

tolerant children

Diversity Education

by Lynn Machon



“
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At a young age, children are taught the “golden rule,” the simple directive to treat others as you would like to be treated.

During adolescence, that command is still useful in teaching kids tolerance, an important life skill that sadly, many adults never learn. As we’ve seen throughout history, intolerance creates barriers of ignorance and fear that can lead to personal biases, discrimination, hate crimes and yes, even war.

As ominous as all of that sounds, the good news is that intolerance is easily prevented through education. In order for our children to enjoy a more peaceful world, as well as succeed as individuals in school, work and life, they must first learn tolerance.

Defining Tolerance

For some, the very word “tolerance” tends to have a negative connotation. A better term may actually be “diversity education,” that is, teaching kids to respect the differences in all people.

Our nation is a land of diversity. Most classrooms have a wonderful mix of kids of different sizes and shapes, cultural heritages, family structures, socio-economic status and beliefs. Tolerance simply means appreciating each other’s differences. Kids who learn this valuable lesson

now will be better neighbors, employees and managers in the future.

Teaching Tolerance

Folsom-based marriage and family therapist, Alicia L. Cordeiro, MFT, has worked with families in the area for the past 10 years. She offers several strategies that parents can use with kids of any age to help set the stage for a life of tolerance and respect.

- Teach empathy. For example, “how would you feel if you were made fun of for having brown hair?”
- Correct your child if they say something intolerant.
- Model good diversity tolerance in your own words and actions.
- Expose children to diversity by taking trips outside your own immediate community. Sacramento and San Francisco are short jaunts, which offer invaluable lessons in diversity.
- Volunteer with your children at local homeless shelters, nursing homes or community events.
- Buy ethnically diverse dolls, toys, videos and books.
- Identify unfair stereotypes and examples of intolerance (incidences at school, media stories). Explore with your child how the situation could

have been improved.

- Role-play different scenarios of intolerance and the appropriate responses.

Overall, when teaching tolerance, Cordeiro says, "being proactive is much more helpful than reactive, which is why exposing children to diversity in the first place is so important."

Immersing Children in Diversity

Christie Holderegger, a mother of two from Roseville, has a unique perspective on exposing kids to different walks of life. As an executive with Volunteers of America (VOA), Holderegger has made helping diverse populations of our society her life's passion.

She uses every opportunity to immerse her daughters in different lifestyles and situations. Her family spends quality time interacting with children at homeless shelters. They serve dinners, sing carols and visit the seniors at the affordable housing complex in Roseville, and serve the homeless at VOA's Winter Shelter at Cal Expo. Both girls participate in VOA's Operation Backpack each year, collecting and delivering new backpacks and school supplies to area children in need.

"I just want my children to grow up to be compassionate and kind to all people no matter their culture, religion, sexual orientation or economic class," says Holderegger.

Tolerant Schools are Safer Schools

Like parents, schools have a vested interest in promoting tolerance. Left unchecked, intolerance can rear its ugly head at school in the form of bullying and gang violence.

"As a county, we prioritize the concept that all people have value, and that we must respect each other for who we are," explains Cathy Bean, Deputy Superintendent for El Dorado County's Office of Education (EDCOE).

For the past two years, El Dorado County has hosted a "Safe Schools Symposium" at the EDCOE facility in Placerville. A vital professional development opportunity, the symposium provides a unique forum that allows local schools to showcase their efforts to promote diversity and make campuses more tolerant, safe and inclusive.

Through parents and teachers working together to reinforce the "golden rule" at every age, the tolerance that children learn will assure them greater happiness and success in the future. •



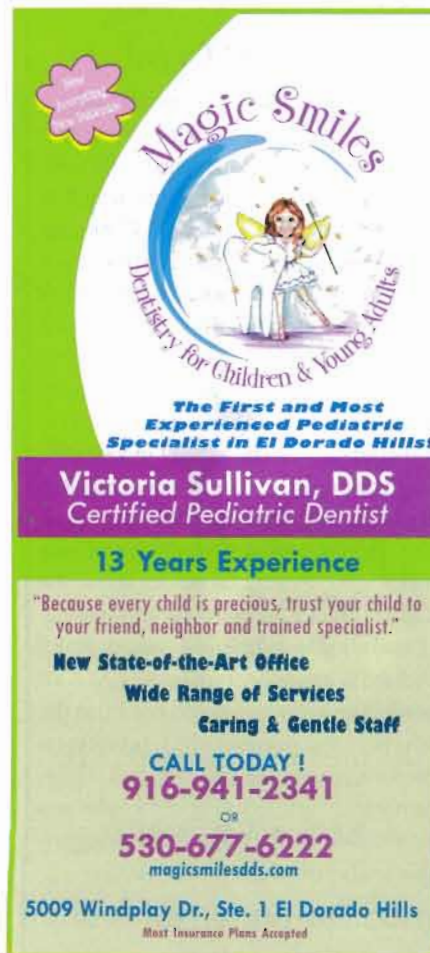
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