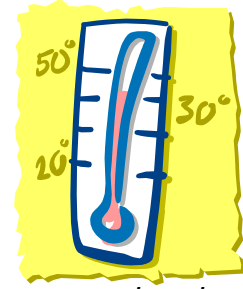


Our Tolerance Meter



Most of us would be familiar with the saying, 'sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.' But how many of us have found that this is really true?

We touch each other with words that are gentle and fair, but they can also be tools to sting and bruise. So perhaps through experience we learn this chant in childhood, to try to protect ourselves from the pain those words inflict.

Children learn the power of words very early. Anyone in contact with two-year-olds and their emphatic 'No' can testify to that! Children are watching and listening and questioning the language that we use everyday. The tolerance we show towards others is observed as well as any negativity or prejudice we express. When through limited facts or fear we stereotype others, we rob them of their individuality. People, who are determined as being from a different group to us, are then in danger of being unfairly isolated and treated, and discriminated against.

This has been happening lately in the media in response to the attack on America and the ongoing exodus of people from countries with far, far less personal freedom and safety than ours. It is very easy through our anxiety and fear to lump terrorists with those seeking asylum. It is also very wrong. This stereotyping has led to the demonising of the desperate and reduced the collective compassion of the community. Some Australian Muslims have been made to feel suddenly unwelcome and anyone identifying with their faith or culture as somehow suspect.

It is a sobering thought that the intolerance of differences is at the root of most violence. This includes the language of hate as well as physical attacks.

So it is relevant to examine ourselves. What messages are we giving out to the children in our care? Are we challenging their thinking and concerns with respectful answers about diverse people in our community? Or do we impress them instead with our silence and indifference? Are we providing information about, and encouraging contact with different cultural groups, to reassure and educate children about all people?

It is time to check our level of tolerance towards difference, as individuals, educators and as parents and as a whole nation.

'It is important for us all to see that hatred does not become the order of the day; that fear does not become an excuse for the violation of rights and that we all remember our common humanity. We must be compassionate in our support for the victims, determined in our search for justice, and vigilant about the rights of all people.'

(Amnesty International)