

The Challenges of Differences

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Being different can be enormously hard. The tendency to torment students who are different is puzzling when we realize that being different is natural. Just as there are no absolutely identical snowflakes or blades of grass, there are no absolutely identical human beings. Even monozygotic twins are slightly different than each other. Humans vary widely in terms of shape, size and skin/hair/eye color. We also vary in gifts, strengths, personalities and abilities.

A hopeful attribute of human beings is our ability to learn. Sure, we have some responses that don't seem learned, such as a dislike of certain food tastes or fears of rodents or the dark. But even these "natural" responses or preferences can be changed when we're given new information. Think of foods you've come to appreciate or fears you've overcome by "teaching" yourself how to handle the fear. Maybe someone else helped you by explaining that unfamiliar, scary-looking thing or by modeling how fun it could be to pet the dog or the hamster.

Children aren't programmed to automatically fear, hate or belittle people who are different. Fear and hate are learned responses. Unfortunately, such learning perpetuates itself in some terrible ways. Once our children absorb the idea that "different" is bad, scary or something to make fun of, they become afraid of being different. This learned and cruel response to diversity perpetuates itself. It's partly a hierarchical problem. Everyone is scrambling to be higher on the social ladder than someone else, and everyone is afraid of being pushed down. You probably glimpsed this reality from your own school experiences. For many middle-school students and teens, social acceptance and belonging to a group are so important that they will conform to the rules even if it violates their individuality, their sense of what is right for themselves or what is right in the world.

This brings us to a perennial debate. Many parents feel like giving up once their children hit adolescence. After all, isn't it true that when your children become teenagers it doesn't really matter what adults want or expect from them?

Our answer is an unequivocal "No." In fact, parents and teachers and other adults continue to have influence throughout the teen years. What if we all, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, bus drivers, babysitters, what if everyone taught our children curiosity and tolerance instead of fear and hatred? This would include teaching children to value the differences within themselves. We're fairly certain that readers with children who are "different" just rolled their eyes and said something like, "Get real." to us just now. And readers with children who fear or hate differences probably had a similar reaction. Maybe we are a bit idealistic, but what are the options? In a world as fractured and judgmental as ours, we need to find ways to break down barriers and value each other just as we are. Of course, this would involve an attitude shift, one articulated decades ago by the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton.

Merton wondered aloud how different our story would be if the first white explorers had learned to encounter other cultures with an attitude of curiosity, an attitude of respect and mystery. He wondered how things would be different if we began with the assumption that everyone was worthwhile. What if we believed everyone had something to offer or teach us? What if we firmly and steadily taught our children these beliefs instead of allowing them to absorb the fear and hatred so

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readily available in our culture?

Recently, we facilitated a small group in a local school. In the first meetings, students sometimes hurled insults back and forth. A girl and boy from different ethnic and social backgrounds were especially mean to each other. One day as the girl talked about her parents' divorce, the boy remarked, "Hey, that sounds just like my family." The meanness between them melted away.

School counselors and teachers need your help. Tell your children you expect them to treat everyone at school with respect, and then back up your talk with action. Treat your children, your spouse or partner, your neighbors and yourself with respect. And if/when you hear a disrespectful comment or behavior toward a minority group, counter that comment or behavior with a polite and calm rebuttal. Parents, teachers and school counselors need to stand strong together as advocates for a respectful school and community where all children are free to fulfill their learning potential.

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