

Making Civility Great Again

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My peers and I are growing up in a generation that is being taught to love to hate. The world has been carved up into tribes; Trump versus Biden, Republicans versus Democrats, pro-masks/vaccines versus anti-masks/vaccines, or Black Lives Matter versus Blue Lives Matter. Our parents watch the news where people are angry at each other and 'experts' attack each others' positions, and then each other. Social media posts and comments are filled with people's opinions and hostility toward one another. I see the destructiveness of these attitudes in my friend groups as middle school kids are constantly wanting to know the other's opinion just so that they can contradict each others' point of view and show them that what they believe is wrong and what the other side believes is right. As you think about it, it is not hard to come up with more instances and examples of how our society is being affected by everyone's animosity towards one another.

Even though each of us have opinions that we treat as true, that doesn't mean that they are in fact true. At the same time, it is becoming popular and acceptable to put 'personal truth' or ideology over fairness and charity toward others. The ways in which we argue with others do not build friendships and community, but rather destroys them, and in doing so, our resulting friend groups are being based off of political and social agreement rather than the actual friendship aspect of relationships. We hear stories of friendships ending over social media conflicts, or families bring torn apart by political disagreements. It is as though we love to fight more than we love people.

Whether adults realize it or not, kids are watching them and learning from them many destructive behaviors. As adults increasingly use vicious language toward one another, kids are learning that using profane, inappropriate and hurtful language is okay and accepted when talking to a person you disagree with. I am seeing a rise in profane language within my friend groups and even in my brother's elementary school. Kids in my 10 year old brother's class will be cursing out at recess and in the classroom. Without someone to teach them that what they are doing is wrong, the use of this foul language has spread and I personally have seen an increase in language like this over the past 5 years. Unlimited access to the internet and other social media resources are bringing toxic content, division and bullying into the lives of young kids. It has gotten to the point where kids are surprised to hear that I have never cursed or held up the middle finger toward a person who frustrated me, as though disrespecting one another is the expected norm. When kids first meet each other it seems to be that they judge the other

based on their political or social ethics. I find this seriously concerning because I want to be able to grow up around people who are respectful to each and everyone, no matter where they come from, their gender, religion, or political positions.

If we want a better future, adults have a responsibility to teach kids, using words and their own actions, how to be respectful and build relationships with people who have different backgrounds and ideas. The Rotary's 4 Way Test is an important tool that can help kids and adults make decisions about day-to-day interactions and improve our school culture and community.

The 4 Way Test's first question of whether something is true is very important. More and more, personal opinions are being treated like truth. Phrases like, 'this is my truth,' or 'live your truth' make it harder for people to work through disagreements because we are told that all truths are equally valid. If we change the definition of truth to mean the same as opinion, we never know when we are wrong and need improvement, because there is no such thing as wrong. It is important for kids to be taught that there are true things, and how to test their opinions against facts.

But truth should not be used as a hammer to hurt or shame each other. It may be true that I don't like someone, but that truth must be balanced against other considerations such as fairness, friendship and caring for others. When used wrongly, truth can divide people. By asking if something is fair to everyone involved, we have to think about who might be getting left out or hurt by a decision. The question of whether an action builds good will and friendships makes us think about how our decisions can bring people together to better care for each other. And the question of whether something is beneficial to everyone makes us consider how an action can help everyone succeed.

If the first point of the 4 Way Test, (Is it true) is the 'what,' then the second, third and fourth points are the 'how.' The final three points make us think about how our actions affect other people. This takes the focus off of ourselves and makes other people a priority, unlike what we are being taught today. Together, these four questions make us think about what we are trying to accomplish and why.

While the media and society are teaching us to tear each other down, the Atascadero Rotary's 4 Way Test is teaching us how to stop fighting and start looking out for each other. This test is something that would be easy for adults and students to use every day for both big and small decisions. If the next generation can learn and apply the 4 Way Test, we have the opportunity to make our school, community and world a happier and healthier place. We should live up to the words of former journalist Ted Koppel when he said, "Aspire to decency. Practice civility toward one another. Admire and emulate ethical behavior wherever you find it. Apply a rigid standard of morality to your lives; and if, periodically, you fail - as you surely will, adjust your lives, not the standards."