

Are We Teaching Intolerance?
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You probably will recognize this category of words: *idiot, moron, retard, deaf and dumb, piece of work, imbecile, and mingo*. Sadly, these are just a few of the derogatory words some people use in their everyday language to describe individuals with challenges. Hopefully, when we hear these words, even if spoken by friends and family members, we have the courage to express our objection to these words. These words are hurtful and misrepresent others. *He acts retarded. He's a retard. She's retarded.* When we hear children use phrases similar to these, whether the child is our personal responsibility or not, we need to step up to our responsibility as adults. The situation will of course dictate the type of response. However, adults need to encourage young people to use communication that is not offensive.

As children enter and develop through the school-age years language influences expand beyond the boundaries of the family. In this digital age, these language influences are dynamic. Cable television, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter for example, all increase the possibilities for school-age children to be exposed to screen to screen communication more rapidly than to person to person communication. Despite the increased possibility for children to have multiple communication partners digitally and with young people outside of their immediate family, the influence of family communication should not be dismissed. In fact I will venture to say that personal communication with family members and observed among family members is more powerful than digital communication. The emotional strength of the communication can be lost with the technology. I will assert further that the real time, face-to-face communication that takes place without words can be as powerful as words. Adults may monitor using derogatory words but fail to monitor derogatory non-verbal communication that creates a lasting impression on children.

Communication is more than the words we say. Communication involves the whole body and the messages that express our intentions through our eyes, facial affects body positioning, hand gestures, breathing pattern and response rate. Adults can engage in hurtful non-verbal communication that encourages children to be intolerant of individuals who have challenges. We stare at people who are physically challenged. We show facial displeasure with people who stutter and can't finish a message without struggle. We express our impatience with tense body positioning with the person on line for a purchase that takes too long to count change, find coupons or read the necessary signs. When someone doesn't respond, do we consider the possibility that the person physically can't hear without difficulty? Momentarily, we all can become forgetful of the frailties we share with other human beings. We indulge ourselves in a delusion that our humanity is superior to another individual who faces communication or cognitive challenges. Brief observations of adult intolerance can make lasting impressions in a child's memory. These

impressions feed intolerant beliefs, which lead to intolerant behavior in school and other social environments.

Past and current history gives numerous evidence of “imperfect” individuals who provide extraordinary contributions to our society. We also have evidence of “perfect” individuals who are responsible for destruction, devastation and holocaust. Shall we encourage intolerance of those who on the surface appear different? Shall we create a community that embraces difference and tolerance? In a school environment, intolerance can become a non-verbal weapon that systematically makes some children outliers. Children are embarrassed to speak in class because of a problem stuttering. These children may withdraw into silence. Children refuse to wear hearing aids or other auditory enhancement devices for fear of being identified as different. Children who need to sit close to the teacher or the chalkboard refuse to accept preferential seating. Children refuse to accept therapeutic services in school for fear of being teased. Children who are struggling with basic skills to express themselves become socially isolated perhaps refusing to attend school. These children may also find ways to physically express their frustration, shame, and isolation through acting out towards others or physically destructive behavior.

We need a community that embraces everyone. Let’s encourage acceptance of others. Let’s teach tolerance and not intolerance by our examples in words and actions. The next time you want to stare at someone who looks odd, behaves atypical, is unable to speak, wears a hearing aid, walks with a prosthetic limb, or is unable to manage simple tasks say, “Hello”, and perhaps...”May I help you?” Or perhaps turn that stare into a compassionate smile. Believe me, your child will notice.