

Alpine County Choose Civility Campaign

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



May Focus:

Speak Kindly

My grandmother used to say, “Look before you leap and think before you speak.” What wonderful advice she gave me. I have worked on slowing down to think before I speak for all of my adult life. I tend to speak very fast so this takes a great deal of effort on my part. I do, however, enjoy listening to others which affords me the time I need to contemplate what others say before I take a turn to speak. One of the main reasons I want to think before I speak is so I carefully craft what I say and am able to speak respectfully and in as positive a way as I can. Speaking kindly to others serves me well. I have found respectful conversations to be the most powerful. Let’s consider one of Aesop’s Fables that teaches this same moral.

In the Fable “The North Wind and the Sun”, Aesop describes a boastful North Wind who challenges the Sun to a competition. The North Wind says he can blow the cloak off a traveler walking along a path because he’s stronger than the Sun. He blows with all his might but the traveler clutches his cloak tighter the harder the North Wind blows. Begrudgingly, the North Wind gives up so the Sun can try. The Sun smiled gently down on the traveler who loosened his cloak and finally took it off as he warmed in the Sun’s gentle rays.

I agree with that same gentle approach to working with people. Dr. P.M. Forni, author of [Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct](#) states it this way, “Speaking with consideration and kindness is at the heart of civil behavior. To speak kindly you need to be aware constantly that you are speaking to living, breathing, vulnerable human beings. Don’t discount the power of your words. The thought that they might cause unnecessary hurt or discomfort should inform every conversation. When you speak kindly to others, you manage to keep *them* in mind as you speak—which means keeping at bay, at least for a while, the pressing demands of *your* needs. By speaking with kindness you will improve the lives of those around you. Your words of kindness can inspire others, rescue them from despair, and reconcile them with life. Or, at the very least, you will lift their spirits and make their day more endurable.” Isn’t that a wonderful thought? Our words can lift the spirits of those with whom we are speaking. A Russian proverb puts it this way, “A kind word is like a spring day.”

Dr. Forni also points out that our tone of voice can show kindness if you watch your volume and try not to sound intimidating or threatening. Additionally, he warns us that

embarrassing others or bragging are not kind ways of speaking. He describes bragging as “often merely a ladder we build for ourselves out of words when we are afraid we are not tall enough in the eyes of the world.” Finally, Dr. Forni encourages us to smile when we speak to others thus demonstrating we are relaxed, open to hearing with the other person has to say and even that we have self confidence.

It is also important to remember that people’s perceptions of us impact our relationships for the long term and the way we talk to them makes lasting impressions. One way I think about this is remembering back (okay, way back) to when I was a teenager. I did not appreciate people talking down to me or yelling at me. I tended to, and still do, shut them out. Their words didn’t really matter to me at all once they started the scolding or demeaning talk. I wouldn’t hear it. Studies have demonstrated that people actually have negative physical reactions to negative talk, yelling and put downs that can be described as shutting down. We should remember how ineffective negative talk can be and try speaking kindly when we want to make important points. This shows a level of respect for the other person that will leave the door open for future communication.

Of course, it also helps to use some of the other skills we’ve learned this year when communicating with others such as listen and pay attention. If you do slip and speak unkindly, you should apply the rule of apologizing earnestly. My goodness, many of our other skills apply too! When having a conversation with another, try thinking the best of their intentions and respecting their opinions, even if they are different from your own. Of course it’s important to assert yourself sometimes and now you see you can do that in a kind way. Again turning to Dr. Forni, “That your words are kind rather than unkind and that they will be perceived as such should be one of your paramount concerns. With your kind words, you build a shelter of sanity and trust into which you welcome others for a much-needed respite. If you manage to make this way of speaking part of what you are, the quality of your relationships will substantially increase and with it the overall quality of your everyday life.”

I think my grandmother would have loved Dr. Forni!

Children’s Books about Speaking Kindly

I’m Sorry, by Sam McBratney, 2002. When two best friends have a quarrel, they are brought together again by two simple words.

That’s What Friends are For, by Florence Heidi, 2003. All the elephant’s friends give him advice, but none can solve his problem until the opossum announces friends are to help, not just to give advice.

When I Care About Others, by Cornelia Spelman, 2002. A little bear explains that he cares about the feelings of others and that others care about him.

Yes We Can!, by Sam McBratney, 2007. When a play date leads to disaster, resulting in name-calling, Little Roo and his friends are left in bad moods until Little Roo’s very wise mother comes up with a creative solution to make amends.