

RESPONDING TO BIGOTED WORDS

Challenging bigoted and offensive remarks is critical to ensuring dignity and respect for all people. Below are step-by-step strategies that can assist you if you find yourself in situations where such remarks are made.

► Think

Explore your understanding of the situation. Take a moment to reflect on what was said and why you consider it to be prejudicial: *What was just said?*

Do an emotional check-in. Consider your own emotions and if you can respond effectively immediately or if you need to take time to do so effectively.

Ensure your safety. Is this something to which you can safely respond to immediately or do you need to walk away and address the matter in another way? Do you need to seek assistance or support from someone else to intervene? Personal safety is of utmost importance.

Be clear about what you want to accomplish. Know what your intentions are, as they will influence the outcome of any responses: *Is this a “teachable moment”? Do I want this person to understand the impact of those words?* Try to start from an assumption of good will. Be aware that some people are acting out of ignorance and will respond defensively when told their words have been perceived as prejudicial.

► Act

Address your concerns. Whether done immediately or later, in public or in private, consider letting the person know that the words he or she used were hurtful or offensive: *What did you mean by what you said? That sounded to me like a stereotype. Do you understand why that was so hurtful?*

Engage in respectful dialogue. Particularly when you’re talking to someone you know, people tend to listen better and be more open when they know that they matter to the person who is speaking. Begin the conversation by communicating that you value and are committed to your relationship with the person. Communicate your concerns without accusation or attacks. Assist the person in understanding that jokes, slurs and demeaning words are not minor incidents to the person who is on the receiving end. Listen respectfully to the person, but do not minimize the impact of the situation: *I want to speak to you, because your friendship is important to me. I want to let you know that what you said hurt me. I do not like such words around me because I think they are offensive and demeaning.*

► **Maintain Dignity**

Hold people accountable. Sometimes people need to hear more than once that their words are not acceptable. Remind them of previous conversations if they resume their behavior. However, recognize too that there is a line to be drawn, and if necessary, let them know that their actions have consequences, in the form of lost friendships or reports to school administrators, supervisors or other authority figures.

Remember your “rights.” Although you do not have the right to dictate other people’s sense of humor or how they speak, you do have the right to request that this type of humor not be used in your presence.