

Tolerance Lessons for Teens



Yes, the world has always been diverse. But never before has diversity been such a pressing, everyday issue. Your kids probably grew up with a children of different races, cultures, religions and backgrounds, wherever it is you live. As a matter of fact, your teen's experiences are likely to have been much more diverse than your own. In the 21st Century, the many challenges of such a diverse world are close at hand and affect teenagers on a daily basis. There's no escaping images of terrorism, school shootings, extremist groups, street violence and hate crimes. But should there be? Particularly if your kids are older, becoming aware of the issues behind the headlines is the first step in becoming an active part of the solution. Tolerance today is not an optional character trait, it's a necessary life skill.

Encourage Your Kids to Talk

Bias is learned at an early age. Even the most aware parent can't control every aspect of a child's world, and studies show that children hold a number of stereotypes by the time they are 12. So it's especially important that parents remember not to stop talking as kids get older and conversations become more complex. And, as you well know, you can't wait for your teen to bring the subject up. Look for opportunities to discuss difficult issues wherever you can find them: while watching TV or reading the paper, or when you overhear inappropriate remarks or witness disturbing behavior in public.

Include Yourself in the Dialogue

You'll also test your own tolerance and values when you ask hard questions of your teenagers: How did a particular television program handle the subject of religious extremism? Are sensitive issues like immigration and racial tensions portrayed differently in your local newspaper than in national news? What feelings did a film about a transgendered person—a man or woman whose gender identity doesn't match their biological sex as male or female—raise?

Respect Your Teen's Conclusions

Ultimately, tolerance and personal character should be a continuing conversation in families. But just as the world is not black and white, your teen knows not to expect easy answers. If teens are able to bring up uncomfortable subjects at home, they can explore their own feelings about complicated issues and come to their own informed conclusions, which may change over time.

Don't Hide From What's Out There

It doesn't help anyone to deny that there are real differences between peoples and cultures. Nor does it serve your teenager to overlook the fact that prejudice comes in all shapes and forms. By the time your kid's in high school, the message "prejudice is wrong, hate is bad" has been communicated, and has an unconscious impact on every decision made. Know that teenagers are probably ready to take things one step further. Consider whether now's the time to examine the range of prejudice imbedded in our culture, and the extreme consequences of hate.

Take a Hard Look at Hate

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, someone commits a hate crime in the U.S once every hour. Every day at least eight blacks, three whites, three homosexuals, three Jews and one Latino become hate crime victims. Hate crimes are defined as violent acts against people, property or organizations because of the group they belong to, or identify with. Race and religion are at the heart of most hate crimes, yet recently there has been a frightening increase of hate crimes against homosexuals and the transgendered.

There has also been a recent rise of violence against Asian-Americans, and anti-Arab hate crimes since 9-11. Violence against women, although not legally classified as a hate crime yet, is increasing as well. So are crimes against the physically and mentally disabled. And the perpetrators? Half of all hate crimes are committed by young men under 20.

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Today, there are over 750 hate groups active in the U.S., and thousands of hate sites on the Internet. Many use rock music and even the guise of religion to spread their message and reach teens. It's an alarming trend that has grabbed the attention of citizens groups and lawmakers; both continue to strengthen hate crime legislation and take action to stop the activities and recruitment efforts of extremist groups.

Recognize the Implications of Hate

The important thing to remember about hate crimes is that an act against an individual is something more—it's intended to terrorize a group of individuals. Thus, hate crimes are a dangerous threat to the community at large, regardless of who the victim is. However, as hate flares up across the country, more and more people are standing up to hate mongers and promoting tolerance. Learning to put a name on prejudice, and condemning these crimes for what they, are essential tools in teaching tolerance.

Point Out Prejudice

It happens in subtle ways, and in small increments. A "harmless" sexist joke, a commonly-used racial slur, or "innocent" name-calling when someone's overweight or disabled. Whether you hear it from a TV character, a personality on the radio or your child's friends, don't let stereotypes slide under the rug. In some cases, bias has become such an accepted part of society's fabric that we forget terms or expressions even have racial or ethnic overtones.

Allow Your Teen to Influence You

Let your teen help you look at language and the media's portrayal of certain groups in a new light. It might be time to examine your own attitudes, as well. Do you make assumptions based on appearances? Are you quick to label someone a "redneck" or "flaming liberal" because you disagree with an opinion? Is your attitude about a particular group

based on what you've "heard," or as a result of what you've learned from experience and research? Especially in communities with less diverse populations, try to be open to the idea that misinformation may be deeply ingrained. Ignorance can be a dangerous weapon, and what you don't know may already be hurting you—and your children.

Push for Critical Thinking and Resistance

As you make it a priority to look for bias in the world around you, be sure to teach your child critical thinking: the ability to consider issues through examination and questioning. In terms of cultural definitions and expectations, encourage teens to ask "Why?" and to pick apart the definition of "normal." It's important that your children learn to resist stereotypes and the pressure to conform. If your kids are the victims of intolerance, call it for what it is. Don't minimize the event, but do find a constructive response. Then, support your teen's efforts to dig deep into the causes of individual prejudices, and challenge the reasons behind actions.

Get Involved as a Family

After you've started to become comfortable acknowledging differences and recognizing discrimination, don't be afraid to reach out and speak out as a family. Becoming active in spreading a positive message is easier than you might think.

For more information, visit www.tolerance.org, a web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Online you'll find a range of information including information on hate groups and hate music, and useful publications like "10 Ways to Fight Hate" and "101 Tools for Tolerance." The site also contains a link to "Project Implicit," a web-based test for hidden biases. For a site designed specifically for 'tweens and teens after the events of September 11, 2001, visit www.rippleeffects.com/resist/teens.

This material is for individual assistance only. It is not intended to provide any reader with specific authority, advice or recommendations.

If and when you determine it is necessary, please seek advice regarding your particular situation from the appropriate professional.

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