

Core Strength: Tolerance

Over the past two decades, scientific research into the growth and development of the human brain has exploded. Increased knowledge of how the brain has developed brings new understanding of some previously confusing human behaviors. For example, knowing how the human brain has adapted over thousands of years helps us understand why humans have difficulty accepting people who appear to be different. Information about neurological development can guide parents as they help their children develop the tolerance that is required in increasingly diverse communities.

Humans have survived as a species because our brains are good at detecting potential danger and sending signals that very rapidly alert us to threats. Because there is not always time to evaluate whether something is truly a risk, our brains evolved to identify anything new or novel as a potential danger. Within micro-seconds of sensing danger, our brain sends powerful neuro-chemicals to the heart, lungs, and muscles activating a fear response, often before we are consciously aware of the source of the perceived threat. This is referred to as the “fight or flight” response. Without this incredibly rapid fear response, our ancestors would not have survived the predators in their environments. Humans therefore have a “neurobiological bias” to view new and unfamiliar things as a threat.

Because the human species is not able to survive in isolation, humans learned to form small groups (clans and tribes) that increased their chances of survival. The biggest danger often came in the form of other humans. If someone encountered a stranger with unfamiliar dress, language or behavior, that person could be an enemy. As a result, humans evolved with a heightened sense of alertness and anxiety when encountering people with such differences.

Although this strategy was necessary for thousands of years of human history, modern society is different. The world of the 21st century requires the human skill of tolerance. Modern culture is dramatically different than that of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. We have economic and social demands that require the ability to accept differences. Tolerance has been identified by child development experts as one of the core strengths necessary for healthy emotional and social development.

So how can parents help their children develop this skill, when their brains are “hard-wired” to react negatively to differences? First, recognize that this is not a skill that comes naturally to any of us – it is something that must be taught. Create opportunities for your child to learn about new places, peoples, and cultures by reading, taking trips, or exploring ethnic grocery stores. Model tolerance when you encounter people who appear different to reduce any anxiety your child might experience. Address intolerance immediately when it is observed and use it as a teaching opportunity.

Although our tendency to respond with fear to novelty allowed the human species to survive, an intolerant child will not function well in contemporary society. Watch for signs of intolerance (bullying, teasing or berating) and work with your child to see differences as something to be valued. This ability will serve them well in the increasingly diverse world they will face as adults.