



To Parents and Teachers

Overcoming Prejudice

Parents are the first educators of the child. In addition to providing physical care and protection, ongoing love and encouragement, we impart to them our beliefs and values, shape their character and teach them how to relate to others.

When our children reach school age, we entrust them to the care of teachers who provide them with the knowledge, skills and tools to help them realize their potential as human beings, and to contribute to their families, their communities and the larger society.



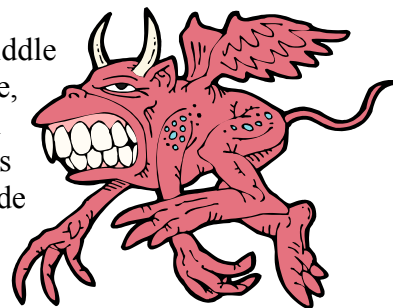
Whether as parents or teachers, we are often challenged to counteract the destructive standards of a world in disarray—with its deeply-entrenched prejudices, its all-pervasive materialism and glorification of violence—a world where injustice is tolerated, where economic exploitation is commonplace, where apathy is widespread, and where dishonesty and political corruption seem to be the norm.

Especially damaging is racial prejudice. Although great strides have been made, it still permeates the institutions of our society and holds a strong grip on individual hearts and minds.

Prejudice, an irrational negative prejudgment about another group, has been passed down for generations. It is learned from our families and friends, from the media, and even from our religious communities and schools. Many young children already hold negative stereotypes of other racial and ethnic groups by the time they enter first grade.

These attitudes are reflected in their everyday behavior. Children might begin with simple teasing, which may seem harmless, or the refusal to play with others from certain groups. Teasing and exclusion can lead to name-calling, harassment, bullying and worse. Even the smallest denial of one person's rights and dignity, plants seeds of hate that affect us all.

In a comprehensive survey conducted by the author in 2002 at four middle schools, 85% of the students reported hearing hateful words (about race, weight, gender, etc.) on a regular basis. With regard to race in particular, 30% of the students said they heard 11 or more racial slurs every single day. Most of this is not reported due to a self-imposed code of silence and fear of retaliation. These statistics mirror that of the nation as a whole.¹



How then do we move beyond people-made barriers to create a unified society where all feel welcome, where differences are valued, and where people are treated with dignity and respect?

Research² shows that one of the best ways to reduce prejudice is through purposeful, mutually-beneficial interaction among people from different groups. Parents and teachers can encourage children to work side-by-side with those from other backgrounds. We can serve as role models. We can give them the tools and strategies needed to form healthy attitudes and relationships, and we can plan specific activities that foster cooperation and understanding.



For example, one of the alternative high schools that I worked with was successful in reducing conflict between two rival groups through an innovative art program. Students from both groups were paired up, and each was asked to paint a portrait depicting the other person's life story. In order to complete the assignment which was a large part of their final grade for the class, the students were forced to learn about someone who had previously been considered an enemy. The final portraits were then incorporated into a mural painted on an outside wall of the school. Several business owners in the community were so impressed that they commissioned these same students to paint additional murals on buildings around town.

While it is easy to transfer a lot of information through abstract verbal explanations, lectures and books, this has little impact on attitudes and behavior. Rather, children learn best through concrete experiences that engage their senses and emotions. This might include games, songs, role plays, peer interviews, group discussions, hands-on projects and other active learning strategies. While these activities may seem like play, the children are actually learning valuable lessons about unity, cooperation and justice.

Learning about unity and overcoming prejudice should not be considered optional—add-ons to the curriculum. Rather, they are a critical part of the education of every child.

Teaching unity requires wisdom, patience, humility and courage. It calls for persistent effort by women and men of diverse backgrounds and colors. We need to purge our own hearts from all traces of racial superiority and inferiority; actively work to undo 500 years of racial conditioning; and teach our children directly about the oneness of humanity, the value of diversity and the need for unity. We may not be responsible for the past, but together we can take responsibility for our common destiny. In a world torn by injustice, hate and war, our homes and classrooms can become models of hope for the future.

—by Randie S. Gottlieb, Ed.D
Adapted from *Teaching Unity*, p. 5-6

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1. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2011/ind_10.asp
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_bullying#Statistics
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011316.pdf>
 2. The Nature of Prejudice by Gordon Allport
Reducing Prejudice and Discrimination, Stuart Oskamp, ed.
<http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2000-03917-004>
www.understandingprejudice.org/apa/english