

### **Weller Health Tip for Parents: Teaching Your Child Tolerance**

America is the great “melting pot,” a rich blend of cultural traditions from all over the world. Many American families can trace their histories to immigrant ancestors who traveled great distances, enduring risk and hardship, to make a home where they would be guaranteed basic freedoms. And for many American families these freedoms came with a struggle. Their parents and grandparents were deprived the basic rights we value.

American society was founded on freedom from religious persecution and on tolerance of differences in beliefs and cultural heritage. The differences (or diversity) that come from people from all over the world enrich our culture, bringing new ideas and energy. Today, more than ever, kids interact with people of differing ethnicities, religions, and cultures. Classrooms are increasingly diverse, reflecting the communities where families live and work.

#### **A World of Difference**

Some parents welcome the fact that we live in an increasingly diverse society. Others may feel more hesitant, especially if they have not had much exposure to people different from themselves. Many kids are way ahead of their parents regarding exposure to cultural differences. Their circle of friends, their schoolmates, and their athletic teams are much more varied than those of even a generation ago.

Still, parents should help their kids prepare to live, learn, and work in communities that will become even more diverse. Teaching tolerance is important not just because it is part of our American heritage, but because the person who learns to be open to differences will have more opportunities in education, business, and many other aspects of life.

In short, your child’s success depends on it. Success in today’s world — and tomorrow’s — depends on being able to understand, appreciate, and work with others.

#### **About Tolerance**

Tolerance refers to an attitude of openness and respect for the differences that exist among people. Although originally used to refer to ethnic and religious differences, the concepts of diversity and tolerance can also be applied to gender, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, and other differences, too.

Tolerance means respecting and learning from others, valuing differences, bridging cultural gaps, rejecting unfair stereotypes, discovering common ground, and creating new bonds. Tolerance, in many ways, is the opposite of prejudice.

But does tolerance mean that all behaviors have to be accepted? No, of course not. Behaviors that disrespect or hurt others, like being mean or bullying, or behaviors that break social rules, like lying or stealing, should not be tolerated. Tolerance is about accepting people for who they are — not about accepting bad behavior. Tolerance also means treating others the way you would like to be treated.

#### **How Tolerance Is Taught**

Like all attitudes, tolerance is often taught in subtle ways. Even before they can speak, children closely watch — and imitate — their parents. Kids of all ages develop their own values, in great part, by mirroring the values and attitudes of those they care about.

Many parents live and work in diverse communities and have friends who are different from themselves in some (or in many) ways. Parents’ attitudes about respecting others are often so much a part of them that they rarely even think about it. They teach those

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attitudes simply by being themselves and living their values. Parents who demonstrate (or model) tolerance in their everyday lives send a powerful message. As a result, their children learn to appreciate differences, too.

Of course, celebrating differences of others doesn't mean giving up your own heritage. Your family may have its own long-standing cultural and religious traditions that are something to be proud of. Families can find ways to celebrate differences of others while continuing to honor and pass down their own cultural heritage.

### **How Can Parents Teach Tolerance?**

Parents can teach tolerance by example — and in other ways, too. Talking together about tolerance and respect helps kids learn more about the values you want them to have. Giving them opportunities to play and work with others is important as well. This lets kids learn firsthand that everyone has something to contribute and to experience differences and similarities.

### **Things parents can do to help kids learn tolerance include:**

- Notice your own attitudes. Parents who want to help their kids value diversity can be sensitive to cultural stereotypes they may have learned and make an effort to correct them. Demonstrate an attitude of respect for others.
- Remember that kids are always listening. Be aware of the way you talk about people who are different from yourself. Do not make jokes that perpetuate stereotypes. Although some of these may seem to be harmless fun, they can undo attitudes of tolerance and respect.
- Select books, toys, music, art, and videos carefully. Keep in mind the powerful effect the media and pop culture have on shaping attitudes.
- Point out and talk about unfair stereotypes that may be portrayed in media.
- Answer kids' questions about differences honestly and respectfully. This teaches that it is acceptable to notice and discuss differences as long as it is done with respect.
- Acknowledge and respect differences within your own family. Demonstrate acceptance of your children's differing abilities, interests, and styles. Value the uniqueness of each member of your family.
- Remember that tolerance does not mean tolerating unacceptable behavior. It means that everyone deserves to be treated with respect — and should treat others with respect as well.
- Help your children feel good about themselves. Kids who feel badly about themselves often treat others badly. Kids with strong self-esteem value and respect themselves and are more likely to treat others with respect, too. Help your child to feel accepted, respected, and valued.
- Give kids opportunities to work and play with others who are different from them. When choosing a school, day camp, or child-care facility for your child, find one with a diverse population.
- Learn together about holiday and religious celebrations that are not part of your own tradition.

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Honor your family's traditions and teach them to your kids — and to someone outside the family who wants to learn about the diversity you have to offer.

When parents encourage a tolerant attitude in their children, talk about their values, and model the behavior they would like to see by treating others well, kids will follow in their footsteps.

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit [www.wellercenter.org](http://www.wellercenter.org).

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