



Tolerance for differences begins at home

by Michael Grose



It's often said that a civil society can be determined by the way it treats its most vulnerable members, including the young, the old and minority groups. Most Australians like to think that we do pretty well on these measures, but I suspect the imminent postal survey on same-sex marriage may challenge this comfortable view.

Thanks to saturation media coverage, virtually all Australians, kids included, are aware of the survey (aka plebiscite). We have all been exposed to the debate over the pros and cons of using a postal survey, and, of course, to the debate over its central question. Many, again including kids, will have heard some of the more vitriolic commentary that is part of the surrounding debate. You'd have to be living under a rock not to have noticed it. If it relates to you personally, you are likely deeply affected by it.

While the debate rages on, it's worth considering what place children and young people have amongst all this noise. As a parent, how are you approaching the issue with your children and/or young people at home?

There are many ways to approach this topic within your family, but perhaps it's most appropriate to view it through the lens of tolerance and respect for diversity.

The conversation starts at home

Kids learn tolerance from those around them. Children in primary school usually reflect the attitudes of their parents, and while adolescents are also strongly influenced by their peers, parental attitudes still have a significant impact on their acceptance, or otherwise, of people who are 'different'. In short, if you want your child to be tolerant of differences – whether they relate to race, culture, behaviour, sexuality or anything else – then you need to work hard to make tolerance and respect a family trait.

Tackling tough issues head on

By looking at the same-sex marriage survey through the tolerance lens we may be able to steer conversations and discussions into relatively safe areas that kids can relate to. But that doesn't alter the fact that children and young people will have questions about human sexuality, which includes sexual orientation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most parents struggle to talk to their children about human sexuality, with many happy leaving the topic to schools to tackle.



The current debate offers an opportunity for parents to have genuine discussions with their children about a broad palette of human sexuality topics that is truly reflective of the community in which we live. That means parents need to be informed and also feel comfortable with their own views and attitudes. The latter may call for an examination of your own attitudes toward sexual orientation to

prevent conversations and discussions being flavoured by any insensitivity or insecurity you may have.



It's worth remembering that research shows that providing young people with a thorough knowledge about sex and sexuality does *not* lead to an increase in promiscuity or teen pregnancy. On the contrary, it's widely accepted that a better understanding of human sexuality amongst teens is associated with a lower incidence of teen pregnancy and less likelihood of first intercourse at a young age.

Similarly, informed, adult discussions of different sexual orientation do not increase the likelihood that a young person will identify as homosexual or lesbian. Explaining LGBTIQ does not influence a child's sexual identity, orientation or expression. Importantly, it *does* decrease shame and harm for young people who are LGBTIQ – including those who have not yet 'come out' – and it models how to be respectful to those who are.

Being matter-of-fact

Kids are naturally curious. Questions such as "Where do babies come from?" and "Why does he have two mums?" can be asked by both a five-year-old and a fifteen-year-old, albeit in very different ways. Your responses as a parent to questions like these need to differ in complexity and depth as your kids reach different developmental stages. Regardless of a child's age, it also helps to use language that is objective and factual such as, "Families come in many different shapes and sizes", "All families are equal", and "There are many ways to make a family, adoption and IVF being just two examples".

Challenge prejudice and narrow-minded views

Sometimes children and young people will say the cruellest things about others, particularly if those others are part of a minority group. As a parent, remind your child or young person about the impact that narrow views can have on others. We shouldn't underestimate the long-term impact that intolerance by the majority can have on the wellbeing and mental health of a minority.

Most Australians like to pride ourselves on the fact that we've accepted and assimilated people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I hope that when the same-sex marriage survey is finished, regardless of the result, we can also say that we are a nation that's tolerant of diversity in all forms and whose citizens are truly respectful of each other. That's the type of country that most reasonable-minded adults want our children to inherit.



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