

Supporting the Dignity Act in Your Home

The Dignity for All Students Act is a state law that took effect on July 1, 2012. Its goal is to provide students with a safe and supportive school environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying. Schools are required to educate students and staff in human relations training so that no child is discriminated against on any basis, “including but not limited to race, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practices, mental or physical abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexes”. This bully free environment has always been a priority at Jericho, but now there is a law that backs up good school policy. Legal action into the fight against discrimination, harassment, and bullying is helpful, but it is certainly not enough to address this problem. The Dignity Act, as implemented within our schools must also be supported at home within families. So in this posting, I will explore some things you can do as parents to combat prejudice, discrimination, harassment, and bullying.

Children are not born with prejudices. Looking at pre-schoolers on the playground, you will often see various cultures, racial, and religious backgrounds playing together. They may notice differences between them (and much to their parents horror may ask questions aloud such as “Why is Jacob’s skin brown?”), but they don’t seem to mind. So how do children learn prejudice? At Seaman, I’ve asked several of the children in my groups why they think some children may say negative things about children that are perceived as different from themselves. Students gave the following explanations: “...trying to act tough/ popular/cool... following their friends...don’t know they said anything wrong...think that it’s fun/funny/ just kidding...parents didn’t teach them well...have problems at home”. These children basically described social learning theory as the theory behind prejudicial behavior. This would mean that prejudice is learned in the same way that other attitudes and values are learned, primarily through association, reinforcement, and modeling. By association, children learn to associate a particular group with crime, violence, and/or other bad things. Reinforcement occurs if others laugh when a discriminatory remark is made or when people who behave in ways that are discriminatory gain social status. An example of this may be when people laugh if an ethnic joke is made. If others laugh along or think they are cool, this behavior gets reinforced. Lastly, much learning takes place through modeling, where children may imitate the prejudices of family members, friends, or the media.

So what can you do as parents to combat prejudice in your home? Teaching Tolerance magazine recommends the following four basic strategies to deter prejudicial behavior:

1. **Interrupt** – You must speak up against every biased remark, every time you hear it, in the moment, without exception. Even letting one remark slide can send an inconsistent message that sometimes bias is acceptable, while at other times it isn’t. Anytime you let it pass, it’s an opportunity missed. So if you’re riding in the car with your child and his/her peers, and someone makes a biased remark, address it immediately. Early, firm, intervention sends the message that those types of comments will never be tolerated. Biased jokes should also be

interrupted. For example, you may say something like, “Stop, I don’t like ethnic jokes”. This may not stop every “joke”, but the more it is interrupted, the more likely it is to be curtailed.

2. **Question** – Exploratory questions to biased remarks can be a powerful tool. If you overhear something, you can say, “What do you mean?”, or “Tell me more”. By not challenging them at the moment, it causes the person to be less defensive. Once they give you more information, you can tease out the reasons behind their thinking and frame and tailor an appropriate response. Be careful, however, because aggressive questioning can be counterproductive, closing off communication rather than opening it. The gentle but clear “tell me more” response extends the conversation rather than cutting it off. Your tone while you’re questioning also matters in the moment. The goal is to understand the root of the speaker’s prejudice, and then help add context and information to dispel them. Watch for nonverbal taunts too, and question those as well. If a child fundamentally mocks another’s mannerisms, call the offenders attention to the issue and explore the reasoning behind the behavior.
3. **Educate** – Sometimes ignorance or lack of exposure to certain populations causes prejudice. Other times, children simply don’t know the negative power behind certain words or phrases. For example if you overhear a child using the expression, “That’s so gay”, address it immediately as an offensive phrase. You can offer background and context to encourage a person to choose a different expression. Furthermore, don’t ask children to stop saying something because of a personal issue tied to your own life. For example don’t say, “I don’t like that talk because my brother has a disability.” The goal is not to have students avoid slurs in front of targeted people, rather to eliminate the slurs no matter who may be within earshot.
4. **Echo** – It’s powerful to be the first voice to interrupt bias. However, it’s even more powerful when there is a second, third, or fourth voice to join in the interruption. If someone has said something biased in a group, and not one, but four people speak up, the echoing power of those voices has a multiplying effect. The echoing voices can reiterate the anti bias message. You can also thank the first person for speaking up by saying something like, “Thank you, I have a lot of respect for you for speaking up like that, and I totally agree with you”.

We live in a world of different races, religions, cultures, sexual orientations, and abilities. Parents and educators need to stand together to teach children to accept, respect, and even celebrate differences in others. Let’s all do our part to support the Dignity Act in our homes. If you are witness to a prejudicial remark or behavior, keep in mind the four strategies discussed in this posting: “Interrupt, Question, Educate, and Echo”.

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