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Sacred Beings
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It surprises me how often something I learn during my occasional weekends spent as a visitors' assistant at the Minnesota Children's Museum applies to my real job here at Press Publications- or to life in general.

Last Saturday, for example, I was in a group of educators, social service workers and museum staff who completed a training session in "Wakanheza" (pronounced walk – ahn – zha). The name Wakanheza, or Sacred Being, is the Dakota word for "child." The program suggests that if we speak of and treat our children as Sacred Beings, we will begin to treat them differently than we currently are.

Two of the educators at Saturday's training session were from the Mounds View School District. They will be sharing what they learned with their peers in an effort to make their schools more welcoming for children and families.

Among components of the project, which was started by Ramsey County and now has been adapted to schools, libraries and the museum, is to offer tools that will allow us to reach out to people in stressful situations, to be supportive and lend a hand.

In particular, this session focused on techniques to help parents who are having difficulties with their children in public places. Every parent knows the sense of pressure and powerlessness that results from dealing with a tantrum-throwing 3-year-old in the midst of eye-rolling strangers.

A critical point is to learn to avoid judgment of parents in these stressful situations.

This withholding of judgment has parallels to journalism, which teaches us to source stories carefully. Life should be the same. When we draw conclusions about others, we should be sure the facts are complete.

Participants in Saturday's workshop shared personal experiences about times we'd been wrongly judged or had wrongly judged others.

A teacher told of a student who, because of her unkempt hair and clothing, appeared to be a victim of neglect. As it turns out, the little girl with the matted hair was being raised by her grandfather, who was a loving caretaker but knew little about dressing little girls or fixing hair.

Another workshop participant told of his own daughter, who at a very young age became attached to a special dress. She insisted on wearing it every day – everywhere

– while it grew more and more tattered and frayed with each washing. What judgment did strangers make when seeing this little girl in the torn dress?

I remembered a co-worker's shame many years ago when she was called by school officials and chastised because her daughter was at school without a coat in bitter weather. "What kind of mother lets her child leave the house this way?" was the message she heard.

Fact is, that daughter was fully zipped into a warm coat when she left the house that morning, but left it on the bus and didn't think to tell anyone.

In addition to these examples of judgment, workshop participants shared moments we weren't proud of involving our own children and grandchildren.

In cases where these moments were witnessed by strangers, it's likely strong assumptions were made about our qualifications as caretakers. In reality, these were just moments in the lives of otherwise-loving parents and grandparents who were in situations where we'd "lost it" for a moment.

These moments, while real, were just scenes out of context; and judgments were being made based on these fragments of a whole life.

Children and parent's were the focus of Saturday's Wakanheza training, but the principles and tools can be practiced everywhere to change people and environments. In any situation, when people appear to be at their worst, it's good to take a moment to assess the situation and think about what is really happening.

I was reminded of a situation in our offices a while back which involved a very angry public official from one of the communities we serve.

A mistake had been made in identifying people in a photograph. We apologized repeatedly and offered to correct the information in a subsequent issue. After several conversations with different people, the man's anger did not de-escalate.

His response seemed extreme, given the nature of the situation, and out of character for those who knew him. We were puzzled.

Later we discovered he was dealing with an extreme emotional situation that day, unrelated to the photo. And for a moment in time, he had not been himself.

Who among us does not know how that feels?

And that's the basic tool of Wakanheza. Whether watching a parent dealing with a tantrum-throwing child or dealing with an angry customer, it's important to convey that we understand how others feel and seek ways to help.

The principles of this program – treating others as Sacred Beings – can apply to everyone.

For more information about Wakanheza, visit <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/ph/hb/wakanheza.htm>).