

## Teaching Tolerance, Embracing Diversity – Putting an End to Prejudice and Bullying

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Children's first reaction is to reject or fear that which is new or different. Parents must teach their children to appreciate diversity and to befriend those who look or act differently. It is not acceptable to believe that "we" are the best, shunning "them" as inferior. ("We" would be me along with those I identify with – people of my race, faith, gender, or ethnicity. "They" would be those who are not like me.)

The USA was founded on freedom of choice. In the 1700s it was common for governments to mandate religious beliefs, but the USA promoted a new concept. Our forefathers established a country where people could practice their own faith in their own way. The 1800s could be characterized by the development of the concept that people of all races have equal rights to freedom. In the 1900s, women were recognized as citizens with the right to vote. Even though we still have racism, sexism, and religious zealots promoting their way as the only way, most will agree that everyone needs to learn tolerance and to embrace diversity if we are ever going to live in a safe and peaceful world.

Our federal government prohibits discrimination in employment because of race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, or disability. The USA is way ahead of many countries throughout the world where there is no freedom of religion, women have no rights, and there is still a rigid caste system based on birth or skin color. But there is still one area in which discrimination is rampant and which is causing many teens and adults to become victimized. That is sexual orientation.

Between 5 & 10% of the population identify themselves as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or "questioning"). LGBTQ youth are often victims of prejudice, discrimination, and bullying. Children and teens expressing even minor gender non-conformity traits are often teased and bullied by peers. Just as people of all faiths, colors, and genders are supposed to be afforded equal rights in the USA, the LGBTQ population deserves the same rights. This appears to be the civil rights issue of this century. Parents can really help to reduce the bullying by teaching their children to embrace all types of diversity.

By modeling nonjudgmental behavior and attitudes, we teach children to treat others appropriately. We need to avoid using expressions like "That's so gay" when referring to something stupid or "He Jewed me down" when referring to someone cheating us. We need to examine our own attitudes and behaviors when it comes to interacting with those of a different race. We need to seek to expand our circle of friends to include those with different perspectives – people of different faiths, cultures, races, ethnic origins, and even sexual orientation. And most importantly for a more peaceful world in the future, we need to teach our children to treat everyone with care and respect at all times, by modeling this behavior in our everyday lives.

If your child has been a victim or perpetrator of bullying or prejudice and is exhibiting some negative behaviors (running away, cutting school, acting out), please call (352) 244-0628. CDS offers counseling

for children age 6-17. [www.cdsfl.org](http://www.cdsfl.org) - Other local resources: River Phoenix Center for Peacebuilding.  
[www.centerforpeacebuilding.org](http://www.centerforpeacebuilding.org). PFLAG (Parents, Friends, & Family of Lesbians & Gays)  
[www.pflaggainesville.org](http://www.pflaggainesville.org).