Interfaith children in Chicago receive lessons in making friends, not foes

By Chicago Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.09.17

CHICAGO, Ill. — The children of Muslim, Jewish and Christian faiths sat cross-legged, shoulder-to-shoulder, brainstorming ways to practice charity.

"Smiling!" a young boy called out.

"Helping someone carry something heavy," suggested another.

Serving food to homeless people. Cutting the grass for an elderly neighbor. Planting a tree. The answers came fast and furious, fueled by youthful hope and miniature bags of Veggie Straws.

The hundred or so students gathered recently in the gymnasium at the Muslim Community Center in Morton Grove. The nonprofit youth arts organization Poetry Pals hosted the interfaith event. Fourth-graders attended from Sacred Heart Academy, Bernard Zell Anshe Emet Day School and Muslim Community Center Academy.

Communicating Shared Values
Habeeb M. Quadri is Muslim Community Center Academy's principal. He told me, "one of the greatest ways you get to know about other ethnicities and faiths" is through communicating. "They're talking about their faith, but they're talking about it through shared values, trying to get close to God, trying to be a good individual, taking care of your family and your community."

Shortly after they arrived, the students split into small groups and played a game called, "Yes, let's," in which they called out different traditions and celebrations in their religions. Then they snacked on Veggie Straws and decorated bookmarks and tiles for Little Free Libraries. With the website, littlefreelibrary.org, the organization has small wooden boxes that house books for people to share for free.

When the crafts were complete, the students retreated to the mosque, where Quadri led the students in a discussion about charity and stewardship.

"There aren't enough days like this," said Ilene Siemer, executive director of Poetry Pals. "This should be normal for everybody, and this is so very far from normal."

**Poetry Pals Coordinates Ninth Annual Gathering**

The event was the ninth annual interfaith gathering that Poetry Pals has coordinated at the Muslim Community Center. Founded in 2008, the nonprofit works with elementary schools throughout the Chicago area, encouraging kids to express and share their faiths with one another through music, art, poetry and performance.

The educators present Wednesday were as enthusiastic as the students.

"We think it's important that kids are exposed to as many different people and cultures as possible, so they get to see that we're all pretty much the same," said Brian East. He is a teacher at Sacred Heart.

"Our kids are always kind of amazed, for example, that Steph Curry is just as popular with Jewish and Muslim kids as he is with the guys at Sacred Heart."

Favorite athletes, favorite movies and favorite books all plant the seeds that can grow into friendship, rather than fear.

"The kids learn to stop othering," Siemer said. "Instead of being this other group of people I don't know, they just become 'my friend.'"

**Children Are Inspiration In Critical Moment In America**

It's a particularly critical lesson in this moment, when the nation and the world are debating a crackdown on refugees coming to the United States. Disputes have come over recent travel restrictions that target people from seven mostly Muslim countries.

We seem hopelessly, bitterly divided. And yet, in that gym, we seemed anything but.

"Kids have pure hearts," Quadri said. When you catch them at a young age, he said, you can change their outlook "before they let other factors influence their decision-making."

The students giggled and played together, seemingly unaware of their differences. Some wore hijabs, or headscarves to cover their hair. Others had on pleated skirts, or shirts with a tiny Star of
David embroidered on the chest. The six-pointed star is a Jewish symbol.

"It's fun to meet people, so you're not just reading about them in a book," a girl from Bernard Zell told me. "You're actually with the people, and you get to know them."

"You learn about their personalities," her classmate chimed in.

The schools asked that students' names not be used.

**More Same Than Different**

During the discussion about practicing charity, a Jewish boy stood up and explained the tzedakah box, a container for collecting money that will be donated to charity. A Muslim child raised his hand and said his faith has the same tradition. It's called sadaqah, and it means voluntary giving.

The words are similar, tzedakah and sadaqah, and the value they express is the same.

"We learn that we're more the same than we are different," a Sacred Heart boy told me.

We should all find the courage to follow their lead.