

Teaching Children Tolerance

HOW DO WE TEACH our children tolerance? Today wise parents actively discourage old-fashioned thinking that pre-judges people based on their religion, race, gender, or family composition (“That’s great that your friend Joey has two moms”). However, in reality the things that we find especially hard to tolerate in others often have little to do with skin color or the way they worship. The differences in personality and habits we discover in others often attract or repel us. Sometimes the very traits we initially find appealing in a friend become the source of irritation. Our rate of divorce might indicate that we have learning to do in the area of embracing differences in others.

This can hold true for parents, colleagues, roommates, and children in the same class. Teaching children to be tolerant requires us to learn how to rise above irritations. Ideally, we want to demonstrate that differences are desirable, and that rather than insisting on a “right” way of doing things, decisions can be negotiated. Talking about varying perspectives is helpful (“Daddy likes spicy food but I don’t, so we choose a restaurant that has mild and spicy food”).

On the other hand, we want to avoid displays of intolerance (“I can’t stand it when you fold the towels this way” or “I can’t believe you left the lights on again”). Of course, one of the most valuable aspects of embracing differences is that we learn from each other. The highly acclaimed new movie *The King’s Speech* reveals the profound learning and support that can occur between people when tolerance is allowed to flow.

Just as we want to discuss children’s innocent statements of intolerance about race, it’s important to open their minds by discussing the complaints they make about others. We can validate their feelings while broadening their understanding (“I see why you felt impatient. Kiley likes to do quiet things, while you’ve always wanted to be on the go”). The idea isn’t to teach children to go along with what others want but for them to understand that it’s okay to dress differently, like to play in particular ways, or have ideas that don’t match ours. We can also help children empathize with those who don’t have the same level of awareness that they do (“Maybe George interrupts because he doesn’t know how to ask to play”).

The idea of learning tolerance, one of our defined learning outcomes at The Meher Schools, isn’t learning to put up with abusive behavior in others but to strengthen oneself to feel comfortable with a wide variety of people. “Whether or Not You Like Me,” a song written for our school by Henry Mindlin, expresses the ideal of looking beyond people’s reactions to us.

We believe that children benefit from being with people from varying cultures and backgrounds from an early age and feel privileged to serve so such a diverse population. More importantly, we want children to acquire the skills to cooperate with others and learn that apparent differences in appearance and even personality don’t matter very much when you have the same positive goals.

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