

Teaching about Differences and Appreciation of Diversity

Janelle Durham, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Young children love to sort things by color, or by shape, or by type (e.g. car or train?). They make sense of their world by seeing how things fit into categories. And in most cases, we encourage them to think about classifications – especially when it helps them to remember to put the Legos in the Lego bin, the books on the bookshelf, and the dirty socks in the laundry basket!

But, when they try to sort out categories of people: race, gender, ability, age, and more, we tend to get all flustered. We worry about saying the wrong thing, causing offense, creating prejudice, etc.

For example, consider our approach to racial differences. Children are very aware of different skin tones, even as young as 6 months. But when kids ask their parents about it, how do they respond? Most non-white parents talk frequently about race. But research finds that 75% of white parents almost never talk about race. When well-meaning white parents *do* talk about race, they often try the “color-blind” approach and say “we’re all the same.” Which mystifies a young child who can clearly see we are NOT all the same. If parents avoid a subject, or act awkward whenever it comes up, kids may get the message that the topic is “taboo” and something bad we’re not supposed to mention.

How might our kids’ perception be changed if we instead acknowledge and celebrate differences?

Talk about Differences. 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, languages spoken, family compositions, and more. Use descriptive words / labels they can use, like Asian, gay, disabled, multi-racial. (As they get older, we’ll help them learn 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.)

Be careful not to add in biased judgments or stereotypes when talking about differences: “She’s only got a mama, no daddy. That must be hard for her.” “He’s Asian, I bet he does well in school.” “She likes sports? She must be a tomboy.”

Talk about Commonalities. We shouldn’t ignore the differences and *only* talk about commonalities. But, once you’ve acknowledged a difference your child has noticed, you can also talk about universal needs and common interests. “You’re right, her skin is a different color than yours. Her ancestors came from a different part of the world than ours did. I noticed that you two played soccer together for a long time – it seems like she likes it as much as you do.” “Yes, you have just me as your parent, and most of your classmates have two parents – sometimes a mom and a dad, sometimes two moms or two dads. But all of you get lots of love and snuggles, right?” “They wear those special clothes as part of their religion. We don’t wear special clothes, but we do celebrate special holidays because of our religious beliefs.”

Answer Questions about Differences. I have a visible handicap, and it’s pretty common for me to overhear a child saying “mama, how come that lady only has one leg?” Some parents ignore the question, change the subject, or “shush” the child. That tells the child this is something that is “not OK” to talk about. It implies that disability is something shameful or embarrassing to discuss, either for them or for me. Instead, when your child asks questions about differences, try these approaches:

- Acknowledge the difference – “you’re right, and that’s different than what you’re used to.”
- After acknowledging it, you could say “we’ll talk about it later” or you could address it now.
- Give a simple answer to the question, if you know it: “Those are called crutches. They help her to walk.” Or, if you don’t know, you might say “I don’t know why she has one leg... some people are born without one and sometimes someone loses a leg in an accident.”
- Try to figure out how your child is feeling. If they’re simply curious and wanting to learn something, then answer the question they asked. If you sense there’s any fear or discomfort for them, make some guesses about what that is and address it.

Actively expose your child to other perspectives: 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. Seek out multi-generational communities – make friends with people of all ages. Connect with queer families. Attend public events hosted by faith communities. Choose to live in a diverse neighborhood and/or attend a diverse school.

Choose children’s books which teach about diversity. Look here for info on how to evaluate books (and other media): <http://www.teachingforchange.org/selecting-anti-bias-books> and here for recommended books <http://www.childpeacebooks.org/cpb/Protect/antiBias.php>

Talking about Inequity. In the early years, we can focus on building an appreciation for, and understanding of, a wide variety of differences.

As they get older (around early elementary school), *then* we add in that even though we’re different, we all have the same rights and deserve the same fair treatment.

As they get even older (by age 10 or so), 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 increase everyone’s access to the same opportunities?”

And with teens, we can add in discussion of systemic oppressions – classism, ableism, homophobia, and so on. If you think you can skip these discussions, you likely are coming from a place of privilege. As a white parent, I can *choose* whether or not to talk about this. If my kids had brown skin, it’s not an option to not talk about it. Check out this article on how white parents talking about racism can help their kids support friends of color: www.scarymommy.com/black-child-friends/

In an increasingly diverse society, the more we try to pretend racism and sexism and such are things of the past, the more we allow them to persist. Having open and honest conversations about diversity will help us work together toward a more equitable society for all.

Learn more: Even Babies Discriminate - excerpt from *Nurture Shock*: <http://mag.newsweek.com/2009/09/04/see-baby-discriminate.html>; Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias, from NAEYC: www.cccpreschool.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Teaching-Children-to-Resist-Bias4.pdf; What White Children Need to Know About Race: <http://www.nais.org/magazines-newsletters/ismagazine/pages/what-white-children-need-to-know-about-race.aspx>