Alpine County Choose Civility Campaign

(An initiative of the Child Abuse Prevention Council and County Superintendent of Schools)

August Focus:

Pay Attention

I just love the concept of being considerate to others because I'm paying attention to them. In other words, when I'm attending to those around me, I sometimes notice what they need and can actually serve them. For example, I've waited in line at the grocery store and noticed the mood of the checker as she works with the customers before me. If I notice her mood is somber or sad I step right up and greet her in my warmest manner hoping to make her day better. I am also carefully aware of those in line behind me. Yes, I'm the one who notices the man rushing home to his family with one or two items in his hands behind me with my overflowing cart or the mom with the fussy toddler wishing she can get the baby home for his nap. In both cases, I offer that they go ahead of me. I can only offer these acts of kindness because I'm paying attention.

Having taught Kindergarten and raising my own children, I learned first hand how ineffective it is to tell young ones to "pay attention". What an interesting phrase that is! Little ones hear us talk about having to "pay" the bills or "pay" for something in the store, so what on earth must it mean to pay attention? Instead, I've taught children to attend to specific sounds or watch facial expressions. I've asked them to describe what they hear and what they see. Then I explain that what we are doing is called "paying attention" or "attending to" the world around us When studying the word "attention" we see that it means turning toward, extending toward and stretching. So, according to Dr. Forni, author of the book Choosing Civility: The Twenty-five Rules of Considerate Conduct, paying attention has to do with the tension that connects us to the world around us. Only after we *notice or pay attention to* the world can we *care* for it.

So, how is paying attention a civil thing to do? Dr. Forni explains that when we pay attention we are alert to the world and the people in it. This allows us to improve the quality of our responses and therefore the quality of our lives and of the lives of those whose lives touch ours. Examples include noticing a coworker's preoccupation with his child's health issues and making a note to ask about progress and schedule meetings around his doctor's appointments. Also, if I'm talking to a group I can watch the faces of those listening. Yawning, looking at their watches and blank stares might indicate I've gone on too long or have been too engrossed in my own story and negligent of their

issues. If I'm talking on my cell phone or visiting with a friend in a restaurant and notice those around me trying to enjoy quiet conversation I may be interrupting, I can lower my voice or take my call outside. If I'm really listening to my child and notice her mood, I realize this is a unique individual who needs encouragement or understanding at this moment and nothing else is going to distract me from her needs. All of these examples show the victory of attention over selfishness, carelessness and indifference.

Dr. Forni points out how important it is to pay attention to people. "When we slow down the pace of attention we do justice to life by taking it seriously. When we pay attention we do justice to the presence of others in our lives." By paying attention, we confer value upon the lives of others. We honor the worth of those around us. Civil treatment of others requires attention and consideration. This attention to and consideration of others is the opposite of self-centeredness and being oblivious to the needs of others. To take this even farther, we can pay attention to the needs of those we don't even know or don't even see. Imagine helping the next person who comes into a busy fast food restaurant even after you're gone by busing your own table as you leave. How about tossing your empty cup and popcorn bag in the trash as you leave the movie theater?

<u>Ideas to use with children to help them pay attention:</u>

Remember that as adults we often have a framework of experience to help us screen out sounds and filter out other distractions so we can attend to the person to whom we are listening. Young children do not have these skills but can be taught to listen to background sounds (like a lawnmower or birds chirping in the distance) and foreground sounds (such as the voice of someone speaking to them) . By practicing and discussing what they hear, they are learning to attend to some things and filter others out.

It's important that children have quiet spaces where they can listen to themselves. They can do their own thinking without distraction.

A favorite way to help children pay attention is to read aloud to them stopping every now and then to ask thoughtful questions. Of course, you can ask them to tell you about the color of the bike in the story but questions about how a character might feel help them to attend to lots of details in the story.

Helping children pay attention to how their behaviors impact others is also important. Point out how loud talking is interrupting someone's conversation or how running and being rambunctious is causing a napping child or resting elder discomfort.