

## “...but WORDS will never HURT me”?

Some children have been heard to say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Not true. Words can hurt. Not just one child, but entire groups, neighborhoods, and communities. In fact, **hate speech** is both **pervasive** and **destructive**. But, **you can do something** about it. And we must.

### Hate Speech and Hate Crime

For the most part, hate speech, even when it is based on race, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, disability, gender, or sexual orientation, is protected by the First Amendment guarantee of free speech.

In California, hate speech is not protected if two conditions exist: 1) it is directed at a specific person or persons, or institutions, or place of worship, and 2) it is accompanied by threat of violence and the target has reason to believe that the perpetrator can carry out the threat.

### Hate Speech is Pervasive

Sometimes it seems as if hate speech is everywhere. It is so pervasive that we may become accustomed to it and less sensitive to its damage. That is, unless you're the target.

**Every population group has been the target of hate speech.** Police hate crime reports have recorded slurs against not only historically common targets, such as, African Americans, Jews, and gay men, but also Latinx, Muslims, transgender persons, people with disabilities, and many, many others.

Hate speech is perhaps more common **when there is rapid demographic change**. When a neighborhood, industry, or school has been dominated by a particular group, and people of another group arrive in significant numbers over a short period of time, there can be friction from a sense of competition. This can be even more challenging when economic opportunities are limited.

One of the reasons hate speech is pervasive is what is known as **implicit bias**. Implicit bias refers to stereotypes that affect our attitudes, understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. All of us make assumptions about others that can affect what we say to them and about them. When our assumptions are negative, our words can be hurtful.

### Hate Speech is Destructive

Hate speech, when it is allowed to continue, has a **cumulative effect**. It feeds itself and creates an atmosphere where people feel it is more and more acceptable to disrespect and ridicule one another. It can breed hate crime and make our streets unsafe. It can victimize and destabilize entire communities.

Healthy, nurturing communities for children and adults alike can be destroyed when hate speech is tolerated. It hurts not only an individual target, but also that person's family and friends and entire social networks.

Hate speech can be **emotionally traumatic**. Targets may feel devalued, angry, and ashamed. Verbal assault can damage self-confidence. Targets often feel attacked just for being who they are. Persistent harassment can eventually harm someone's ability to function in daily life.

The destructive effects of hate speech may persist long after physical injury has healed. Many people remember vividly, and painfully, experiences from long ago when they were mocked, ridiculed, or humiliated.

And, remember, when hate speech targets someone because they are seen as representing a group, the harmful effects go beyond the individual. Entire populations can be affected by a single serious incident of prejudicial hate speech. Social media makes it possible for messages to be shared widely, and for incidents to become known to many. The results can include widespread fear and hostility.

## You Can Do Something

When you encounter hate speech, either as a target or as a witness, you can do something. If you do nothing, you can expect that nothing will change. Often, perpetrators of hate speech interpret silence from witnesses as support and agreement.

Avoid the impulse to respond to hate with hate. Only more hate will result. Be aware of your emotions, and use them to propel you to act rather than allowing them to cloud your judgment.

Separate the statements from the one making them. It doesn't help to condemn the person or accuse them publicly of being prejudiced. Condemn the words spoken, not the speaker. You might simply say, "I don't agree at all with that [stereotype expression]."

**If you are a parent, teacher, or youth leader**, help youth recognize the impact of words. They are likely to use words they learn from their peers, influential adults, social media, and pop culture. They may not realize how hurtful certain words used in certain ways can be. Explain to them what hate speech can do to a targeted person. Often, just knowing they have inflicted hurt can lead youth to stop. Instant, global communication means mobilizing youth to replace hate speech with respect is needed now more than ever.

And, if a young person uses words to purposely hurt someone, what should you do? Well, what would you do if they hit or kicked someone?

**If you are the target of hate speech**, keep record of details. And, report the incident to a community services organization. Organizations available to assist you include the Anti-Defamation League, the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Coalition of Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles, local LGBT Centers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the LA County Commission on Disabilities, and the LA County Commission on Human Relations.

If an incident occurs at work, notify a supervisor, manager, or personnel officer. If the hate speech continues and you decide to file a grievance, you will need a record of who said what and when in order to demonstrate a pattern.

If the verbal assault stops just short of threatening violence, report it to law enforcement. Sometimes an inquiry by law enforcement is enough to prevent further incidents. If the hate speech deteriorates to a hate crime, the reports can help show a hate motive.

**If you witness hate speech directed toward someone else**, encourage the target to report the incident. If you can do so safely, you may want to try to help resolve the situation. If so, be sure you are certain of the facts. Attempt to determine if the intent was hateful. You can ask the speaker if they knew the words were offensive. Give feedback. For example: "It sounds like you think all immigrants lie to get on welfare. Is that what you meant to say?" It can be helpful to give the speaker the benefit of the doubt. For instance: "I know you didn't mean to make a sweeping generalization about all Muslims. But that's how it sounded." If you don't feel comfortable intervening directly, get help.

**If you are in a position of authority or influence**, you can use your position to restrain hate speech. Keep in mind that in any group, leaders and other persons of influence set the tone. The tone they set can support hate speech or deter it.

Be sure that your organization has a well-established, well-understood policy that prohibits harassment and hate speech. Model acceptable, respectful communication at all times, in public settings, meetings, and conversations. Invest resources in training workers to respond effectively to hate speech, reduce their implicit bias, and strengthen their cultural competence.

If each of us will do what we can do, together we can make a difference. We won't make hate speech less destructive. But, together **we can put the unity back into community**, and make hate speech far less pervasive. Will you do something?