

Your Child's Broader World: Culture, Race, and Diversity

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Connecting your Child with a Cultural Identity

Identifying your culture and cultural values

When I searched for resources on this topic, I mostly found articles for adoptive parents connecting their child to its culture of origin, and a handful of articles for parents who are part of a religious or ethnic minority group. There was little about how people from any background might do it. I think people who view themselves as part of “mainstream America” may often not think of themselves as having a cultural identity. But clearly, we are shaped by our background. I was raised in a church-going, military family of four in Wyoming. Each of those things lead to me having some different world views than a friend who was an only child raised by a liberal single mom in Berkeley in the early 70's. So although that friend and I have a lot of common from our current perspectives, we've certainly run across times when we have very different assumptions about 'how the world works' and 'how things are done.' Like a fish learning to describe water, the first step of connecting your child to a cultural identity may be for you to figure out what that identity is!

Talk to your partner to agree on a common set of goals. Here are topics you may want to touch on.

- What is your cultural background?
- How might that be the same or different from other people in your child's community?
- What are some of cultural values that resonate with you? Are there values or attitudes you would like to leave behind?
- What things in your life have helped you connect to that identity?
- What traditions or rituals do you want to continue to follow?

Sometimes talking with other people about their culture, or reading books from diverse cultures, can help you to understand your own better. I would recommend Parenting without Borders as a great introduction to other cultures' approaches to parenting.

Beginning to talk about culture

We don't have to wait till children are “old enough” to understand religion and culture to begin talking about it. Like everything else in their lives, from food to books to dressing themselves, we talk from the beginning about all the things they experience, and trust their understanding of it will grow and deepen as they get older.

Young children are very concrete. They learn through hands-on experience, and through observing the important people in their lives. They don't really learn through abstract conversations about ideas. They also learn through repetition, so as you begin to think about what parts of your cultural identity and values you want to reinforce, keep that in mind.

Culture: Routines, Rituals, and Traditions

For a toddler, life often seems unpredictable and random. Routines create a reassuring sense of structure in a child's life – the more they know what is coming next, the more manageable life seems for them. They

appreciate the sense gained from daily routines that ‘this is how my family does things.’ Ritual and traditions take that to the next level: ‘this is how my people do things and how we have done things for a very long time’. From annual holiday traditions, they gain a sense of how time passes, bringing with it lots of change, but also retaining some important cores.

Some places to consider adding rituals or traditions:

- Daily: How do you begin your days together? What are mealtimes like? What is the typical rhythm of the day? What’s the bedtime routine?
- Weekly: Could you do “family date nights”? Weekly dinners with extended family or friends?
- Holidays: Which do you celebrate? How do you celebrate? Decorations? Foods? Gifts?
- Special occasions: Does the tooth fairy come to your house?
- Other family traditions: Do you have nicknames or family in-jokes or songs?

Some ways to include cultural identity in your child’s life:

- Tell stories. Talk about your childhood, how your family did things, about their grandparents’ childhoods, and so on.
- Read books about your culture, listen to ethnic music or the music your parents played/sang when you were young, eat foods that were traditional where you were raised. (Jello salad for me. 😊)
- Learn the language of your culture.
- Go to religious services or cultural festivals.
- Make scrapbooks with information about your family: a family tree, photographs, documents of your family’s journey

Learn more: http://www.growparenting.com/pages/blog_files/Building-Cultural-Identity.php

Stages of Development of Cultural Identity and Racial Awareness

It’s important to know how young children’s cognitive abilities develop. It can help you decide what you should be talking about and what activities to do with your child at each stage. Here are some general benchmarks that show how young children develop racial and cultural identity and attitudes. These lists describe average development – all children develop at their own pace.

Infants and Young Toddlers

Infants are working on the basics of self-awareness and a separate identity from their caregivers: sorting out “what’s me” and “what’s not.” As young as six months, they notice differences in skin color as an interesting novel experience, and will gaze longer at a face that is different from their parents’ face. By age two, they may comment on different skin colors. These differences may be more obvious to them than gender differences.

Two- and three-year-olds

Can begin to describe themselves and their abilities. Become more aware of how people look, notice differences between boys and girls, skin color, hair color, eye shapes, weight, disabilities, size... May be curious about differences, or may be fearful of those who look different than their family looks.

Three- and four-year-olds

Better able to describe themselves. Notice difference more – this is the age they start asking (loudly in the store), “Mama, why is that person ___?” May show preferences for children who are like them. May want to

know why there are different races, or how they got their skin color. They understand they are getting bigger as they get older, they may wonder if other things will change – gender, skin color, and so on.

Kindergarten

Continue to ask questions about differences. Start noticing the differences between members of an ethnic group, such as the range of skin tones amongst “black” people. Can identify which ethnic group they belong to. More aware of family culture.

Learn more: www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topics/getalong/getalong05
www.pbs.org/kcts/preciouschildren/diversity/read_activities.html

Teaching Cultural Awareness and Appreciation of Diversity

Toddlers love to sort things by color, or by shape, or by type of thing (e.g. car or train?). They make sense of their world by seeing how things fit into categories. They are very aware of racial differences. But when they ask their parents about it, how do we respond? Research finds that 75% of white parents almost never talk about race (non-white parents are *much* more likely to do so, often when issues of discrimination come up.) If parents avoid a subject, or become awkward around it, kids may learn that the topic is “taboo.”

When white parents *do* talk about race, it’s often to say “we’re all the same.” Which mystifies a young child who can clearly see that we are NOT all the same.

How might our children’s perception be changed if we instead acknowledged and celebrated the differences? As they get older, *then* we can add in that even though we’re different, we all have “the same” rights. And, then as they get even older, we can refine that into “we *should* all have the same rights and opportunities, but we don’t. What can we do together to help be sure everyone has the same opportunities?”

When reading books, watching movies, or people watching, talk about differences easily and openly. Note different skin colors, ages, gender expressions, weight, ability, clothing / hairstyles, and family compositions. Use descriptive words / labels they can use, like Asian, gay, disabled. We will, of course, help them understand as they grow older that no one can be defined by any one label. But, as they start to sort things out, talking about differences builds vocabulary and context for understanding the broader world.

In public, when your child notices a difference, acknowledge it. If they have questions, address them calmly without embarrassment or awkwardness. (As a person with a visible handicap, it’s not unusual for me to overhear a child saying “mama, how come that lady only has one leg?” The question never troubles me – if a child asks me directly, I say “you’re right, that’s unusual for someone to only have one leg isn’t it?” and then share more information as is age appropriate. Sometimes parents respond in a similar way. But I’m dismayed when I hear a parent “shush” the child. That tells the child that this is something that is “not OK” to talk about.)

Actively expose your child to other cultures: eat at ethnic restaurants, attend cultural festivals, visit museums which focus on other cultures, read books and see movies from many countries, learn bits of other languages. Discuss what are the ways we are the same as other people, and what ways are we different. Celebrate both your own culture and other cultures.

Learn more: www.growparenting.com/pages/blog_files/Raising-Culturally-Aware-Children.php
Even Babies Discriminate - excerpt from *Nurture Shock*: <http://mag.newsweek.com/2009/09/04/see-baby-discriminate.html>
Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves, Excerpt: www.naeyc.org/store/files/store/TOC/254.pdf
Cultural Nurturing: www.bhcmhmr.org/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=14347&cn=462