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“Teaching Children Religious Tolerance”

Accepting Diversity in a Changing World

By Kimberly Blaker

Every hour a hate crime is committed and half “are committed by young men under 20,” according to Tolerance.org, a web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Religious-based biases, as well as ethnic and racial ones, are learned during early childhood and lead to numerous stereotypes by the time a child reaches 12, says The Leadership Conference Education Fund.

In a society as diverse as the United States, it’s both surprising and disturbing to see the misconceptions often held toward those who are different, including those of other religious beliefs. Unfortunately, Americans witnessed a hard lesson on this on September 11, 2001.

As parents and educators, we must take responsibility for changing these pattern for our children and for future generations.

**Tolerance begins at home**

There are many ways to teach children religious tolerance. But first, we must realize that our own attitudes and actions toward those of different faiths play a crucial role. Children are observant and catch even the subtlest stereotyping and discriminatory

behaviors. Therefore, attitudes held in the home will have the strongest impact on the way children perceive those who are different.

There are many ways you can encourage your child to accept those of other faiths or of no faith. If you haven't already, explain to your child your beliefs and the reasons for them. Then share accurate information about other religious beliefs as well.

Read books with your child on world religions, diversity, and tolerance. Have open discussions and encourage questions.

Explain the importance of religious freedom for your own family as well as for others, and make sure your child knows that being accepting of another doesn't mean you must hold that person's beliefs as true.

### **Learning tolerance outside the home**

Talk to your child's school, as recommended by [Tolerance.org](http://Tolerance.org), to make sure that textbooks and curriculums are up to date to reflect equity and multiculturalism.

Ask teachers and staff if and how they approach the task of teaching tolerance in the classroom. If the school or classroom doesn't already include tolerance education in its program, try to help activate it. Ask if you can share ideas with staff, and learn other ways that you can assist the school in promoting positive attitudes toward diversity.

Help your child also by sharing the beliefs of relatives and friends. It often comes as a surprise, even to adults, to learn that some family members hold very different beliefs. Ask those of other views to share what they believe and why with your child.

If you are concerned that one of these members might go too far and preach or proselytize, discuss your concerns and objectives with the adult, and ask that the discussion be held in a neutral manner by simply sharing ideas. You will help your child

on his way toward acceptance of others by giving him opportunities to learn about the different beliefs that are held by people he looks up to.

### **Fight Intolerance**

Another recommendation by Tolerance.org is to encourage your child to actively fight stereotypes and intolerance. Help your child to form a club, study circle, or sponsor a walkathon for diversity. Your child will have the opportunity to meet children of other beliefs while at the same time teaching social responsibility.

Confront biased behavior among family and friends, as well, especially when children overhear.

If grandmother complains about her “Jewish” neighbors who don’t take care of their lawn don’t brush the comment aside. Otherwise, both grandmother and your child will perceive your silence as acceptance of the stereotype or prejudicial remark.

Confronting family and friends isn’t easy. But it can be done in a tactful manner. Don’t criticize. Rather, nonchalantly yet clearly acknowledge grandmother’s frustrations with the unkempt yard. Then point out that it is doubtful that it has to do with being a Jew. By doing so, your child will learn that such biased comments are not necessarily true. This will also teach your child not to be apathetic toward intolerance.

Finally, if your child attends church, Sunday school, or other religious functions, talk with the leaders and teachers to learn *their* attitudes and levels of tolerance. While many are accepting of others, some religious leaders perpetuate intolerance by preaching against nonbelievers or those of other faiths. Others contribute in more subtle ways. But the effects are still the same.

If you detect prejudiced attitudes, your child is likely to notice these as well. Look for another church or denomination that holds views more similar to yours and that is less biased toward those of other beliefs.

Also, be sure to talk with your church about ways it can teach and promote religious tolerance.

**For more ideas**

Visit Planet Tolerance at <http://www.tolerance.org/pt/index.html> where children can read and listen to stories, create a mural, and explore.

Parents can go to [http://www.tolerance.org/tol\\_at\\_home/index.jsp](http://www.tolerance.org/tol_at_home/index.jsp) for a variety of informative articles on teaching tolerance.

*SIDEBAR: Share these books on world religions and tolerance with your child.*

*A World of Faith* by Peggy Fletcher Stack, illustrated by Kathleen B. Peterson

*One World, Many Religions: The Ways We Worship* by Mary Pope Osborne

*The Story of Religion* by Betsy Maestro and Giulio Maestro

*To Bigotry No Sanction: The Story of the Oldest Synagogue in America* by Leonard Everett Fisher

*Sacred Myths: Stories of World Religions* by Marilyn McFarlane

*Tolerance 101: Practical Solutions to Interfaith Family Problems* by Stanley Koehler

*Teaching Tolerance: Raising Open-minded, Empathetic Children* by Sara Bullard

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PULL QUOTE: While many are accepting of others, some religious leaders perpetuate intolerance by preaching against nonbelievers or those of other faiths.

WAYS TO LOCALIZE: List programs, upcoming, and annual events in your area where children can learn about different cultures that might include religious traditions.

Kimberly Blaker of Michigan is a mother of two. She is an author and syndicated writer and has appeared in more than 100 parenting and women's magazines.

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