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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Promoting Tolerance in Children

Although much is unknown about the causes of intolerance, we can discuss one factor that we know does play an important part in developing tolerance: the ability to empathize.

What is empathy?: Empathy is the ability to understand another's point of view. Empathetic people feel a connection and compassion for others with different perspectives and histories. They are therefore more likely to be tolerant and affirming of differences among people, whether on the basis of race, gender, sexual preference, religion, physical and mental disabilities, or other differences that do not bear on the worth or goodness of a person.

How can parents foster empathy?: Children must be taught how to be empathetic. Sometimes it is relatively easy for a child to empathize with another. When children are confronted with situations similar to ones that they have experienced, it is easier for them to be empathetic. In these cases, children can map their experience onto someone else's experiences, making the assumption that someone else feels about as they do.

We use this approach to introduce young children to empathy, asking them to imagine how they would feel in a situation so that they can understand the feelings of others. We might ask a 2-year-old, "How do you feel when someone takes your toy? That's how Maria feels."

Children (and adults) face a greater challenge when the experience and relevant background of someone else is increasingly different from their own. For example, young people find it difficult to know what it feels like to age, and it is hard to feel what it is like to be unable to walk, hear or see if you

can do all these things. This kind of empathy requires work, a kind of creativity that we call “an imaginative leap.”

Parents have the challenge to guide their child in building a capacity to empathize with experiences that are increasingly different than his or her own. The key to doing this is to first dignify the experience of another, and then take the next step of helping children imagine what it might feel like inside that other person. There are a variety of ways that parents might accomplish this.

First, parents should understand and respect their own child’s feelings and point of view. Parents shouldn’t trivialize the reasons their child does things, such as by saying that she or he is only seeking attention or implying that she or he doesn’t feel what she or he claims to feel. As a child directly experiences parental empathy, she or he will learn about empathy through firsthand experience, and will be increasingly able to emulate their parents’ empathy.

Parents should model the imaginative leaps that put them inside another person. Being compassionate is important, but being specific about how it would feel to be inside that person is also very important. If a parent sees a homeless person on the street, it is worthwhile to take a moment to say how difficult life must be for the person; he or she might worry about whether there will be enough to eat tomorrow or whether tonight will be freezing cold or rainy. Parents will find many such opportunities to humanize others, once they start looking.

If a child asks about someone who has a different cultural tradition, it can be an opportunity to talk about what it might be like to be a person who wonders whether others say or think negative things about him or her. Parents might help their child make this imaginative leap by asking their daughter or son how it might feel if she or he didn’t know whether some of the people that she or he is around think mean things about them.

Parents can remain sensitive to the perspectives and feelings of those who are not in the majority, or dominant culture as it is sometimes called. The recent political process gave several opportunities. Perhaps a child is old

enough to start to think about questions such as the one that Colin Powell recently raised: "So what if a presidential candidate is a Muslim? What is wrong with that?" Parents can help their child see that a Muslim child watching TV might conclude that a presidential candidate shouldn't be Muslim, and how that might feel. Or, parents can help their child consider what would it be like if someone was a Jewish child and saw the way candidates proclaimed their faith in Jesus as if that were a requirement for office. Would that Jewish child believe that it was just as good to be Jewish and not believe that Jesus was the messiah?

Readers may note that we did not emphasize explanations about equality. Of course, these have their place. However, explanations that skin color, religion and other differences do not affect who we are as people - our rights and our goodness - are only the first steps toward tolerance, and the more straightforward ones at that. True tolerance requires emotional connection and empathy, and these often require courageous leaps of imagination. Lead and they will follow.