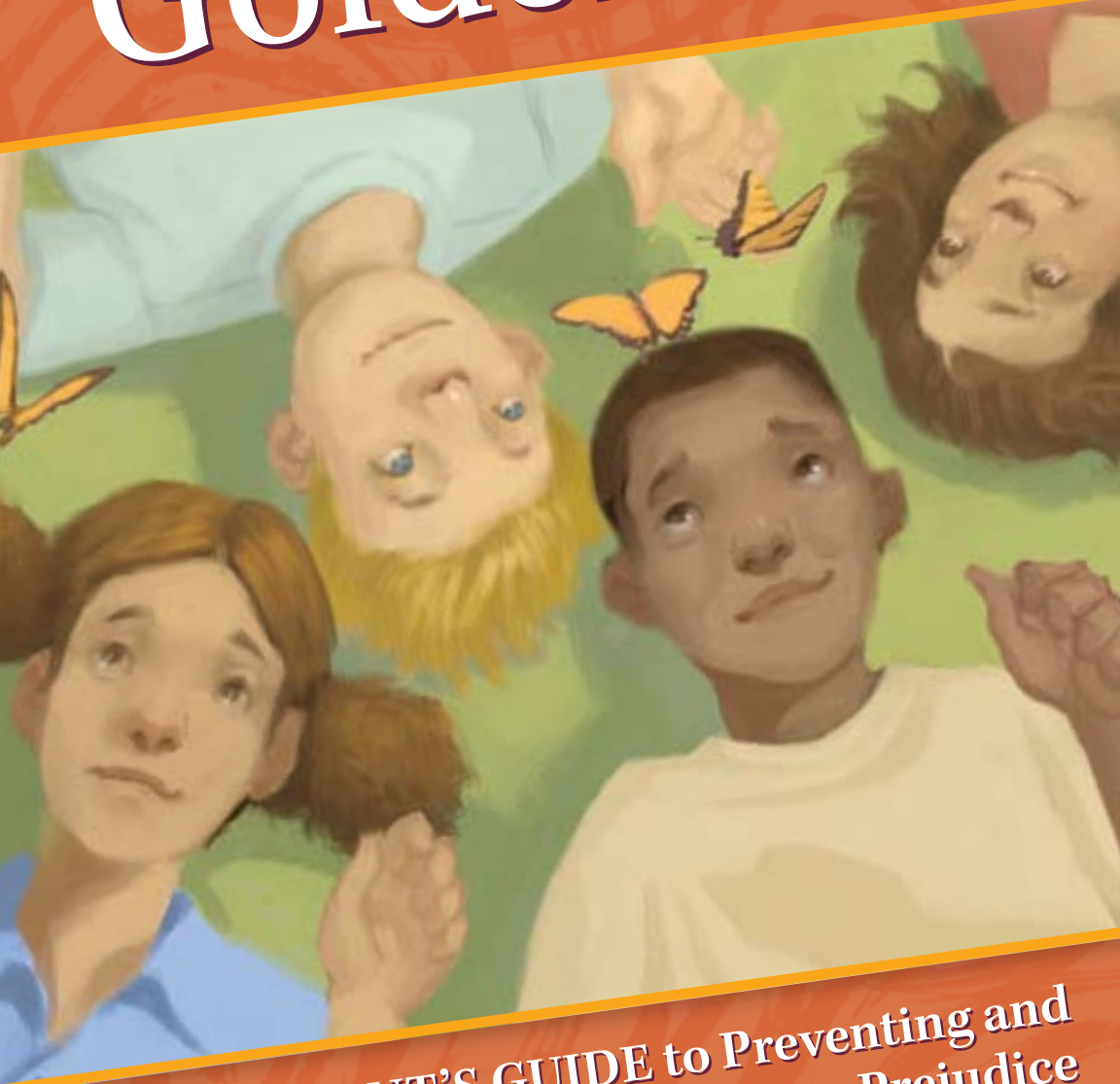


A TEACHING TOLERANCE PUBLICATION

Beyond the Golden Rule



A PARENT'S GUIDE to Preventing and
Responding to Prejudice



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**A Parent's Guide to Preventing and
Responding to Prejudice**

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Talking to Kids About Tolerance

The first conversation my mother ever initiated with me about tolerance happened the night before I started first grade.

I'd just finished my bath and slipped into my Muppets pajamas, which matched the Muppets lunchbox I'd painstakingly chosen for the new school year.

I dragged out what we called the hairbasket, a large wicker container of combs, brushes, detanglers, ribbons and barrettes. Then I sat between my mother's knees while she parted and braided my hair.

On and on I chatted about the colorful new ensemble I planned to wear, how I would surely have the prettiest outfit and hair and, of course, the best shoes of all the girls in my class.

My mother pulled extra hard on the section of hair she was braiding, one of her ways of expressing displeasure with something I'd said or done.

I winced, and she told me something I've never forgotten: "You're not any better than anyone at that school, and don't you ever behave like you are. And no one at that school is any better than you, and don't you ever let them make you believe they are."

I didn't know it then, but that statement was my mother's attempt to introduce the concept of tolerance to me, long before it was the buzzword it has become today. My mother was teaching me to resist the notion of supremacy — both my own and other people's.

She went on to offer her version of the Golden Rule: "I want you to always treat others like you'd want them to treat you — even if you were barefoot and dressed in rags."

Those words echoed throughout my childhood, doled out as a one-size-fits-all solution to whatever social problems I faced at school.

Parents As Teachers

I have a child of my own now, and my mother's words come back to me. And I know this: Teaching tolerance must begin with the Golden Rule, but it certainly does not end there. Too often, simply advising a child to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is insufficient.

There are times when we as parents must explain things that are painful and unfair — racism, sexism, stereotypes, hate. Times when we must comfort our children, times I have had to help my 10-year-old son learn that what some would do unto him isn't always kind or fair.

Like the day we stopped at a local carnival and I was forced to explain to him why he could not have the small photo he had won while shooting darts — a caricature of a bulldog against an image of the Confederate flag.

Or the Christmas he wanted an Easy Bake Oven and couldn't understand why family



members and friends balked at the notion.

Or why his elementary school's "Indian" mascot — a feather-toting, stereotypical warrior — was offensive and unacceptable.

Such moments have provided learning opportunities for my son and for me. Here's what I've learned:

Speak openly. When we are honest with children about our country's history of bigotry, sexism and stereotypes, we help prepare them to challenge these issues when they arise. A child who knows the racial history of the Confederate flag, for example, is less likely to brandish that symbol out of ignorance.

Model equity. As parents, we are our kids' first teachers. When it comes to teaching tolerance, actions speak louder than words. When you say that boys and girls are equal but refuse to buy your son an Easy Bake Oven because it's a "girls' toy," what message do you send?

Do something. Take a stand when you witness injustice. Challenge racism, bigotry and stereotypes, and encourage your child to take action, too. Silence and inaction in the face of bigotry condone it. With regard to offensive mascots, for example, hold a petition drive, write an editorial in the school paper, organize a boycott of the school supply store — do *something* to make a difference.

These conversations are rarely easy, and sometimes we don't have answers. What we do have is time, patience and the desire to help our children grow into adults who value and honor diversity. So that, someday, they might remember what we said the night before they started first grade — and be better people for it.

Dana Williams

Dana Williams
Teaching Tolerance





About This Book

Whether you are the parent of a 3-year-old who is curious about why a friend's skin is brown, the parent of a 9-year-old who has been called a slur because of his religion, or the parent of a 15-year-old who snubs those outside of her social clique at school, this book is designed to help you teach your children to honor the differences in themselves and in others — and to reject prejudice and intolerance.

Three age-specific sections feature everyday parents sharing personal stories about the challenges and rewards of raising children in today's diverse world. Psychologists, educators and parenting experts offer practical, age-appropriate advice to help you integrate lessons of respect and tolerance in day-to-day activities. And a final section offers guidance for reflecting upon your own biases, and how those biases affect your parenting.

We welcome your thoughts on these issues. Email us at parents@tolerance.org, or write to us at Beyond the Golden Rule, c/o Teaching Tolerance, 400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104.

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The Preschool Years



{Ages 2-5}



A Whole New World

Your tumbling toddler has finally shifted her focus from “I” and “I want” and is beginning to take notice of the vast world around her. Along with a desire for independence and exploration, this new awareness brings a blossoming curiosity about identity, her own and those around her. It may seem that nearly every sentence she utters now begins with “why” or “how.” Sometimes the questions are about how things work or why things happen. More often, though, the questions are about other people — playmates, neighbors, strangers and friends.

“Why is my hair in braids and not long and bouncy like Megan’s?”

“Why is that man in a wheelchair?”

“How did Derrick get two mommies?”

As early as age 2, according to research, children begin to take note of differences in other people. The preschool years mark your child’s first introduction to the characteristics that have long grouped and divided humans: race, ethnicity, gender and physical ability. From the curl in her hair, to the color of her eyes and skin, to the games she prefers during playtime, your child is discovering the similarities and differences she shares with others in her world.

During the preschool years, you have perhaps the greatest impact on your child’s perceptions and attitudes about difference than at any other time in her childhood. The manner in which you treat and discuss others based on similarity and difference —



and the manner in which you respond to your child’s natural curiosity about these matters — provides the blueprint for her reactions to them. Biases that you and other adults convey, both positive and negative, tell her who is safe and who is dangerous, who is strong and who is weak, who is beautiful and who is ugly. These messages have the power to turn her “how” and “why” questions into judgment statements:

“The teacher always tells Megan how pretty her long, bouncy hair is; my braids aren’t pretty.”

“Strong people can walk and run fast; the man in the wheelchair isn’t strong.”

“Some people frown when they see Derrick’s two mommies; having two mommies is bad.”

Left unchecked, such judgments can become precursors to poor self-esteem and social interactions based on prejudice or bias. Fortunately, there are ways to discourage this. It is vital that we become aware of the many ways our children learn and internalize prejudice, and the many ways we can counteract such influences.

Too often, we label children’s questions and observations about differences as impolite. Rather than seizing the teachable moment, we ignore or discourage such remarks because they make us uneasy.

The 5-year-old, for example, who surprises you with a question: “Is that man who wears a turban a terrorist?” Or the 9-year-old who wants to know if the man wearing baggy pants and a backwards cap belongs to a gang.

Seizing these moments as learning opportunities, rather than embarrassing moments to be hushed or ignored, can help your child get past stereotypes and prejudicial images and into a deeper understanding of the world around her.

Experts say honest and age-appropriate dialogue about these issues is the best approach. These real-life stories from everyday parents offer examples of such discussions.

‘SHE JUST KNOWS SHE’S DIFFERENT’

Alissa Hill, a 38-year old sexual assault case manager in San Antonio, Texas, is the mother of two daughters. The Hills, who identify as African American, live in a largely Latino and white area of San Antonio. In fact, one of the daughters, 5-year-old Alexa, is the only African American child in her preschool class. That, Alissa says, has led to many thought-provoking conversations.

“Soon after she started going to her preschool, she would come home every day and say things like, ‘Mom, why am I darker than the other kids?’” Alissa says. “This was new to

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*Anne Ira of Kansas City, Mo.,
a white adoptive mother of a biracial
2 ½-year-old son:*

“There was a teenage boy sitting down on a park bench. He saw me with Sam, and he glared at me as if there was something wrong. It reminded me that there will be times when Sam will be made to feel uncomfortable because he is biracial.”

me, because in Illinois, where we lived before, Alexa was able to identify with people who looked like her. I think this was the first time she had to experience being the only one.”

Alissa says she was careful to answer Alexa’s questions in a positive way, highlighting the good things about being different.

“I told her, ‘God makes all types of different people, and all of us are very special. There will be many times when you’ll be different from other people around you — you might be the only girl playing with the boys or you might be the only kid around who likes to eat a certain food,’” Alissa says. “I let her know there’s nothing wrong with being different, and it doesn’t make you any better than or less than the next person.”

Alissa says she doesn’t believe Alexa has ever been made to feel isolated as the only African American girl in her class. “She just knows she’s different,” she says. Alissa, the daughter of a Korean mother and African American father, recalls experiencing similar feelings during her own childhood.

“It was hard for me growing up as part of two different minority races,” she said. “Sometimes, even when I was as young as Alexa ... I felt embarrassed about my mother, because she didn’t look like or speak like anyone else at my school. I didn’t want people to see she was my mother because I thought they would laugh at me.”

That experience, Alissa says, has influenced the way she talks to her children about diversity.

“I never want my children to be ashamed of what they look like or where they come from,” she explains. So when her daughters ask questions — “Why am I darker?” or “Why do I look different?” — Alissa provides both an answer *and* an affirmation. “I explain why being darker and different is beautiful and something they should be proud of.”

...

*Dawn Wallace of Killen, Texas, an African American mother of two children,
whose father is Asian Pacific Islander:*

“My daughter took gymnastics, and, when she saw some boys in the gymnastics class, she stared and told me she didn’t know boys could do gymnastics because it was for girls. I’ve always told her that girls can do everything. I guess I needed to let her know that boys and girls can do everything.”

EXPERT Q&A

Derald Wing Sue, professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University; and Melanie Killen, professor of human development at the University of Maryland, answer questions about parenting, preschoolers and prejudice.

What behaviors can parents expect to see with regard to preschoolers and their awareness of difference?

Sue: We know children begin to notice racial and ethnic differences in particular between the ages of 3 and 5. This brings about a naive curiosity that isn’t yet linked to any positive or negative qualities about different groups of people. What happens after that is that positive and negative qualities do come into the picture, conveyed to children through their parents, significant others and the mass media.

Killen: Generally, kids become aware of gender very early. They are starting to notice what they are and [what] other people are and whether they should be treated differently. Initially, this is based mostly on physical appearance, as they are learning what marks you for being a boy or girl. They might ask, “Is she a girl? She has short hair.” Or, “Is he a boy? He’s playing with a doll.”

Then, later, around 4, race begins to come up, when kids become curious about things like skin color. A lot of times, this is more of an issue for white majority kids who might not be coming into contact with people of color that much where they are, so for them, it’s more unusual. It’s very common for them to ask parents questions in public like, “Why is her skin brown?” It’s not quite the same for minority kids — it’s not the same



shock because they see people from the majority population all the time. Mostly, they aren't remarking or asking questions about it in public as much, but they do start to pick up on preferential treatment based on race and ethnicity around this time.

What are some common mistakes or missteps that parents make when teaching preschoolers about difference or responding to preschoolers' questions about difference?

Sue: Many parents talk to their children about embracing difference, but in subtle, covert ways, they communicate something very different. For example, when approaching a group of black youngsters, a mother may unconsciously pull the child nearer to her. Also, many white parents often talk to kids about the evils of prejudice and discrimination, yet in their own lives they have few friends or neighbors of color with whom they regularly socialize. These implicit communications are more powerful than any intentional efforts on the part of parents.






Killen: Parents sometimes get overly embarrassed or self-defensive [with] kids' questions about difference, especially when those questions are asked in a public way. Parents should ... treat them as honest inquiries, explain it to them like a scientific question and try not to see them as a bad thing, because these questions are very natural. If a child asks a question about someone's brown skin and the parent gets defensive or embarrassed or tries to brush the question aside, that child starts to associate that and think, "Is there something bad about brown skin?"

Parents of preschoolers seem to be well-informed about things like choosing a safe booster seat for the car or the importance of getting their youngsters to eat the proper foods. How can parents become better informed about the importance of fostering an early appreciation for diversity?

Sue: For parents who want children to be good, decent and moral individuals who believe in our democracy, the time for intervention is early. Whether we are talking about race, gender or any kind of differences, no matter what words you use, inclusion has to be a part of the conversation early on.

Killen: A lot of parents seem to think that teaching kids to appreciate difference is something that's nice if you do it, but then it doesn't really matter if you don't do it. I think the No. 1 thing is to connect it to academic achievement, to make the connection for parents that kids who are better prepared to get along with others are going to do better in school. It's important that kids learn how to get along because they will have to interact with different groups of people in school, and if not school, then ultimately in the workplace one day.

5 TIPS: THE PRESCHOOL YEARS

-  **Be honest.** Don't encourage children not to "see" color or tell children we are all the same. Rather, discuss differences openly and highlight diversity by choosing picture books, toys, games and videos that feature diverse characters in positive, non-stereotypical roles.
-  **Embrace curiosity.** Be careful not to ignore or discourage your youngster's questions about differences among people, even if the questions make you uncomfortable. Not being open to such questions sends the message that difference is negative.
-  **Broaden choices.** Be careful not to promote stereotypical gender roles, suggesting that there are certain games, sports or activities that only girls can do or only boys can do.
-  **Foster pride.** Talk to your child about your family heritage to encourage self-knowledge and a positive self-concept.
-  **Lead by example.** Widen your circle of friends and acquaintances to include people from different backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

2

The Elementary and Preteen Years



{Ages 6-12}



A Time for Social Growth

It seems like only yesterday you were arranging play dates for your little one. Now, school project due dates, game schedules and other extracurricular activities are tracked on your refrigerator. Those familiar “why” and “how” questions of the preschool years have been replaced with new ones: “Can I go...?” and “Can I have...?” Welcome to the elementary and preteen parenting years.

Along with your child's growing list of activities comes a growing list of friends. From the classroom to sports teams to the neighborhood playground, he now encounters more and more opportunities to interact with others outside your watchful eye — and with others who are different from him. He seeks a sense of belonging and acceptance from peers, and these friendships are a vital part of his development. They are friendships that will be important later in life, too, as they provide the road map for future relationships, teaching him how to resolve conflict and get along with others across group lines.

Now that your child has moved beyond simply noticing the similarities and differences he shares with others, he is learning how such characteristics — and people's attitudes about such characteristics — have the power to make him and others feel included or excluded among peers. During these years, your child is likely to be on the receiving or giving end of such exclusion: being picked last for a basketball game because he's too short or too heavy; not inviting a classmate to his birthday party because she speaks with a "funny" accent; being called names because of his skin color or religion.

While parental influence plays a critical role in how children view and respond to difference, the elementary and preteen years mark a period when various outside sources also are competing for influence. Television and video games perpetuate stereotypes about good guys and bad guys. Toy aisles limit girls to pink princess boxes and boys to trucks

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Karan Samuels of Newville, Penn., identifies as white and Cherokee Indian and is the mother of eight children, whose father is African American:

"Every day, my kids were coming home telling me that kids called them 'stupid N-word' and harassed them about being biracial. The harassment made them not want to participate in activities that other kids take part in; my kids were afraid."

...

Yolanda Abel of Baltimore, Md., a 41-year-old single parent of a 12-year-old African American daughter, Akila:

"Akila came home from school one day and asked me when I'm going to get married. I told her, jokingly, 'I'm going to marry you.' She looked at me and said, 'Girls can't marry each other.'"

Yolanda took that opportunity to explain that sometimes people fall in love with people who are the same sex — and about the fact that it's OK not to marry.



and action figures. Classmates and friends use language that puts down certain groups of people: “That’s so gay.” “That’s so retarded.”

This is the time when the values you emphasized early on — and the behaviors you modeled all along — are put into action. Have you emphasized the value of diversity? Have you fostered a healthy sense of self-esteem by discussing positive aspects of your heritage? Have you created open, honest dialogue about the myriad issues that define difference — race, gender, class, ethnicity, ability, religion, etc.? More importantly, have you modeled an appreciation of difference through your own actions?

Experts say ongoing dialogue and good role-modeling are key to bringing up young people who are open-minded, self-confident and accepting of others.

‘IT’S A WORK IN PROGRESS’

Jennifer Roche is a 40-year-old writer in Chicago, Ill. She and husband John Svolos, 42, are the parents of two children, including 6-year-old son, Zachary. Jennifer says exposing her children to various types of diversity and teaching them to embrace difference always has been important to her family. Those values influenced their decision to live in downtown Chicago rather than the suburbs.

“I think the more diverse people children see, the more families of different religious and economic backgrounds they are able to come in contact with, [the more] they are able to understand the world,” says Jennifer, who identifies her family as white. “It’s a work in progress, but we’ve tried to immerse our kids in different cultures, from the events we attend to the materials we bring into our house. We try to make sure all of it reflects the different things so many different people have contributed to our world.”

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Anna Solomon of Alameda, Calif., a Jewish mother of two children, including son Eli:

“One day Eli arrived at school to find an 18-inch swastika painted across the mural in front of his school. He knew what a swastika was. It was a hurtful experience for him. He kept asking, ‘Who would do that?’ My husband and I learned how hard it can be to deal with the school on an issue like this; there were those who told us it wasn’t a big deal. We also learned that you can’t always protect your kids from hate, no matter how hard you try. That’s why it’s so important to talk to them about it, to prepare them for when it happens.”

Jennifer admits such exposure has recently led to some interesting questions and comments from Zachary.

“We were sitting in front of our house one day when two African American men walked by, and Zachary said, ‘Mom, have you noticed how black people look tough?’” Jennifer says she first asked Zachary what he meant by the statement and then talked to him about appearance, explaining that the way people treat others is far more important than the way they look on the outside.

Jennifer believes it’s vital for parents and schools to work together when it comes to teaching children to embrace difference. She serves on the diversity committee at the Montessori school Zachary attends. “It’s definitely a shared thing. I think parents and teachers have to see the whole education of children as a collaboration. Neither can do it alone,” she says. “I know my son’s teachers see him in social situations more than I do; they see him interact in broader social groups. It’s important to me that his school and the curriculum they use include teaching respect for difference in an organic, sweeping way — not a tokenizing way as in ‘Here’s our look at xyz culture.’”

EXPERT Q&A

Kevin Swick, a professor of early childhood education at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, and **Roni Leiderman**, associate dean of the Mailman Segal Institute for Early Childhood Studies at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., offer answers to some common questions about youth and prejudice.

What are the common issues related to prejudice and tolerance that arise during the elementary and preteen years?

Leiderman: Children are very aware of belonging or not belonging to the group at this age. Peer relationships are paramount to them, and you’ll either see embracing of difference or separation and discrimination coming in at this point, depending on what they’ve been taught in the home. These are the years when you’ll either see the fruits of your labor or the negative aspects of what you did or did not do during the preschool years.

Swick: This is the time when children want to compare themselves to others — body size, appearance, ability. It’s a time when they are looking to feel accepted and to be a positive part of their peer group or community.

Where does the most influence upon children of this age come from regarding the development of prejudice and bias?

Leiderman: Parents are the first and most important and influential teacher at this age. What you allow them to read, watch, see and hear lays their foundation with all sorts of information that will help form their responses to difference. If they attend a school that lacks diversity, if they watch TV shows that paint stereotypical pictures of certain groups, if they visit websites that use slurs and putdowns to describe people — all of these influences inform children’s responses to other people.

In many ways, schools are more segregated today than in past decades, and residential segregation is a fact of life in many areas. How can parents foster respect for differences even when the school environment lacks diversity?

Leiderman: Parents have to make an effort to get kids involved in activities outside the school walls that will give them a different experience. You can be deliberate about the sports clubs you sign up for. Getting kids involved in the arts is a good way to expose them to people from different backgrounds, where they get to interact around something they love to do and see that we all share strengths and talents. You can send them to summer camps where they'll come across other kids from diverse backgrounds. And parents should keep in mind that elementary school is not too young for kids to volunteer. Volunteer experiences are a good way to help kids understand the value of everyone.

Swick: There are so many ways to involve children in activities where they have an opportunity to interact with people who aren't necessarily like them. Parents can arrange for children to do service through their church. They can purposely get them and their friends involved in service activities with people from different parts of the community. We cannot limit kids' exposure to diversity to just the school day.

Many believe that teaching tolerance is the job of white parents, while the job of parents of color is to prepare their children for intolerance. Are the responsibilities different for white parents vs. parents of color?

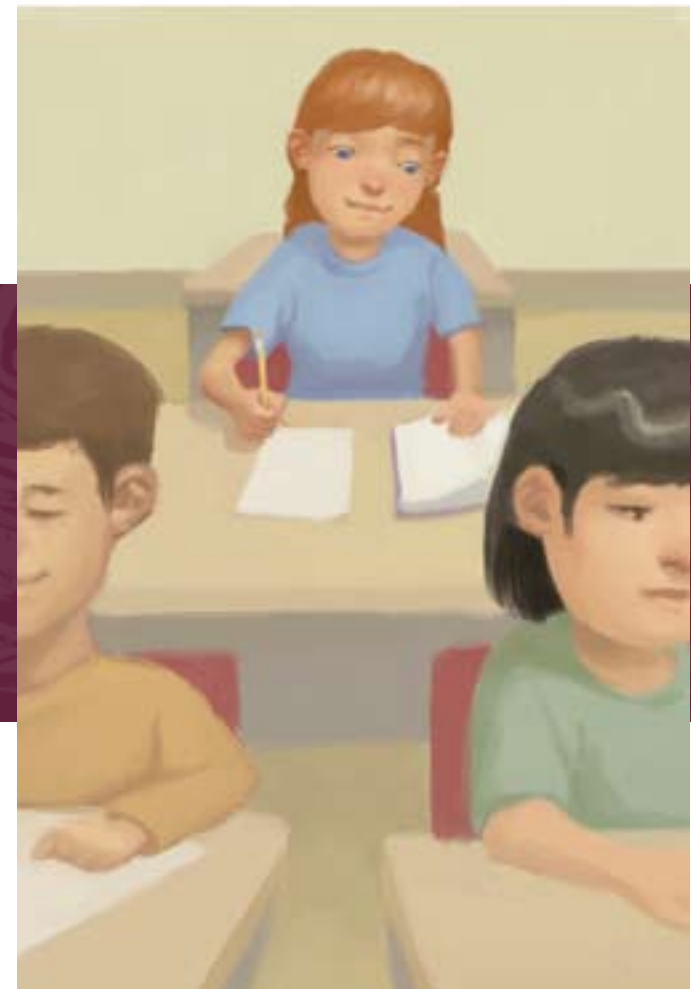
Leiderman: To believe that is to believe that prejudice and discrimination only involve race and ethnicity, when in fact, those issues are only the tip of the iceberg. It also assumes that only white parents are capable of raising children who may be guilty of prejudice, when, really, we *all* share that capacity. When you limit the discussion to just issues of race, you are cutting out 50 percent of the conversation.

Swick: The responsibilities run across the board for both white parents and non-white parents. All parents need to prepare kids for intolerance, and all parents need to prepare kids for being appreciative of other people. Prejudice works many different ways, and everybody has experienced this to some degree, so all parents need to be prepared to address it.

Teachers often say parents are one of the biggest challenges they face when attempting to incorporate anti-bias lessons in the classroom. Why are so many parents reluctant to allow schools to address these issues?

Leiderman: Often the reason is fear or deep-rooted experiences with discrimination. Many parents know these lessons will bring about all kinds of questions from their children about some issues they may be uncomfortable discussing. Some of the questions their children will ask might be painful to answer. This is why teachers have to work to educate families, too. This work can't be done in isolation; it requires an open dialogue among teachers and parents.

While many parents are well aware of the need to talk to elementary and preteen children about



issues such as drugs, alcohol use, smoking and safe sex practices, it seems talking to kids about the dangers of prejudice is not always as high on parents' radars. Should it be?

Leiderman: Often in seminars or workshops, I ask parents, "What do you want your child to be?" I'll get one or two who say a doctor or a lawyer, but for most parents, the answer is happy. The real essence is if you want to raise children who are happy, who form quality relationships in their lives, who are successful in their careers and who are good partners and good parents, you have to discuss these issues with your kids.

Swick: These issues have to be on parents' radars. They are what's killing us. And it's a problem even bigger than drugs or alcohol. All over the world, we are killing each other because we don't know how to value each other's differences. Discussing these issues with kids has to be a priority, and the earlier the better.



5 TIPS: THE ELEMENTARY & PRETEEN YEARS

➔ **Model it.** Talking to your child about the importance of embracing difference and treating others with respect is essential, but it's not enough. Your actions, both subtle and overt, are what she will emulate.

➔ **Acknowledge difference.** Rather than teaching children that we are all the same, acknowledge the many ways people are different, and emphasize some of the positive aspects of our differences — language diversity and various music and cooking styles, for example. Likewise, be honest about instances, historical and current, when people have been mistreated because of their differences. Encourage your child to talk about what makes him different, and discuss ways that may have helped or hurt him at times. After that, finding similarities becomes even more powerful, creating a sense of common ground.

➔ **Challenge intolerance.** If your child says or does something indicating bias or prejudice, don't meet the action with silence. Silence indicates acceptance, and a simple command — “Don't say that” — is not enough. First try to find the root of the action or comment: “What made you say that about Sam?” Then, explain why the action or comment was unacceptable.

➔ **Seize teachable moments.** Look for everyday activities that can serve as springboards for discussion. School-age children respond better to lessons that involve real-life examples than to artificial or staged discussions about issues. For example, if you're watching TV together, talk about why certain groups often are portrayed in stereotypical roles.

➔ **Emphasize the positive.** Just as you should challenge your child's actions if they indicate bias or prejudice, it's important to praise him for behavior that shows respect and empathy for others. Catch your child treating people kindly, let her know you noticed, and discuss why it's a desirable behavior.

3 The Teen Years



{Ages 13-17}



Searching for Identity

Not long ago, you shopped for clothes together, planned birthday parties and sleepovers and enjoyed family movie nights. Today, it seems she'd rather hide behind her locked bedroom door than be seen in public with you. Your opinions are less desired; though behind the humor, sarcasm or sullenness, she still listens to you more than you may realize.

You now are the proud parent of a teenager. In her growing quest for self-identity, your teen may try on new looks, new thoughts, new attitudes. Whether a part of the in-crowd, the out-crowd or somewhere in between, she searches for a sense of belonging among peers. You can only hope that in seeking such, she remembers the values and lessons you have spent years attempting to instill.

Outside influences do affect the way your teen views herself and her peers. What message does the swimsuit ad send about girls and body image? What stereotypes does



the music video perpetuate about women? While your views may not be those your teen seeks first — or at all — with so many outside influences competing for her attention, it's important that you continue to share them and encourage her to share her views, too.

It is during the teen years that the lessons you have imparted about embracing difference begin to have real-world impacts and consequences. It is also during these years that your own beliefs about difference may be tested. For example, you always encouraged her to socialize and play with friends from all backgrounds when she was younger. Now, however, she may be dating. Do you still strongly encourage socializing across racial and ethnic lines, or has *your* comfort level shifted?

Experts say open dialogue between parents and teens is key to continuing early lessons about difference. Providing messages that promote healthy self-esteem can go a long way to encourage her to embrace difference in herself and others. And while your words always are important, your actions now are more important than ever before. Teens are quick to identify and reject hypocrisy from parents and other adults.

'WE ALL HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY'

Susan Gordon Ryan of New York is a 56-year-old mother of two teenagers, a 13-year-old daughter, Taylor, and an 18-year-old son, Shayne. As vice president of development for a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving and empowering people with disabilities — and as a survivor of childhood polio who lives with several residual effects from the disease — Susan has strong beliefs about what and how children should be taught about differences.

"I really think a lot of tolerance education is done by example," Susan says. "Growing up with a disability, I saw that a lot of it has to do with educating both the children and adults who are around about what it means to be different. Barriers are broken when we are introduced to people who aren't just like us."

In many ways, Susan says, children pick up cues from parents about how to respond to differences. "If a child comes over and asks a question about someone's disability, you

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Cindy Hilbinger of Greensboro, N.C., the white mother of 13-year-old Katie Bess:

"I've talked a lot about the immigration issue — it's personal to me because, [as an ESL teacher,] I work with a lot of immigrant students. I talk to Katie Bess about some of the rhetoric we hear in the news and about why people have certain attitudes about immigration. I hope that in doing that, she'll be less likely to believe everything she hears or to have a negative view of immigrants."

should answer,” she says. “There is a purity about children when they’re open to asking questions. A lot of parents will discourage it, but it shouldn’t be discouraged. Children aren’t asking in a cruel sense, and there is nothing wrong with honest questions.”

At times, Susan has had to remind her own children that it’s OK to ask questions. She remembers a few years ago when her daughter came home from school and was upset because a classmate asked a question about the crutch Susan uses to walk. “My daughter burst into tears, saying, ‘I don’t want them to call you disabled or talk about your crutch,’” Susan recalls. “I let her know it was all right for her classmates to make those comments, and I tried to help her feel more comfortable responding by reassuring her that her friends were just being curious.”

Susan believes real acceptance comes with familiarity and has seen evidence of that belief in her two children. “I think it was inherent for them,” she says of Taylor and Shayne. “I think there is a certain sensitivity and awareness that comes along with having a parent who has a disability, and that sensitivity and awareness goes beyond me or what I need done. They have always been good about helping others, too. And they have always been good about recognizing unfairness and injustice and wanting to do something about it.”

Susan’s son, Shayne, is entering his freshman year in college and has chosen special education as his major. Her daughter, Taylor, now volunteers for a local toy-lending library for children with disabilities.

Instilling the desire to accept and help others is something every parent can do, Susan says. “It’s in the example that we set for our children. No matter who we are, what we look like or what our experiences are, we all have a responsibility to teach tolerance.”

•••

Patricia Beede of Rhode Island, an adoptive white mother of a 13-year-old daughter, Nicole, who is African American:

“I was driving Nicole and some of her friends around. We passed by a group home, and Nicole’s best friend said, in kind of a mocking way, ‘That’s where those group home girls live.’

Nicole spoke up and said, ‘There’s no such thing as ‘group home girls.’” She then explained that those who live in group homes aren’t responsible for their situations and that living in a group home doesn’t define them. “I was proud of Nicole. I once bought her a button that says, ‘Speak up, even if your voice shakes.’ She put that button on, and I can honestly say that I believe that’s how she tries to live her life. She gets it, I think.”

EXPERT Q&A

Constance A. Flanagan, a professor of youth civic development at Pennsylvania State University; **Marvin Megibow**, a clinical psychologist and professor (emeritus) of psychology at California State University, Chico; **Lois Christensen**, associate professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Alabama, Birmingham; and **Cynthia Garcia Coll**, professor of education, psychology and pediatrics at Brown University, answer questions about parenting, teen development and prejudice.

What are the most common behaviors and problems related to prejudice, discrimination and tolerance that arise during the teen years?

Flanagan: Teens are keenly aware of social status and group membership and of the ranking of social groups. This allows them to also be more aware of the perspective of “the other.” They are able to empathize more and have a better understanding of the poor, the dispossessed, etc., because they are so emotionally sensitive to feeling excluded themselves. Because they get those concepts, this is a good time for parents to continue lessons about valuing difference and to encourage them to get involved with projects that help them become more civically engaged.

Megibow: The issue of identity comes up a lot during this period. (Teens) tend to be trying to find their way and develop their own personal identities, which sometimes can be threatened by any sense of difference. The teen peer culture contributes to finding ways of putting people down because of difference; and by this period, teens have either learned from home or from our society to put people down because of difference, or embrace it.

Coll: First, there is more discrimination felt during these years, often from adults in power positions — police, teachers, storekeepers. Teenagers have bigger bodies, they dress differently, they are closer to adulthood and are now seen as more of a threat than when they were younger. In many ways our society views adolescents as dangerous. When you add gender, race and ethnicity in the equation, it’s even worse, because those teenagers may now experience overt discrimination that they might not have experienced before. The second issue is that teenagers are dealing with intimate, amorous relationships, and while some parents may have been very comfortable allowing their kids to play with kids of different races and backgrounds, they might now be uncomfortable with it.

Experts stress how important it is for parents to teach kids about valuing difference in the early years. Are the teen years too late to teach these lessons?

Christensen: Because of the everyday situations that come up in life, there will always be moments to teach such lessons. Hurricane Katrina is an excellent example. It provided so many examples of the vast differences in our society because it was so easy to see who seemed to matter and who did not seem to matter, who *had* and who *didn’t have*. Teenagers are able to grasp those kinds of complex issues better than younger children, and parents can use those issues to get across their own values and opinions and get teenagers to open up and talk about theirs.

Flanagan: It's never too late. Lessons come up all the time; they can come up in families. There may be older members of families, for instance, and teenagers hear or witness prejudices among those people. That's the time for parents to call those relatives on it and teach their teenagers to be brave enough not to be bystanders. It's so easy to raise issues of exclusion in this country — they're in the news all the time, so there are always opportunities for parents to bring them up with their kids.

Self-segregation can be a common phenomenon among teens. Should parents be concerned about it? What can parents do to encourage teens to widen their circle of friends?

Megibow: Kids are always going to try to be at a maximum comfort level. When seeking and learning about their own identity, it's normal for teenagers to seek out certain



characteristics in others that make them feel more comfortable with their identity. That is often found in the people who are most like them. It's not really something parents need to be concerned about, as long as there are other opportunities for the child to associate with people outside of that comfort zone — in church groups or in the neighborhood or other social activities.

Coll: I think parents should recognize that teenagers, like all humans, find a certain sense of comfort in being around people who are like them. That does tend to happen with teens in schools. Parents have to know that it happens and then think about extracurricular activities, summer programs, vacations, as ways to help make kids more comfortable crossing cultural and group lines. And parents have to make those choices in their own lives, too, and find ways to widen their own friendship circles.

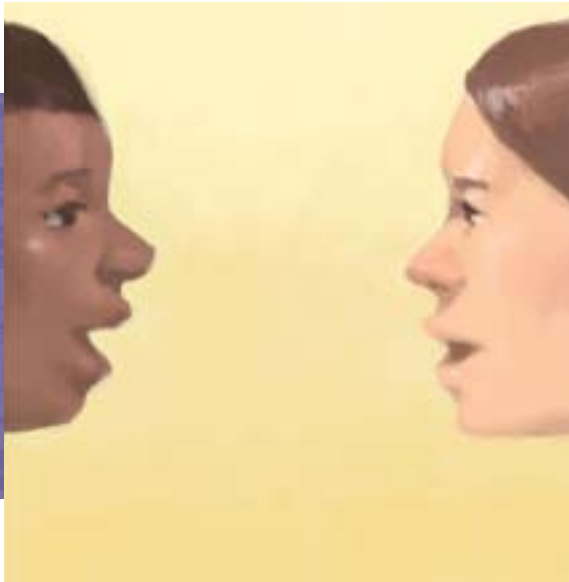
Flanagan: There are lots of other good mechanisms for teens to meet others and for parents to encourage inter-group relations. Service learning and volunteering in the community are examples, but that is an area where you have to be careful not to reinforce some of the stereotypes about different groups. For example, when all the kids of privilege go to work in communities that aren't [privileged], that can sometimes reinforce stereotypes. It's important to look for ways for kids to have those opportunities while working alongside different groups of people, not going to volunteer for those people.

It's a common belief that teenagers don't talk to parents very much, choosing instead to talk to peers. How, then, can parents get teenagers to open up and discuss issues of tolerance, prejudice and discrimination?

Christensen: Kids of all ages, but especially teenagers, relate very well to inquiry. Parents can ask kids what they think about certain issues and let them answer, really making an effort to respect their views even if they don't always agree. But another way to get kids talking is to provide opportunities for them to talk. If we know that kids are comfortable talking to peers, let's bring them together in diverse groups, let's encourage them to talk about these kinds of issues and share what they think about solving problems.

Megibow: Broadly speaking, parents should make themselves available for such conversations and make sure the kids know they are available to talk about any subject. And parents should be careful not to always take one-word answers as sufficient. Don't stop at the "nothin'" — try to probe deeper. Also, parents can create situations in the family for people to come together — mealtime, leisure activities. Those are the moments where conversations happen naturally, and teenagers are less likely to feel like they are being put on the spot or questioned.

Coll: I think the notion that teens don't like to talk to parents is a little exaggerated. Yes, there are times when they don't want to talk, but then there are times when they can't wait to talk. What parents can do is keep talking, keep [instilling] the values and even more importantly, make sure that if you do the talk, you also walk the walk. With preschoolers and younger kids, parents might be able to get away with the "do as I say and not as I do," but teenagers won't live with that contradiction. If you are talking to teenagers about how and why they should practice values of tolerance and embrace difference, and you're not doing that in your actions, they will reject those messages from you.



5 TIPS: THE TEEN YEARS

➔ **Keep talking.** Many believe the last thing teens are interested in is having a conversation with parents. But even if your teen doesn't initiate conversations about issues of difference, find ways to bring those topics up with them. Use current issues from the news, such as the immigration debate or same-sex marriage, as a springboard for discussion. Ask your teen what she thinks about the issues.

➔ **Stay involved.** Messages about differences exist all around your teen: the Internet, songs, music videos, reality shows, ads and commercials, social cliques at school. Know the websites your teen enjoys visiting; take time to listen to or watch the music and shows they enjoy. Then discuss the messages they send. Ask your teen about the group or groups she most identifies with at school. Discuss the labels or stereotypes that are associated with such groups.

➔ **Live congruently.** Discussing the importance of valuing difference is essential, but modeling this message is even more vital. Evaluate your own circle of friends or the beliefs you hold about certain groups of people. Do your actions match the values you discuss with your teen? Teens are more likely to be influenced by what you do than what you say, so it's important for your words and behaviors to be congruent.

➔ **Broaden opportunities.** It may be natural for teens to stick to groups they feel most comfortable with during the school day. These often are the people they identify as being most like themselves. Provide other opportunities for your teen to interact with peers from different backgrounds. Suggest volunteer, extracurricular, worship and work opportunities that will broaden your teen's social circle.

➔ **Encourage activism.** Promote ways for your teen to get involved in causes he cares about. No place for him to hang out with friends? Encourage him to get together with peers to lobby city officials for a teen social center or skate park. Upset about discriminatory treatment of teenagers by a storekeeper or business? Give your teen suggestions for writing a letter of complaint or planning a boycott. When young people know they have a voice in their community, they are empowered to help resolve issues of injustice.

4

Reflecting Upon Our Own Biases



{All Ages}



The Work Continues

No matter how open-minded or accepting we believe ourselves to be, and no matter how good a job we think we are doing when it comes to raising tolerant children, this fact remains: We all carry prejudice and biases.

The personal biases we hold as parents significantly influence what we teach, and don't teach, our children about valuing difference.

Some of us may have internalized negative attitudes about our identity groups because of racism and discrimination that we experienced growing up. As such, we sometimes pass these negative attitudes along to our children, or we are reluctant to have open, honest dialogue about discrimination with our children because these conversations are too painful.

Others of us may have been raised in families where parents and other relatives conveyed racist and discriminatory attitudes about other groups of people. Even if we do not openly display such behavior, it may affect our beliefs about others on a subconscious level. Knowingly or unknowingly, we can pass along many of these unspoken beliefs to our own children.

Simply living in a society in which discrimination — at times, legal — has played such a prominent role affects us all on some level.

We know that biases are learned. We also know that we as parents impart many of the most important, lasting lessons in our children's lives. If we hope to pass on lessons that emphasize acceptance and tolerance, we have to be willing to live those values. This calls on us to take on the crucial work of reflecting upon and addressing our personal biases. It is work that is rarely easy — and work that must be ongoing.

'IT GOES AGAINST MY FEELINGS'

A 35-year-old woman in Minnesota, who asked that her name not be used, says teaching her 2-year-old son to value diversity is an important part of her parental responsibility.

She works as a public school teacher in an area of the state that has a large Latino population. Growing up in a suburban Minneapolis neighborhood, the woman, who is white, says she did not encounter a lot of diversity, nor did her parents discuss the issue much.

"My dad's family was actually pretty racist, but my mom was quick to tell us why what we said was wrong if we spoke badly about other people."

She sees similarities in her own household, describing her husband's strong and negative beliefs about diversity as very different from her own.

"He will often make negative remarks about the Hispanics in our community. He believes the stereotype that all Hispanics are lazy, and he says these things around our son, which makes me very nervous about what (our son) will think about other children when he starts school."

As a public school teacher, she believes she has learned a lot about stereotypes by simply looking at students she works with who regularly prove them wrong. She considers herself to be very accepting of diversity and hopes to teach her son not to take in messages that stereotype groups of people.

"I don't want my son to think it's OK to think certain groups of people are all one way," she says.

She admits, however, that becoming a mother and making decisions for her child have caused her to question some of her attitudes, especially regarding her son's education.

"There are many parents in our community who are afraid that the needs of so many

ESL students in the district's schools may jeopardize their children's educational needs," she says.

"I know that when a majority of kids aren't getting it, they slow the lessons down to accommodate kids that need more help. I am considering placing (my son) in a private school when it's time for him to go to school. I want my son to get a good education, and I just don't want to put him in the middle. Knowing that I'm having these thoughts makes me very uncomfortable, because it goes against my feelings that people are equal and that diversity is a good thing."

She has about three years before she'll have to make a decision about where to enroll her son in school and hopes to find a solution that doesn't go against her beliefs.

"It's something we'll have to figure out. If we do choose private school, I hope he will still be exposed to some diversity, and if not in school, maybe in some outside activities."

A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION TO HAVE

Malynda Coleman of Arizona is a 31-year-old mother of two daughters and a son, ages 7, 4 and almost 1.

While Malynda, who is African American, believes parents should teach children the importance of valuing those who are different from themselves, she has yet to bring the topic up with her own children.

"We haven't gone over it yet because it hasn't been an issue," she says. The topic was, however, an issue during Malynda's childhood. For that reason, Malynda expects talking about racism and discrimination with her own kids may be difficult.

"When I grew up, there was a lot of prejudice in Arizona. I went to school with mostly white kids, and sometimes I did feel like people treated me differently," she says. "But I probably wouldn't bring it up to my kids until they bring it up to me."

While Malynda has yet to discuss issues of racism and discrimination with her children, she believes it is important to reinforce their African American heritage at home — especially because the children attend schools that are predominantly white.

"I buy books and games that talk about who *we* are," she says. "I make sure they have baby dolls to play with that come in all the different skin tones, because I want them to be able to see that beauty is in all colors. I teach them about different things that blacks have done, like black inventors."

She adds, "I want my kids to know who we are and where we are now, but I guess without making them think about some of the things that I had to go through when I grew up. Hopefully they won't really have to experience those things."

EXPERT Q&A

Kerby T. Alvy, founder and executive director of the California-based Center for the Improvement of Child Caring, answers questions about how parents' biases and experiences with discrimination affect the raising of their children, and why, when it comes to bias, self-reflection is an important parenting responsibility.

How do parents' own biases impact their children?

Alvy: Much of the time this occurs unconsciously. Parents, in their own behavior — especially facial expressions and posture and body language — convey a lot that kids see. Other times, it can be more obvious, when parents actually talk about their biases out loud. Parents may tell children they don't want them associating with a certain group of people. For some, prejudice can be a family value.

There are also times when parents participate in ethnic self-disparagement. That happens often in groups where negative attitudes from society have affected the way people see and feel about themselves. Parents sometimes perpetuate those attitudes with their children. You see this, for example, in an African American family that looks down upon being "too dark." It is possible to have prejudice against your own.

What happens when parents are not on the same page about what to teach their children about respect for differences?

Alvy: Because bias is learned within the context of intimacy — family relationships are intimate relationships — children can feel some loyalty to uphold negative attitudes if these are the attitudes that even one parent conveys. When parents have different attitudes, those mixed messages put the child in a difficult position. It's important that parents are united about how they want their children to feel about other people and how they want them to think about differences.

Reflecting upon personal bias can mean admitting or acknowledging shortcomings — and admitting that you need help to address those issues. Is this a difficult thing to get parents to do?

Alvy: I think parents in general are interested in being educated. They already have made this commitment to bring up another human. Sometimes that involves training. I believe training is something that parents deserve — it's their right. And it isn't just something for those who are having trouble. It's for all of us. I think that when you approach it from the view that education and training are what parents need and deserve, and not something that is needed because parents have somehow gone wrong, parents are more open to doing the work.

It is honorable for parents to acknowledge that they have bias, and this is not something to be ashamed of. We are all products of this marvelous society; we are products of what we learned as just little kids, before we developed critical faculties. It is impossible for anyone

to have been brought up in the United States without having been influenced by racist attitudes and practices. Parents should not blame themselves, but rather accept that fact as the baseline and then be vigilant about always asking ourselves if we are coming from a place of racism or stereotyping. Doing that and asking those questions takes work from all of us.

How can parents be encouraged to address and assess their own biases? What benefits can they expect from doing that work?

Alvy: I believe the biggest challenge of humankind is the ability to accept difference. We need to let parents know that this is a very important issue, even more in our time today than in previous times, as the world and as our cities become more pluralistic. It's something parents need to be aware of for humanitarian and practical reasons. Most kids are going to school with people from different backgrounds. And for those who are not, for those who are in segregated areas, it's even more important to highlight the issue of out-group relationships.

Parents have to know that it is very important for kids to get along for their own educational advancement. Also, today's workplace is a pluralistic workplace. No matter what our jobs are, we will find ourselves working with people from all different backgrounds. Group work and group decision-making also are an important part of today's workplace. We have to know how to interact with all kinds of people for that to work. The bottom line is that we as parents should recognize that it is educationally practical and economically practical to lay a foundation for acceptance and tolerance.

PERSONAL BIAS: A REFLECTION EXERCISE

Use these journal prompts to explore your experiences with and attitudes about difference.

1. The first time I became aware of differences was when ...

2. As I was growing up, my parent(s) taught me that people who were different from us were...

3. As I was growing up, my parent(s) taught me that people who were like us were ...

4. A time I was mistreated because of my own difference was when ...

5. A time I mistreated someone for being different was when ...

6. I feel most comfortable when I am around people who ...

7. I feel least comfortable when I am around people who ...

8. The memories I have of differences affect my parenting by ...

Talking to Kids About Prejudice

“White people are crazy!” my son exclaimed as he folded his arms, plopped down on the couch and emptied two fistfuls of candy from his jacket pockets onto the coffee table.

He had just returned from our city’s annual holiday parade with a neighbor, and, needless to say, this was not the event commentary I expected.

“What in the world are you talking about?” I asked, puzzled.

He continued sounding off about a “racist” woman he had the misfortune of standing next to during the parade.

He told me the woman, who had three small children with her, had shouted at him when he accidentally stepped on her foot. When he apologized and told the woman he didn’t do it intentionally, she glared at him.

“She just kept looking at me like I was a bad kid,” he said. “And she kept telling me I better not get in front of her kids when I wasn’t even trying to get in front of her kids.”

I suggested that perhaps she was just mean and not necessarily racist. But he was adamant, saying he also overheard the woman telling her children not to “let that little black boy get in front of you.”

“Why do you think she said that to her kids?” I asked.

“Maybe she thought I wanted to jump in front of them and take their candy, even though I would not do that,” he said. “Some people think all black boys do bad things like steal and fight, so maybe that’s what she was thinking about me.”

Sadly, I couldn’t argue with his response.

Stopping the Cycle

Indeed there are some people — many people — who believe young, black boys like my son are little more than troublemakers. The truth is, whether we admit or deny it, most of us believe some generalization or another about those who are different from us.

Some of us, like the woman at the parade, openly act upon those assumptions, while others keep it hidden or reveal it behind closed doors.

I explained to my son that prejudice always has existed and always will exist; that’s just the way it is. But incidents like the one he experienced during the parade have a lot to teach us, about other people and about ourselves. Such incidents can even help stop the cycle of prejudice, I told him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I reminded him of how he stormed in the door a few moments earlier, loudly announcing, “White people are crazy.” I explained that in the same way it is wrong for others to make blanket assumptions about all black boys being troublemakers, it also is wrong for him to let one incident with one white woman taint his view of all white people.

We All Face It

At some time or another, every parent must explain incidents of prejudice and racism to

children. Here are some suggestions for having such conversations in your family:

Be frank. Explain to kids the very real issues of racism and prejudice. While racism and prejudice aren't factors in every incident, they certainly are factors in many. When your child has faced such an incident, don't be afraid to name it.

Keep your cool. No one likes the idea of her child being exposed to an incident of racism or prejudice, and often, such incidents anger us greatly. But when parents are able to remain calm, children feel more comfortable turning to us when these incidents arise.

Admit your own issues. We all struggle with prejudice, bias and stereotypes. Be honest with kids about your own issues and how you work to overcome them. Not everyone who struggles with bias or prejudice is "bad." Knowing this can help kids grow to recognize their own biases and encourage them to search for common ground with others.

Talk regularly. Don't wait for an incident of racism or bias to occur before discussing such issues with kids. Look critically at stereotypes and race issues in the media and in everyday life. Incorporate discussions about such issues in day-to-day conversations.

As painful as explaining moments of prejudice or bias to my son can be, sometimes I'm thankful for such opportunities. If more people found ways to examine their day-to-day interactions and honestly discuss race issues, our nation would be healthier and more tolerant for it. And perhaps my son could return home from the annual holiday parade shouting about floats, candy and lights — not racism.



Organizations & Resources

Teaching Tolerance

Teaching Tolerance offers free print and online resources to K-12 educators and parents, including a collection of monthly parenting columns designed to help address issues of tolerance and diversity with children.

Teaching Tolerance

A project of the Southern Poverty Law Center

400 Washington Avenue

Montgomery, AL 36104

(334) 956-8382

www.tolerance.org/parents

Center for the Improvement of Child Caring

The Center for the Improvement of Child Caring offers parent skill-building programs taught in communities across the country, including the Effective Black Parenting Program and Los Niños Bien Educados.

Center for the Improvement of Child Caring (CICC)

11331 Ventura Boulevard, Suite 103

Studio City, CA 91604-3147

(818) 980-0903

www.ciccparenting.org

Anti-Defamation League

The Anti-Defamation League offers print and online resources to help parents and educators combat hate and bigotry among children, including *Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice*.

Anti-Defamation League

823 United Nations Plaza

New York, NY 10017

(212) 490-2525

www.adl.org

Families First

Families First provides parent training programs designed to help parents raise children who are productive, healthy, caring members of their communities.

Families First Parenting Programs Inc.

99 Bishop Richard Allen Drive

Cambridge, MA 02139

(617) 868-7687

www.families-first.org

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