

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

January 15, 2017
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

From Dr. King's Letter From a Birmingham City Jail:

When you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness....

On the eve of a Presidential inauguration, the culmination of a year-long American political scene that has been the arena of contentiousness stirring up bitter controversies between the good people of this country, and one that continues to divide good people everywhere, I'd like to take a moment this morning, to focus us on the children. The Children. I'd say that Dr. King set a pretty good precedent for focusing on children. In his letter to the clergy from a prison cell in Birmingham — when he reflected back to his difficulty trying to find the right words to tell his own children about the evils of racism, bigotry and hatred... he understood that much of what was at stake was for a renewed world, a better world, for his children and everyone's children. And in his "I have a dream speech" — he crescendo-ed his passion with some of his most memorable words:

...one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

...we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last!

You know the end:

Thank God almighty, we are free at last!

The Children. The children are listening. That's good news and bad news. This is news that we must consider and take responsibility for. The Children are listening. Here is what members of the American Pediatric Association are writing: Pediatricians from the University Michigan Medical School and from the University of Pennsylvania.

(Nia Heard-Garris, Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholar, Clinical Lecturer, Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, University of Michigan Medical School, *University of Michigan* and Danielle Erkoboni, National Clinician Scholar and General Pediatrician, *University of Pennsylvania*)

Children are listening. During the election, messages of hate, fear and intolerance were propagated across different media and into communities. And the messages continue.

While parents view and listen to these ever-present messages, alongside them are their children,

hearing these same messages through a lens ill-equipped to discern the implications of negative stereotypes and incorrect portrayals. Throughout the election, children heard such things as Mexican immigrants are “rapists” and are “bringing drugs... bringing crime” and that African-Americans are “thugs” and “living in hell.” These messages, no matter their voice, were designed and intended to target adults. As pediatricians, we’re now seeing, however, that children were listening and they are responding in ways we might not have anticipated. As parents, caretakers and citizens, we have the power to turn this tide. And as we approach the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, now is the time to explore ways to teach children to communicate with love and respect.

Stop the hate and offer love

One response to the messages children hear is to incite more hate. In April 2016, a now well-cited survey of 2,000 teachers conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Teaching Tolerance Program found that more than half of respondents reported seeing an increase in uncivil discourse in their schools. This, along with other findings from the survey, was used to coin “The Trump Effect,” a term denoting the hateful acts performed by children and adults alike. The change we’ve seen in children’s behavior may be happening for the same reason they react to the violence they see in media. Prior research has shown that children exposed to media violence have higher levels of violent behaviors, hostility and that they are more desensitized to violence, including a lower likelihood of intervening in an ongoing fight and less sympathy for the victims of violence. Media violence itself can instill fear in the young viewers that may be persistent for years. Hate and intolerance touted in the media is no different.

As is their nature developmentally, children adopt what they hear as truth, adapting it to their lives, and in many cases across the nation, acting upon it.

Why am I focusing us on this? It is not an abstract idea, or something that is happening, some other place. It has happened, and it is happening, right here. I hear about it from teachers in both public and private schools. It is getting worse and incidents are more and more frequent. As close as our own local high school. It happens all the time, “under the radar” if you will, but now, it has been exposed in a hateful petition that was circulated at Arundel High School. If you haven’t read or heard about the petition written by the Kool Kids Klan (the KKK)

and reactions to it... well... I'll share it with you. It is an awful example of just what these pediatricians are seeing across the county.

Another response, can be love. Recently, a Facebook group was started by a Seattle-based mom, encouraging children to write letters to the president-elect explaining the importance of being kind. To date, 10,000 children have joined, from across the country, writing how kindness should guide the future administration.

This dichotomy of responses begs the questions: Why are children uniquely positioned to respond to messages of hate strongly, and how do parents guide their children to respond with love over hate?

Developmental stages: A lens for media messages

Children's actions may depend heavily on their developmental stage. Older teenagers are generally better able to discern the meaning and implications of the strong emotions conveyed in the media, but younger children often are unable to decode them. Emotions like hate, fear and intolerance are complex. Younger children are not equipped to understand the context and ramifications associated with these complex emotions, especially when seen in an abstract form, such as media. In addition, we know that young children are not developmentally able to discern *paralanguage*, the complex, emotional undertones of speech. Without these underpinnings, it's nearly impossible to understand when messages are rooted in sarcasm or are based on fallacious assumptions. Older children may be able to think more critically about what they hear, but may have a hard time deciding what they should believe. Children who identify as a part of a minority group based on their race or ethnicity, nativity status, sexual orientation or ability status may also *internalize* the messages, which can lead to increased distress. This distress may be associated with concerning behaviors such as withdrawal, anger, anxiety and conduct problems.

Our path forward

The strongest change you can make is in your own home. Here are four ways you can scaffold the messages our children hear, providing them with context and skills beyond their developmental stages to filter and respond to the hate and intolerance seen in the media.

Use your resources:

There are many web-based tools that parents can turn to, including KidsHealth.org's "Teaching Your Child Tolerance" and Southern Poverty Law Center's "Teaching Tolerance" toolkit. Both of these sites include developmentally appropriate stories and games to discuss racial and cultural differences with your child.

Talk to your child about responding with kindness:

Even offhand statements can be felt as hateful to others. Creating a culture of kindness in your home can have ripple effects. Remember, tolerance does not mean tolerating hateful behavior.

It means everyone deserves to be respected and should respect others. For example, if your child hears someone saying something intolerant, encourage them to speak up against it. However, instead of saying, “I think people who use racist and sexist language are stupid,” encourage them to demonstrate kindness: “I think it’s cool when we treat everyone with respect.”

Set a strong example and explain it to your child:

While children pick up on everything we do, it’s even better to tell them what you’re doing.

Become active in your community, volunteer locally, nationally or globally.

I am so proud and so excited by what was accomplished yesterday, by about 20 people from Epiphany Church — four of them were teenagers. With the money given by all of you during our Advent St. Nicholas Gifts for the Boys and Girls Club at Meade Village, in four hours we painted the entire interior of the Club. It is now clean and beautiful and ready for them to enjoy with a new knowledge about how important and wonderful and valuable we think they are! We all did this, together!

The pediatricians write:

Take your child along and get them involved. Even easier, show them how you respond to intolerant acts and explain to them why.

Teach your children to feel good about themselves and love their own culture:

We know that children who struggle with self-esteem can respond by bullying others. Conversely, kids with higher self-esteem may bolster others around them. Emphasize your child’s own strengths and encourage them to explore their interests. Teach them about their own cultural background and instill a sense of cultural pride in your family. Being aware of the language we use and being intentional about our attitudes are skills child carry with them outside their home. And remember, children are listening. While we may not be able to change the messages in the media, we can change how our children respond to them, and that change starts with you.

This change, starts with us! Right here. Right now.

Amen.