

## Prejudice and Discrimination

As I've listened to the children talk excitedly about the various holidays that they are celebrating this season, I've also overheard some children making comments about different cultural customs. So, I decided that this would be a good time to discuss the ways we can help our children be more accepting, tolerant, and understanding of one another. All children notice differences, and this awareness in itself is not a problem. However, problems arise when negative values are attached and expected from those differences. How can we help our children live and eventually work harmoniously alongside people that may be different from themselves? Empathy training is one key factor in reducing prejudice. (Feel free to refer to the last posting on Empathy Training for specific suggestions.) When children are more sensitive to the feelings of others, they are less likely to engage in prejudicial behaviors. Besides teaching our children to be more empathic, we must simultaneously address any prejudicial comments and behaviors whenever they arise. Elementary aged children have a natural quest for fairness, therefore making it the perfect time to stress the inequality of prejudice and discrimination, and teach them the lessons of tolerance that they can carry with them throughout their lifetime.

Even if you, as parents, model tolerance and acceptance, you should be aware that there are other factors that affect your children's opinions and behaviors. Some of these factors include influential peers, children's self perceptions, and the media. In terms of peer influence, some children may make fun of others or exclude them because they think it is the "popular" thing to do. They may begin to use unkind names for different groups of people, hoping it will help them be more accepted with the "popular" crowd. Children who have poor self images may be especially vulnerable. They may experience feelings of greater self worth by putting down certain groups of people. Still, I find a majority of children who make prejudicial comments simply lack an understanding for people that are different from themselves. Although some improvements have been made in the media, it is not uncommon to find TV shows that depict some well established stereotypes. Many times humor is derived from using these stereotypes to make jokes. Sometimes, the media may even present misinformation. Or, they may exclude important positive information about specific groups of people. While we can not teach children about all the different people they may come into contact with, we can teach them to be more accepting of all types of people. The following are recommendations from the Anti-Defamation League:

- ***Accept each of your children as unique and special.*** Let your children know that you recognize and appreciate their individual qualities. Children who feel good about themselves are less likely to be prejudiced. Also, notice unique and special qualities in other people and discuss them with your children.
- ***Help your children become more sensitive to other people's feelings.*** Studies indicate that caring, empathic children are less likely to be prejudiced. Share stories or books with your children that help them to understand the points of view of other people. When personal conflicts occur, encourage your child to think about how the other person might be feeling.

- ***Make sure your children understand that prejudice and discrimination are unfair.*** Make it a firm rule that no person should be excluded or teased on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, accent, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or appearance. Point out and discuss discrimination when you see it.
- ***Teach your children respect and appreciation for differences by providing opportunities for interaction with people of diverse groups.*** Studies show that children playing and working together toward common goals develop positive attitudes about one another. Sports teams, bands, school clubs and community programs are examples of activities that can help to counter the effects of homogenous neighborhoods. In addition to firsthand experiences, provide opportunities for children to learn about people through books, television educational programs, concerts, or other programs that show positive insights into other cultures.
- ***Help children recognize instances of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.*** Make sure they know how to respond to such attitudes when they see them in action. Television news and entertainment shows, movies, and newspapers often provide opportunities for discussion. According to recent studies, encouraging children's critical thinking ability may be the best antidote to prejudice.
- ***Encourage your children to create positive change.*** Talk to your children about how they can respond to prejudiced thinking or acts of discrimination they observe. Painting over racist graffiti, writing letters to a television producer who promotes stereotyped programming, or confronting a peer's discriminatory behavior are all appropriate actions. Confronting classmates is particularly hard for children, so they need to have a ready made response to such instances. If another child is called a hurtful name, an observer might simply say, "Don't call him/her that. Call him/her by his/her name." Or, if your child is the victim, "Don't call me that. That's not fair. You don't like to be called bad names and neither do I." In all cases, try to help your child feel comfortable pointing out unfairness.
- ***Take appropriate action against prejudice and discrimination.*** For example, if other adults use bigoted language around you or your children, you should not ignore it. Your children need to know that such behavior is unacceptable even if it is from a familiar adult. A simple phrase will do: "Please don't talk that way around me or my children", or "That kind of joke offends me." Adults need to hold themselves to the same standards they want their children to follow.

I encourage you to have open communication with your children about prejudice and discrimination. The earlier they are made aware of the dangers of prejudice and discrimination, the greater the likelihood they will not engage in prejudicial behaviors or tolerate these behaviors in others. It is important that we address discriminatory remarks made by children, which usually don't come from malicious intent, but rather lack of understanding. We can address these remarks by empowering our children with knowledge. The following are some examples from the Anti-Defamation League regarding what can be said to children to address their questions and/or comments:

***"How is a prejudice different from a dislike?"***

*Prejudice is having an opinion or idea about a member of a group without really knowing that individual. A dislike is based on information about and experiences with a specific individual.*

***"Why don't people like those people? Why do people call them names?"***

*One answer could be: "Some people make judgments about a whole group of people without knowing very much about them. Sometimes people are afraid of those who seem different from them and, unfortunately, they express that with name-calling and negative treatment. When people grow up with these ideas, sometimes it's hard to get rid of them."*

*It is important for children to know that they can help to overcome racism, sexism and all forms of bigotry. Show them how the choices they make can help to create a fairer world: "When a lot of children like you grow up, differences will become less and less important, and people will respect each other even for their differences."*

***"Why do those people look (or act) so funny? Why can't he walk? Why do they believe such strange things?"***

*Children need to realize that all people are different. It is important to communicate to children that we often think others are different simply because they are unfamiliar to us. We don't think our own beliefs and appearances are strange or funny because they are what we're used to. Point out that we must appear different to others, too.*

***"I don't like (name of group) people."***

*Such a comment needs to be handled carefully. It is important that you address such comments without making your children become defensive. With young children, the tone of the discussion should be one of exploring their thinking. A discussion might go as follows:*

*"You sound as if you know all the people who are (name of group), and that you don't like any of them. You can only like or dislike people you know. If you don't know someone, you can't have a good reason for liking or not liking them. There are children you may not like to play with, but their skin color (religion, accent, appearance, size, etc.) should have nothing to do with it." Discuss with your children the character traits they look for in their friends, such as kindness, honesty, etc.*

***"Name calling? I didn't mean anything!"***

*Often young children do not know the meaning of the words they use, but they do know that the words will get a reaction from the victim. Children need to learn that such language can hurt other people, and is as bad as throwing rocks. Children who yell a racist or other hurtful name in anger should be talked to right away. They must learn not*

*to throw objects at or say hurtful words to other children. Children need to understand that they have made a mistake and have hurt someone. A discussion might include the following ideas:*

*"You were angry at Tom and you called him a hurtful name. You need to know that words can hurt. When people get hurt by words, they don't get cuts or bruises on the outside, but they are hurt on the inside. You may have been really upset at something Tom did; but instead of telling him what you didn't like, you called him a word that is used to hurt people. If you told Tom what you didn't like, it might have helped him to change his behavior. Name-calling is unfair. It hurts people, and it doesn't solve anything." Help children think about solutions. Try to elicit a few options from them, and then ask which ones they would like to try. "If you are angry with Tom, what can you do to let him know how you feel without calling him a name?"*

Together we must address issues of prejudice and discrimination whenever they occur and wherever we hear them. We must point out inequities to our children and let them know that these ideas and actions are unacceptable. Let's work together to increase our children's Emotional IQ by increasing their awareness and knowledge of prejudice and discrimination. Let's do our part to support tolerance, compassion, and equality for all.

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