PROMOTING TOLERANCE

How To Make A Change

In recent years, schools have given an increasing amount of attention to issues surrounding diversity and tolerance.

The need for tolerance is not because of an epidemic of hate crimes, but because of the much more mundane and daily social interactions that require treating each other with respect and dignity. Intolerance is most frequently reflected in hallway insults, angry outbursts, social cliques, put-downs, and smug dismissals of others' viewpoints during class discussions.

Defining Tolerance

When some use the word *tolerance*, they mean a non-critical acceptance of just about everything someone says or does – the more you accept, the more tolerant you are.

Some even go so far as to define tolerance as the *embracing* and *celebration* of the opinions, practices, or behaviors of others.

You may cringe at the "anything-goes" attitude reflected in that idea. But, you may feel that if you oppose that "non-critical" approach, you run the risk of being accused of advocating bigotry, intolerance, and even hate. This is because the most open-ended view of tolerance has dominated the discussion. Pressure then gets put on you to adopt this view. But, there is another way to understand tolerance.

Tolerance Is Not a Virtue

Tolerance, in and of itself, is not a virtue. If someone tolerates drinking and driving, his tolerance is not virtuous. Tolerance is neutral. It derives its value from what it is the person tolerates, and the manner in which that tolerance or intolerance is expressed. This involves character.

When a student uses a racial slur, his problem is not a lack of tolerance, but a lack of kindness and a problem with pride (the root of belief in racial superiority). When a student makes fun of a classmate's point of view during a class discussion, his problem isn't a lack of tolerance, but a lack of courtesy.

Proper tolerance is the outgrowth of character qualities such as kindness, patience, courtesy, humility, self-control, and courage. Even intolerance (especially intolerance!) should be expressed through these qualities.

Too many people think they are being tolerant when they are actually only expressing indifference ("whatever"), or apathy ("who cares?"), or even recklessness ("why not?"). Improperly understood, "tolerance" can lead to disarming you of your proper convictions.

The Real World

The view that tolerance means, "accepting everyone's ideas and behaviors" is impractical in the real world. It sounds nice in classroom discussions, but it won't work in the real world.

You will find a more practical definition of tolerance in the dictionary's second definition of the term: *the allowable variation from a standard.* For instance, an engineer might ask about the tolerance of a metal beam in a building during an earthquake. How far should it bend before it breaks? This is the definition by which we most commonly live. We establish a standard of what we think is best (even if somewhat vague). We then establish an allowable variation from

that standard (often more vague). Then we evaluate the ideas and actions of others based on what we've established.

This is as it should be. We establish standards in hundreds (maybe even thousands) of categories. For example, our standard (ideal) for the way a husband and wife treat each other includes love, support and nurture. However, our allowable variation from the standard is a marriage filled with anger and disharmony. But, what goes beyond the allowable variation; what is *intolerable*, is spousal abuse.

This definition of tolerance is applied in many places at school: dress codes (pants are allowed, but not swimsuits), hallway conduct (conversation between boys and girls is allowed, but not harassment), and classroom participation (you don't have to participate in discussions, but you can't fall asleep).

We even apply this definition of tolerance to the food we eat. You probably like a hamburger fixed a certain way -- maybe you don't like tomatoes. If someone serves you a hamburger and it contains tomato slices, you don't have to tolerate it; but, your intolerance should express

good character. For example, you might discreetly remove the tomato slices and set them on the edge of your plate. It would be inappropriate to scream at the server about your opinions of tomatoes and fire off a few expletives as you fling the tomato slices across the restaurant!

The issue isn't your acceptance or rejection of something; it is the character you demonstrate as you express yourself.

Tolerance & Discernment

This practical definition honors your moral views developed by your religion and family. Rather than think that tolerance is best demonstrated by an *absence* of discernment, it helps us understand that tolerance requires making decisions based on our values: first, establishing a standard, and second, establishing the limits of the allowable variation.

If you don't clearly establish your standards and allowable variations, you will struggle with what to tolerate. In frustration, you may jump to the simplistic view that you should just accept everything. This doesn't require hard thinking and yet has the appearance of taking the moral high ground.

We shouldn't be people who lack strongly held beliefs and accept any

idea or behavior we encounter. We can create better schools if we think less about tolerance, and focus more on being people who express kindness, patience, courtesy, humility, and self-control to everyone around us even while holding firmly to our beliefs.

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To Get You Thinking
Apply the definition of tolerance to everyday situations around you. Think of one standard, one allowable variation, and what is intolerable in the following areas:

1. A school rule.
2. The way you like a meal prepared.
3. An expectation you have for a friend.
4. A homework assignment.
5. Music you enjoy.
6. The neatness of your bedroom.
7. Classroom conduct.