

The Difficult Discussion

How to have it.

By Michael Tyler

The challenge of discussing provocative issues and traumatizing events is so risk-riddled and stress-inducing as to be deterring to most people. Attempting to do so becomes even more daunting when aggravated by the inflammation of violating histories, deep-seated distrust, and bitter emotions. Such is the case when trying to have a constructive conversation about hate-based discrimination and the disparities, dissension, and destruction they create in society and consequences for the lives of many.

Another challenge to overcome is that the difficult discussion on such issues must be approached with a dual intention: 1. How do we talk to our children about it? 2. How do we talk to each other about it? I will address this in two parts: 1. Our Children 2. Each Other.

Our Children

Parents, caregivers, educators, and adult influencers struggle with their concerns, about being sensitive to our children's capacity to comprehend and cope with upsetting and unsettling issues and events. We need to:

- Help them process what they are exposed to.
- Protect them from psychological harm and emotional distress.
- Safeguard against them becoming victims.
- Teach them how to intervene when others are being victimized.
- Prevent them from becoming perpetrators of intolerance and mistreatment.

This effort can be productive if we evaluate the *operative mindset* we need to be in when speaking to children, and if we translate our lessons into a *conduct application* they can practice.

1. **Rethink, reconsider.** The expression "raising children" is the directive adults consider to be their duty. However, the average life expectancy in America is 79 years. So, our children will spend three-quarters of the lives as adults. We are not raising them. We are caring for them. The truth is *we are raising adults*. If we fail to consider this, we will not think more purposefully about the adults we are developing for our society.
2. **Don't determine, discover.** Adults tend to prejudge the intelligence of children. Rather than determining the limits of their capacity for thought, we should discover the frontier of their ability to comprehend. If we do this, we will be more proactive about determining the content of their character and more preemptive about ridding their lives of discrimination.
3. **Tend to your garden.** Children are like seeds we plant into the soil of our beliefs. Whatever lies in the earth of our perspectives will nourish or choke the roots of their principles. We must till the ground our own judgments, to weed our intentions of hate. The flowering of our children depends on our self-examination and dedication, to water our words and fertilize our thoughts with a humanitarian regard for everyone.

4. **Dole out the cure.** Hate is a disease of character that poisons compassion and infects sensibility. Tolerance is promoted as a cure, but tolerance means to endure not eradicate. There is no moral remedy in only enduring those who are different while preserving disdain for their differences. We can inoculate the hearts and minds of our children with the antidote of acceptance. It goes beyond prescribing the placebo of false virtue administered by tolerance. Acceptance requires us to *recognize, acknowledge* and *affirm* the universal humanity within us all. Promoting it will bolster our immunity to combat the contagion of hate and protect the equality of everyone. Acceptance is the cure.
5. **Have a greater goal.** We often react to injustice and violation with calls for change but change only means to alter perspective. For example, the moon changes its position and appearance in the sky each night but still remains the same size, shape, and substance. Such is the case with discrimination. Perspectives change on their place and presentation in society, but it essentially remains the same. When a caterpillar cocoons itself, it will emerge as a butterfly. This alteration is so profound that the caterpillar is completely unrecognizable as a butterfly, and the butterfly can never again be the caterpillar. This is transformation. Defeating hate requires us to become so profoundly altered in our beliefs and behaviors, that who we become can never again be who we were.
6. **Give them the answer.** A common mistake many adults make is dismissing the curiosity of children and ignoring their observations, when they ask questions and make comments that trigger our discomfort. But consider that when a child can ask a question or make a comment about a sensitive or complicated issue, that child is ready to understand it because she or he has demonstrated the interest and ability to think about it. Subsequently, it is incumbent upon us, as adults, to, in that moment, provide an answer to the question and examine the comment for understanding.
7. **Give them the vocabulary.** Difficult conversations are even more difficult to have, given the disparity in communication between adults and children. We must bridge the gap between our ability to explain and their ability to understand. This can be done by teaching them the words we need them to know, to enable them to process and understand what they see, hear and confront. Again, if we don't prejudge their intelligence, we will find that they are very capable of understanding what they need to know. When my youngest son was four years old, he was taught to speak Mandarin in preschool. I reasoned that if he could learn a different language and a different alphabet at age four, he could certainly learn words for a better understanding of the society he had to grow up in. They can, if we will.
8. **Give them the way.** I heard a pun, in third grade, that became fixed in my memory: "I never metaphor that I didn't like." Metaphors are the secret language that allows the difficulty to be made easy in conversation. When speaking to our children, metaphors can be the key to giving them comprehension with lasting clarity. Why? Children reason in ways more literal than conceptual. Associative models give them a tangible tool to be repeatedly referred to. For example, most children have had the experience of being given a present, and they know the real gift lies inside. Their hair and skin are but ribbons and wrapping paper on the gift of who they are. From this analogy, they can see others as gifts to open, discover and appreciate.
9. **Be their example.** It is not enough to verbally instruct children about equality and acceptance, and to teach them against hate indoctrination. When it comes to hate, "Practice what you preach" takes on the significance of perpetuating or ending what

continues to divide us. Children need to see it, if they are to believe it and we need to be it, if they are to achieve it. They must witness how we, the adults in their lives, live their lessons as our truths. Otherwise, our hypocrisy will become their instruction and the duplicity of a sham morality will be what guides their conduct.