

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Confronting the Monsters of Misunderstanding

YEARS AGO, A MEHER SCHOOL KINDERGARTNER asked one of his teachers, “Is this a Jewish school?” “Yes, it is,” the teacher replied, and the child, who was from a Jewish background, beamed. The teacher admitted that she would have answered yes to a child inquiring if our school is Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Sikh (or a place of no religion). Her spontaneous reaction was a way of communicating, “Here, everyone is included.”

Perhaps you remember a time in your past when someone reacted in a way that made you feel “other.” Comedian Jon Stewart recently aired a skit about feeling like an outsider when his classmates talked about Christmas. In the past, making someone feel like an outsider because he didn’t celebrate the same holidays or wear the “right” clothes was considered cool.

Consciousness has changed, and the idea of embracing human diversity continually grows and expands. America has become the most religiously diverse nation in the world, and even in preschool we want children to know that our friend’s celebrations are an important part of our life fabric too. It’s easy to have misconceptions.

When one of the second grade teachers introduced a discussion of Hanukkah, many children in the class said, “It’s about monsters.” They had read the Caldecott Award-winning picture book called *Herschel and the Hanukkah Goblins*. This book does depicts Herschel confronting various monsters as part of observing Hannukah. For a child who understands Hannukah, the addition of goblins might be intriguing, but luckily our young readers who had concluded from the book that the holiday is about monsters brought up their confusion.

Learning factual information about what other people value and hold dear is an important part of combating prejudice. Harvard professor Dr. Diana Eck, who heads the Pluralism Project, tells the story of some young boys who vandalized a Vietnamese temple in their neighborhood. Instead of prosecuting, the temple invited the boys to a picnic and neighborhood clean-up day. Diana talked to one of the vandals after his visit to the temple, where he saw people praying. He told her, “I never would have done this if I knew what went on inside this building.”

Our children aren’t at high risk for becoming vandals, but their generation will experience more diversity than ours has, and it’s our job to help them understand people in the rapidly changing world around them. One way to do that is through reading.

The Storyteller bookstore in Lafayette provides a whole shelf of children’s books about religion. Here are some interesting selections that they carry:

♥ *The Golden Rule* by Ilene Cooper. A beautiful picture book for young children that talks about how the golden rule is worded in different religions.

♥ *Religious Food: What’s Sacred to Me* by Anita Ganeri. A children’s photographic book detailing food associated with various religions.

♥ *What Do You Believe?* A lovely DK book that explores the beliefs of multiple religions.

♥ *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: The Religious Etiquette Handbook* by Edward Stuart. This is the fifth edition of an award-winning book for older children (and adults) about how to participate in religious services that are unfamiliar to us.

December 19, 2012