



# Staten Island Advance

Sunday, August 7, 2011

## It's never too early to start teaching children about differences

by DANIELLE LUCCHESI

STATEN ISLAND — Mary Russo sits at the family dining room table, two of her children alongside her, while another of her children sits alone at the opposite end of the table, excluded from the conversation and laughter being enjoyed by her mother and siblings.

Mrs. Russo is not being cruel. The New Dorp mom is acting out a school lunchroom scenario with her children, Spencer, 9, Gianna, 7, and Michael, 4, in the hope they'll treat children of all different shapes, sizes and colors with respect and consideration.

After the exercise, she asks each of them how they felt to illustrate both what it's like to feel left out and included.

"Don't treat anyone different; everyone has a heart and feelings," Mrs. Russo tells her kids, believing children are never too young to start learning about differences.

### MAKING HEADLINES

Bullying has been a hot topic on Staten Island and throughout the country over the past year, with a number of news stories focusing on kids who were bullied to the point where they had to leave school, or in the most severe cases, committed suicide. With the start of a new school year just ahead, parents of young children should start teaching them now that being different is OK.

West Brighton child psychologist Dr. Phyllis Brown advises teaching tolerance through movies, television shows and games by having children point out similarities among diverse characters.

"Just because you are different doesn't mean there's nothing in common," Dr. Brown explained.

The psychologist knows what it's like to be "different." She was born with cerebral palsy and had three surgeries while in elementary school.

"People stare, usually kids," Dr. Brown said. "There's always kids who tease."

Children begin to notice differences around preschool age or even younger, she said; by the time they're 6 to 8 years old they start to form a sense of right and wrong, Dr. Brown noted. As they get older and have more exposure to different types of people, kids tend to become increasingly accepting of others.

### EVERYONE IS EQUAL

Dr. Laura Martocci, an associate faculty member in the Sociology Department at Wagner College, counsels parents to explain to their children that everyone is equal despite differences. Make it a learning experience, she said. For example, tell them how someone who is blind could teach them how to be a better listener, which is an important life skill.

"Affirm the difference and neutralize it," she said, insisting, "Difference should not be pitied."

After establishing that everyone is equal, parents can then discuss the similarities they may have with others, such as enjoying a favorite TV show, sports team or hobby.

She noted that parents also should set an example for their children by modeling acceptable behavior, and talking to them about inappropriate actions they notice and why they're unacceptable.

At the Grymes Hill college, Dr. Martocci leads a bullying intervention program called Students Against Relational Aggression (S.A.R.A.), which sends college students into fourth-grade classrooms to teach about the different elements involved in bullying and the roles played by bullies, victims and bystanders.

Lessons include perception, gossip and assumptions, shame and respect, support and trust. The program uses games, role-playing and short videos to help children understand the importance of accepting differences.

### **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**

Dongan Hills mom Nancy DeMuro believes in setting children on the right path so they don't become bullies later in life, noting, "You have to lead by example."

She teaches her three daughters, Caitlyn, 10, Emma, 7, and Ava, 2, to be tolerant of differences by talking to them about the consequences of their actions and words, and how they can make other people feel.

She also reads them books about differences, including, "One" by Kathryn Otoshi, Carol McCloud's "Have You Filled the Bucket Today?" and "The Crayon Box that Talked" by Shane Derolf.

Ultimately, she lets them know that no one is the same and each person is here for a reason.

"In life, you deal with a lot of different people," Mrs. DeMuro concluded. "You have to be tolerant of others."