



Respecting Each Other

There's a song from the musical *South Pacific* that states, "You've got to be taught to hate and fear..." As the lyrics illustrate, children **learn** to be intolerant—they don't do it naturally. Therefore, children need to be taught and reminded that they shouldn't judge others based on stereotypes or outward characteristics (*i.e.*, an accent, a style of dress, or skin color). While teachers and principals try hard to address these issues, the lessons of diversity and respect must be reinforced at home. Children believe what they live and see. So it is up to us, as adults, to make sure they learn to be kind to one another.

Talk about stereotypes: Webster's dictionary defines stereotype as "a...mental picture that...represents an oversimplified opinion..." Children need to understand what this means and the impact it has on our perceptions. Discuss stereotypes with your child. Explain the importance of thinking of people as individuals, rather than making assumptions about the groups they may belong to. Explain that stereotypes aren't just about race or religion, but anything that might be assumed about a group. Help children understand that even when they think a stereotype is positive (*i.e.*, girls can cook or tall people are good at basketball), it is still a generalization and is discriminatory.

Point out stereotypes: Usually children need concrete examples to understand difficult topics. When you're watching TV or music videos with your children, point out examples of stereotypes (*i.e.*, smart kids wear glasses or athletes are popular), then talk about why it's unfair to think about people this way.



Get reactions: Ask your children how they would feel if they didn't get ice cream because of their eye color or couldn't go shopping because of their gender. Talk about your child's feelings and reactions. If your child has ever been the victim of a stereotype, explore the stereotype and discuss how it made your child feel. Share your experiences with stereotypes, too.

Don't tell ethnic or stereotypical jokes: Make a family rule—no one is allowed to tell or laugh at racial, ethnic, or stereotypical jokes. Set an example by standing up against such humor when you encounter it, by saying: "I'm sorry, but I don't find those kinds of jokes funny." Then explain why that kind of humor hurts people's feelings.

Broaden their knowledge: Introduce books, videos, and games in which the main characters are from different races, religions, and nations. This helps open discussions and gives your child a good education about the world.

Try something new: Attend fairs, festivals, exhibits, and other events celebrating different cultures. At these events, you will not only try new foods, hear new music, and learn about other cultures, you will also have fun as a family.

Be a role model: Your actions mean more than any discussion. Show your children how to live a life that respects others and avoids stereotyping.

We are not all the same: Don't teach your children that everyone is the same, because children know it's not true. There are obvious differences, like skin color, hair color, size, or clothing style. There are also those that are not as visible, such as religion or country of origin. The key is to teach your children to respect people of all backgrounds, and to never make assumptions about people based on how they look or what group they belong to.