

Alpine County Choose Civility Campaign

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



October Focus:

Think the Best

I remember early one winter morning my husband and I headed to Wal-Mart trying to beat the weekend crowd. A small car pulled right out in front of us onto the highway causing us to brake hard. There wasn't a car anywhere behind us, so our immediate reaction was negative, "What's he thinking?" and a few other choice words. But then we reconsidered and asked ourselves what else this could mean. Perhaps the man was racing to the hospital to meet a loved one in the emergency room. Maybe he was dealing with a different worry. Perhaps he simply didn't see us. The point is, we tried thinking the best of this person and it was amazing how different this made us feel about this old man in his tiny, beat up car. We felt compassion, forgiveness and empathy instead of irritation, frustration and impatience. We decided it really would have been better had we thought the best of him in the first place.

Thinking the best of our fellow human beings and acting accordingly is the civil thing to do. Interestingly too, when we approach others assuming the best of them we actually encourage them to be just that. You may have heard of the self-fulfilling prophecy. That means that what we think about someone is what they may become. So, if we think others are good and decent and treat them as such, they often rise to the occasion and act in good and decent ways. I also love the way that thinking the best of others improves the quality of my own life. I'm able to meet new people and establish new relationships simply because I think the best of them. It's easy to fall into a judgmental or critical frame of mind and think negatively about others but those thoughts might just rebound on us. You're likely to feel stressed and unhappy if you believe others are deliberately out to irritate you. Of course, we should keep a healthy dose of realism because we are sure to be let down from time to time, but my life is definitely richer because I think the best of others.

Also, remember that we all come from different backgrounds, have different values and different ways of doing things. Remembering this can help us not jump to conclusions and think the worst. We need to understand that people do things differently and that doesn't mean they are wrong. They just do things differently. For example, when our daughter first experienced college roommates she was really irritated when one of her

roommates didn't empty the trash when it was her turn. When she talked to us about it, she sounded almost as though she thought her roommate was doing that to her on purpose. Surely her roommate knew how much this bugged her! We asked if she'd let her know how much this bothered her and she said she hadn't. We asked how her roommate would know trash piling up really bothered her. She said that everyone should know that. We pointed out that not everyone would be bothered and the girl might not even have noticed. Our daughter needed to understand that not everyone operates on the same system of experiences and beliefs as she does. By the way, we pointed out; her roommate might even be baffled or annoyed about her fussiness about trash.

We can apply this "think the best" mind set to situations as well as to people. We can choose to think negatively and worry about an upcoming event but that may cause stress and irritability. Instead, we can think the best is going to happen. Instead of worrying about all that can go wrong, how about thinking of all that can go right? Instead of worrying about a text message or email you received, remember you can't tell the person's tone of voice from that communication, so think the best and call the sender to check on the true meaning.

Finally, believing the best of other people speaks more about us than it does about the other person because "as a man thinks, so is he". The way we treat others is a good indication as to how we treat ourselves. According to Anthony Wade, "What we think, we believe. What we believe, we will say. What we say becomes a part of our everyday existence, be it positive or negative." I, for one, choose to think positively. I will think the best of others.

Books about thinking the best

The Sneetches and Other Stories by Dr. Seuss is great for children 4-8 years old and teaches the pointlessness of prejudice.

The Hundred Dresses by Eleanor Estes is a classic tale about kindness and compassion for children ages 6 and up.

For pre-teens and teenagers, Kira-Kira by Cynthia Kadohata demonstrates a young girl's positive outlook on life even when life is hard.