



The Importance of Teaching Empathy

By Colette Cross

Dear Parents,

I recently attended the Common Ground Speaks II presentation on Micro Aggressions given by Dr. Derald Wing Sue, author and professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University. Although he did not coin the phrase micro aggressions, Dr. Sue wrote the book, "Microaggressions in Everyday Life." He defines micro aggressions as everyday slights, barbs, looks, actions, insults, or put downs that people make toward different groups of people. What he noted was these comments are often subtle, often delivered unintentionally, but in the long run, have a greater impact on the receivers because they become a constant in their lives. He also noted that this unintentional behavior is due to cultural conditioning and people do not often realize what they are saying or doing to others. I would recommend that you Google Dr. Sue, or watch his YouTube videos, or PBS interview for further insight into his work.

When I attend such presentations, I try to connect the message with how we can affect this type of behavior in a positive way in our role as educators and parents. It was comforting to hear Dr. Sue explain that in order to overcome the problem, one must be able to have empathy and spiritual connectedness with others. In her teachings, Dr. Maria Montessori believed that all people need to work toward community building and acceptance. She hoped that through education children could learn peaceful, ethical living practices that serve, not only the individual, but benefit all. Thus, inherent in Montessori philosophy is a peace and grace and courtesy curriculum. Subsequently, from the moment a child enters our classrooms, our teachers address empathy training in a number of ways. They consistently role model kindness, as well as validation of feelings, respect for selves and others, and positive social behavior. They teach specific lessons on grace and courtesy. They facilitate peaceful peer problem solving techniques by teaching students to express their feelings, to learn patience, use their words, and give opportunities for peaceful "moments". On a day-to-day basis, I see our students learn to incorporate what they experience into their own behaviors. They wait their turn, they say they are sorry, they gently rub a hurt, they say, "Excuse me," they use kind words; they learn to be a friend to all.

Empathy is defined as having the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes, both cognitively and affectively to feel for them and to feel with them: share their perspective, show that you care. Constant role modeling and reinforcement of appropriate social interactions and behaviors will result in empathic beings. How lucky we are to be able to set the culture of a positive learning environment, which will benefit so many.