

On Speaking Up

“**S**tereotype” means to believe, incorrectly, that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same.

What do you do when you hear someone say something about a group or an individual that could be hurtful? Have you heard someone speak in a manner that made you uncomfortable and you wished you had a response? Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” Displaying an attitude that one way, or group, is better than another, often leads to deep hurt and physical violence.

Years ago a student in one of my classes gave me an article, *Addressing Prejudiced Statements: A Four Step Method that Works!* by Beatrice Fennimore.

To demonstrate this in my classes and workshops, I open the floor for anyone to give me a statement, either mild or awful, and I come up with a response on the spot. Sometimes my words are halting and limited.

Many people do not feel comfortable about confronting prejudiced statements. Perhaps, they feel that the speaker will get angry or stop liking them, or that they will be mean to them, too. They might feel like they can’t make a difference. Letting statements go unchallenged not only misses a chance to confront what could be biased, but silence can also be taken as agreement. If you practice confronting negative statements, you’ll become more comfortable when you find yourself in such situations. The four-step process allows people to gently correct a prejudiced statement without creating a climate of rejection or bad feelings.

I suggest we must respond; better imperfect words than silence. By speaking up, we can work to support the dignity and equality of people, especially our friends, both inside and outside of schools.

Four-Step Response to Prejudiced Statements:

1. Pull the prejudice out of the comment and restate it in a calm and objective way.
2. State personal beliefs in a clear and assertive manner.
3. Make a positive statement about the specific subjects of the prejudice.
4. Gently turn the subject to a new direction.

My son teaches middle school, and I asked him to give me some examples of prejudicial comments he

has heard from students. Below are three examples of prejudiced statements and possible four-step responses:

“How come you don’t watch TV? Is your family poor?”

- You believe that watching TV is something that everyone would enjoy, if they could. *(Step 1)*
- I know many people who prefer other ways to spend time than watching TV. *(Step 2)*
- Young people who watch less TV have more time for reading, sports, and hanging out with friends. *(Step 3)*
- What books are you reading now? *(Step 4)*

“Ayan is from Somalia; we can catch Ebola from him.”

- Some children think that everyone from Africa carries Ebola. *(Step 1)*
- I’ve been following this tragic story, so I know that Ebola is a problem in West Africa, and has not spread to East, North, or Southern Africa. *(Step 2)*
- Somalia is far away from West Africa, where Ebola is. Many Somali refugees came here to escape civil war that was difficult for them in East Africa. *(Step 3)*
- We can all work to stay healthy and keep disease from spreading by washing our hands well and often. *(Step 4)*

“How can you eat food that does not have meat in it, just vegetables. It’s not healthy.”

- I know that many who eat meals that have meat in them cannot understand why someone may choose meals with beans, grains, fruits, nuts, vegetables. *(Step 1)*
- I have studied the food pyramid and I know that balanced meals do not have to include meat. *(Step 2)*
- My sister is a vegetarian. She finds it easy to plan healthy meals. My niece is vegan and feels it’s better for health (and nature) not to eat animal products. *(Step 3)*
- Next time there’s a potluck, try some vegetarian dishes. What are your favorite pizza toppings? *(Step 4)*

Practicing responses to prejudicial statements with someone you trust makes it easier to speak up in a situation where silence may indicate that you agree with a statement. Let one person make a prejudiced statement. The other person thinks up and shares their four-step response without being interrupted. In real situations, if you are bold and speak up clearly and gently, you may make a difference in that moment. Speak up, because, in the struggle for justice, we all need to be friends.