

Teaching Tolerance: Promoting Peace in Crisis

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A natural reaction to acts of extreme violence like school shootings, rioting and terrorist attacks is the desire to lash out and punish the perpetrators or perceived enemy. People who are angry or frightened often feel that the ability to “fight back” puts them more in control or will alleviate their sense of pain. While anger is a normal response felt by many, we must ensure that we do not compound an already tragic situation and react against innocent individuals with vengeance and intolerance. There is a tremendous risk of unfairly stigmatizing people we associate with those we perceive as responsible for tragedies, conflicts, and other crises because of their apparent race, language, religion, the way they dress, etc.

Children, in particular, may have difficulty channeling their feelings appropriately and can easily pick up negative or demeaning cues given by adults around them. Given the diversity of America’s schools, some students may become targets of hostility and blame because they may become viewed as the “enemy” of a student’s own particular group. Bullying and harassment are *never* acceptable but they can be particularly damaging when certain students or segments of society feel especially vulnerable. Parents and school personnel need to be prepared to quickly and effectively prevent and intervene in the presence of abusive behaviors toward *any* students. Such behaviors can only further contribute to the risk of violence in schools and communities.

Adults can help children understand the importance of treating all people with dignity and not judging *groups* of people by the actions of a *few*. **Most importantly, adults must model tolerance and compassion in their words and behavior.** They should also encourage children to explore their feelings about injustice, prejudice, and hate. Doing so is not only critical to preventing further harm, but the process presents a potentially powerful opportunity for our young people to learn and incorporate into their values the true strength of our country—our commitment to individual freedom and upholding the respect and dignity of all people.

Key Messages

1. **Violence and hate are never solutions to anger.** Perpetrators of violence—against fellow students or against our country—cause tremendous harm because they act violently against innocent people out of blind hate. We must not act like them by lashing out at innocent people around us, or “hating” them because of their origins, their appearance, or their choice of dress.
2. **Groups of people should not be judged by the actions of a few.** It is wrong to condemn an entire group of people by association of religion, race, homeland, affiliations, or even proximity. No one likes to be blamed or threatened for the actions of others.
3. **America is strong because of our diversity.** Known as the great “melting-pot” of the world, American democracy is founded on respect for individual differences. Those differences in culture, religion, ideas, ethnicity, and lifestyle have contributed to the strength and richness of our country.
4. **All people deserve to be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity.** Certainly individuals that are proven to be guilty of a crime should be punished. No matter how angry we are over these terrible crimes, our Constitution ensures fair and equitable treatment under the law for all Americans.
5. **Vengeance and justice are not necessarily the same.** Justice means punishing the real perpetrators, not innocent people. Hurting other children and neighbors will not make us safer, resolve conflict, or help punish students who harm or harass classmates. It will only add to the hate and anger, increasing the risk of further violence.
6. **We are in this together.** Regardless of their ethnicities, all members of a community are hurt by acts of senseless violence. We need to support each other, comfort each other, and work together to help those most in need during difficult times.
7. **History shows us that intolerance only causes harm.** Some of our country’s darkest moments resulted from prejudice and intolerance for our own people because individuals acted out of fear. We must not repeat terrible mistakes such as our inappropriate, often violent treatment and ignorance of minority groups.
8. **We need to work for peace in our communities and around the world.** By reaching out to our classmates, friends, and neighbors from diverse backgrounds, we can help heal the wounds from tragic events and build stronger, more resilient communities.
9. **Tolerance is a lifelong endeavor.** Although it is critical in the immediate aftermath of a crisis to protect classmates and neighbors from harassment, the issues of tolerance and inclusion go beyond crisis recovery. We must embrace these values for all time. This includes all races, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and those with special needs.

Tips for Parents and Teachers

1. **Model tolerance and compassion.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid making negative statements about any racial, ethnic, or religious group. Reach out to your neighbors and colleagues who might feel at risk because of their ethnicity, religion or other traits.
2. **Provide useful information.** Accurate information about people, events, reactions, and feelings is empowering. Use language that is developmentally appropriate for children. Make sure that all information is

factually true. This is especially important when news reports have negative statements about any specific group.

3. **Avoid stereotyping individuals or groups.** Children can easily generalize negative statements to students in their classes and community. Focusing on the race, ethnicity, nationality affiliations, or appearance of perpetrators of violence can create prejudice, anger, and mistrust for innocent groups of people. Be clear about your statements and biases, and help children understand their own prejudices. Reinforce the inherent injustice of making assumptions based on appearances.
4. **Stop any type of harassment or bullying immediately.** Make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable. Talk to the children involved about the reasons for their behavior. Offer alternative methods of expressing their anger, confusion, or insecurity.
5. **Address the issue of blame factually.** Explore who and what may be to blame for this event. Use non-speculative terms—stick strictly to facts. Do not suggest any group is responsible. Do not repeat the speculations of others, including newscasters. Do not encourage or allow random blaming; but understand that self-blame may be a way for students to feel "in control" (something different they "could have done" or "could do" in the future). Be careful to ensure students from targeted groups do not assume blame in order to make classmates feel better. Blaming can be especially tempting in case of acts of random but intentional violence because someone is at fault. However, explain that the actions of a few individuals cannot be blamed on an entire racial or ethnic group. Help children resist the tendency to want to "pin the blame" on someone close by. In this country, we still believe that all people are innocent until solid, reliable evidence from our legal authorities proves otherwise.
6. **Discuss how it would feel to be blamed unfairly by association.** Ask children if they have ever gotten in trouble for something a sibling or friend did and how they felt. Would they like it if their entire class were punished for the actions of one student and if they think this would be fair?
7. **Explore children's fears.** Even children who can describe an event may not be able to express fears, questions, or describe assumptions or conclusions they may have drawn from their observations. Use activities, role-playing, and discussions to explore their fears about the events and their feelings about various groups from diverse groups, cultures, or lifestyles involved.
8. **Emphasize positive, familiar images of diverse groups.** Identify people of diverse ethnicities, religions and/or lifestyles that children know and who have a positive place in their lives. These could be neighbors, friends, school personnel, health care professionals, law enforcement officers, healthcare workers, members of their faith community, or local business owners. Discuss the many characteristics, values, and experiences the children have in common with these people.
9. **Identify "heroes" of varying backgrounds involved in response to traumatic events.** These include firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, military personnel, public officials, medical workers, teachers, faith leaders, public figures, and regular citizens who work to help keep students, families, schools, and communities safe.
10. **Undertake projects to help those in need with people from diverse backgrounds.** Helping others is part of the healing process. Working with classmates or members of the community who come from different backgrounds not only enables children to feel that they are making a positive contribution, it also reinforces their sense of commonality with diverse people.
11. **Discuss historical instances of American intolerance.** In an age-appropriate manner, invite students to discuss instances of intolerance and the negative consequences which resulted. Walk students through examples such as the Internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor, segregation of African Americans, and the backlash against Arab Americans during the Gulf War and encourage their children to suggest better choices that Americans can make this time. These discussions can be held in class, but should also take place at home and involve parents and family members.
12. **Learn about the diverse communities and faiths represented in your area.** Knowledge debunks myths about other people and can humanize other cultures. In school, have children share information about their family or cultural customs to reinforce the notion that all people have special traditions, beliefs, and rituals.
13. **Read books with your children or students that address prejudice, tolerance, and hate.** There are many, many stories appropriate for varying age groups that can help children think about and define their feelings regarding these issues. The school or local librarian can make recommendations.

Additional Tips for Schools

1. **Provide parents with information.** Send home materials on class lessons, book titles, resources for further information, and opportunities to help. Enlist support from parents to prevent teasing, bullying, or abuse of any students. Consider implementation of one of the proven bullying prevention curricula, such as "Bully-Proof Your School."
2. **Train all school personnel.** Every school professional should be trained to model tolerance and intervene immediately if a child is being bullied. This includes bus drivers, lunchroom and playground monitors, after school program leaders, coaches and extracurricular activities directors.
3. **Share information with community groups.** Provide talking points, information, and intervention strategies to local community organizations dealing with children. This can include local libraries, youth programs, recreational facilities, and the media.

For further information on promoting tolerance among children and youth, contact NASP at (301) 657-0270.

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