



Second-graders at Grove Avenue Elementary School displayed blue shirts on Oct. 1 to raise awareness of the international “Stomp Out Bullying” campaign. Students and staff throughout Barrington 220 wore blue that day, pledging to make their schools kind, safe and welcoming for all.

# Pins and Needles, Sticks and Stones

*The power of words in a world that won't be quiet or kind*

**I** DON'T WATCH MUCH TV, but if I were able to catch an old TV show for a good laugh, I would probably opt for a rerun of *The Honeymooners*. Jackie Gleason starred as Ralph Kramden, a well-meaning but brash Brooklyn bus driver and faithful husband of Alice. Of all the classic episodes, my favorites have Ralph speaking without thinking ... a habit he can't avoid. Many shows end with Ralph lamenting to himself and others about his big mouth.

In one scene, Ralph has a hard time controlling both his tongue and his temper. Best-buddy Ed Norton (played by Art Carney) offers some advice: whenever Ralph feels his anxiety building and his rage rising, he should pause and say, “Pins and needles, needles and pins, a happy man is a man who grins.” The simple phrase followed by a forced smile will help Ralph forget what was bothering him. In small situations the technique works. When the annoyances increase in size and frequency, however, the idiom leads to idiocy, which ignites Ralph's repressed anger.

Knowing how to quash the quarrel and stop talking seems like a lost skill in this noisy world. Compare the talk shows of 30 years ago with those of today to notice how civility, courtesy and kindness have seemingly disappeared from our collective conduct.

The recent elections exposed us to many instances of people speaking before thinking. In heated political rhetoric, tearing down the character of an opponent is a common tactic, which is never a good example for children. In an earlier era, two candidates with opposing views would each speak, then listen, then speak again. Today, the practice of “point-counterpoint” has given way to contenders talking over each other without listening, showing little regard or respect for the other person's position.

Kids learn from adults: their parents, their family members, their teachers, those they see on television, and in the music they hear everyday. How many of our parents taught us, “If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all”

or they warned us, “Better to be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt”? If that were the philosophy of participants in the Sunday political roundtables, there would be a lot of silence.

Words are powerful tools that can create great good or inflict terrible pain. Finding appropriate words for the right moment or withholding words at an inopportune time are skills we should all master. Discretion is a learned discipline. To be comfortable with silence, to be kind when tempted otherwise requires self-control. When we speak too quickly or choose our words unwisely, we risk creating more hurt and heartache than joy and clarity.

My piano teacher tells students that music is the combination of melody, harmony and rhythm (with a key component of rhythm being silence or rests). The three together can create great beauty. Take any one element away and you have something inferior. Silence is the perfect partner to sound. In our interpersonal relationships, stillness

allows us to listen, process and think.

This fast-paced world seems to elevate the person with the quickest wit or the most rapid comeback. To the loudest voice goes the reward. Conversely, the thoughtful person who reflects before speaking is sometimes viewed as weaker, slower and left in the dust ... or, worse yet, bullied.

Because they learn what they live, young people often fall into the trap of saying hurtful things to their peers or speaking before thinking first. Statements made without empathy can cause irreversible anguish. Speaking too quickly, not considering the consequences of words, trying to build oneself up by knocking another down, not listening to or accepting another's point of view, may play well in our current political arena, but are ultimately ingredients in the recipe for social incivility and emotional sadness.

In my view, a bully is a person of any age who either underestimates the power of words or intentionally uses them to inflict verbal injury. While I understand students sometimes make unwise choices and they can do malicious things, I choose to believe they all want to be good, to feel accepted and secure. John F. Kennedy once said, "I am an idealist without illusions." Idealistically, I believe all students are well-intentioned by nature. Having no illusions, however, I admit children need adult guidance and role models to end the bullying behaviors that seem so easily tolerated in today's society.

In Barrington 220, our anti-bullying and social-emotional learning efforts begin with the Second Step curriculum in pre-kindergarten through grade 8 (funded by The Barrington 220 Educational Foundation and school PTOs). But it takes more than simply speaking with and counseling students through their everyday interactions with each other in our schools. Special speakers and awareness days are important, but they aren't enough by themselves. It takes a new community conversation – one that is more courteous and intentional – to really change the culture. Contrary to the childhood adage, sticks and stones AND words can all break our bones – and much more unless we stop the cycle of insolence.



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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As we enter this traditional season of peace, I wish everyone the gifts of silence and time to reflect. Let's teach our children by example to listen and consider the impact of our words before they are unwrapped like an unwanted package. Together, we can become wiser and help the world be a little more gentle. 

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