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Christine's Chronicles: The R-Word

The use of the word “retarded” has again come into the spotlight. Emotions and opinions in the media are mixed. Christine, the mother of a child with a disability shares a story for us all to ponder and react to.



by Christine Lindauer

So I'm sure most of you have seen the recent flurry of news around Rahm Emanuel's use of the R-word. Rush Limbaugh had an R-word filled response to it. Then what saddened me the most was Sarah Palin, the mother of a child with Down syndrome, excusing Limbaugh's use of the word because it was satire while calling for Emanuel to be fired. But so goes the world of politics.

So I thought I'd take this opportunity to diverge from my usual postings and share a story from my childhood. It's strange what you remember, how a moment can touch you in such way, that you never forget it. I didn't realize it at the time, but this was one of those moments.

I had just started first grade and I had made a new friend. Her name was Joyce. We exchanged phone numbers at school and she told me that she would call me that evening. This was a first for me. I had never talked on the phone before with a girlfriend. So she called and we chatted for a bit about silly girl things as my sister Stacy was standing nearby. Joyce then asked to speak to my sister. So I let my sister have the phone and she talked to Joyce for a little while, and then gave the phone back to me. The next words were the ones that still haunt me.

“Is your sister retarded?”

I shouted back into the phone “No, she's not retarded!” I didn't know what it meant, but I could tell from the tone in her voice that it wasn't nice. I got off the phone and immediately went over to my mother and asked “Mommy, what does retarded mean?”

I don't remember exactly what my mother said to me, but she went on to explain how my sister was special. That my sister, my best friend, was different. From that moment, the way I saw Stacy changed. I noticed how she was in the special classroom, with the few other children who were always teased and made fun of. She was one of them.

I don't know if it happened right then, or if it was gradual, but I separated myself from her, all throughout our school years. Always wanting to be liked by the other kids, not wanting to be the girl with the retarded sister. I wish I could go back. I wish I could go back and stand by your side, Stacy as your best friend again.

I suppose that kids will be mean, and if it isn't the R-word, then they will find some other word. But I dread the day when my son is called that. I asked another parent of an adult with disabilities how she got through it. And she said that you just do. You do what you gotta do and that I'll get through it too.

But wouldn't it be wonderful if we lived in a world without labels, and we could see each person for the strengths and beauty that they add to our lives. I think that's worth fighting for, don't you?

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Politics

I think society has changed how we view our special children. In the past, it was ok to use the word retarded. But, however I think by using special, these children dont feel they are bad or different. Its sad to see people still calling someone retarded.

Reply

Hurtful words

Yep, too bad the word is in the special education law. It makes education practitioners feel the need to use the term in a clinical way. People need to have one term to call things (e.g., special education vs special needs) or it's difficult to communicate. But these "terms" refer to people - and they can obviously be very hurtful. I inadvertently hurt someone's feelings yesterday by calling him a salesman - just think how hurtful it is to be called retarded.

Reply

Hurtful words

Let's start using people first language anywhere and everywhere. Instead of saying the r- word we should say people with cognitive impairments.

Reply