What Can Parents and Teachers Do About Prejudice?

- Despite the best efforts of many parents and teachers, children still learn prejudice and practice discrimination. How does this happen?

- Prejudice is learned through living in and observing a society where prejudice exists. Children's opinions are influenced by what the people around them think, do and say. Even if parents and teachers are role models of acceptance of peoples of all races, cultures and religions, children are exposed to many people who do not respect differences. The following suggestions will help parents and teachers teach children to live harmoniously in an increasingly multicultural society.

- Accept each child as unique and special. Let children know that you recognize and appreciate their individual qualities. Children who feel good about themselves are less likely to be prejudiced. Also, notice unique and special qualities in other people and discuss them with your children.

- Help children become sensitive to other people's feelings. Studies indicate that caring, empathetic children are less likely to be prejudiced. Share stories and books with your children that help them to understand the points of view of other people. When personal conflicts occur, encourage your children to think about how the other person might be feeling.

- Make sure your children understand that prejudice and discrimination are unfair. Make it a firm rule that no person should be excluded or teased on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, accent, gender, disability, sexual orientation or appearance. Point out and discuss discrimination when you see it.

- Teach children respect and an appreciation for differences by providing opportunities for interaction with people of diverse groups. Studies show that children playing and working together toward common goals develop positive attitudes about one another. Sports teams, bands, school clubs and community programs are examples of activities that can help to counter the effects of homogeneous neighborhoods. In addition to first-hand experiences, provide opportunities for children to learn about people through books, television programs, concerts or other programs that show positive insights into other cultures.

- Help children recognize instances of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. Make sure they know how to respond to such attitudes and behaviors when they see them in action. Television, news and entertainment shows, movies and newspapers often provide opportunities for discussion. According to recent studies, encouraging children's critical thinking ability may be the best antidote to prejudice.

- Encourage your children to create positive change. Talk to your children about how they can respond to prejudiced thinking or acts of discrimination they observe. Painting over racist graffiti, writing letters to a television producer who promotes stereotyped programming, or confronting a peer's discriminatory behavior are all appropriate actions. Confronting classmates is particularly hard for children, so they need to have a ready-made response to such instances. If another child is called a hurtful name, an observer might simply say, "Don't call him/her that. Call him/her by his/her name." Or, if your child is the victim, "Don't call me that. That's not fair." or "You don't like to be called bad names and neither do I." In all cases, try to help children to feel comfortable in pointing out fairness.

- Take appropriate action against prejudice and discrimination. For example, if other adults use bigoted language around you, your children or students, you should not ignore it. Your children need to know that such behavior is unacceptable even if it is from a familiar adult. A simple phrase will do: "Please don't talk that way around me or my children/students" or "That kind of joke offends me." Adults need to hold themselves to the same standards they want their children to follow.

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