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Talking About Differences

Age 19 Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Teens will not only be noting differences in the world, but they may be directly seeking more diversity as they venture into life after high school, whether that involves college or the work world. Differences can include gender or gender expression, skin color, body size, language, and other attributes they can see or hear. Parents or those in a parenting role can support their teens as they make sense of differences among people by talking to them about what they observe and creating a safe, trusting space to raise issues.



- Ask questions to explore differences and similarities in their world. "*As you interact with or observe students at school events, have you noticed anyone who is having a hard time, is left out, or even targeted because of a difference?*"
- When your teen is reading a book, talk about the characters involved and how they are similar and different. Ask, *"What do you notice about the characters?"* and *"How are they similar or different from you?"*
- Ask about friends and classmates and how they get along. You might ask, "*Are there any classmates who are criticized because of their differences*? *How do they feel? What do you do? How could you be more accepting or inclusive?*"

Tip You don't need to wait for your teen to bring up differences among people to start talking about them. Instead, make talking about differences and similarities part of their everyday experiences.



The fundamental purpose of talking about differences among people is to help your teen develop empathy, perspective-taking, appreciation of diversity, and respect for others.

- Pay attention to how you interact with people who are different from you.
    - "How do I talk about people who are different from me?"

    - “In what situations do I feel uncomfortable or uneasy when interacting with people different from me?”
- Model behaviors (and your teen will notice and learn).
    - “How can I model acceptance, inclusion, and celebration of those different from me?”
- Expose your teen to people and experiences different from your own family. Talk about and celebrate racial, cultural, belief, and perspective differences.
- Provide books, games, and other materials that expose your teen to people who are different.
- Encourage your teen’s questions about differences between people. If they utter judgments about their peers’ character or image, no matter the judgment, look for ways to reframe viewing with empathy and appreciation.
- Stay informed. What is considered acceptable and respectful language may change. Seek out credible sources.
- Grow empathy. Encourage your teen to see the world from others’ points of view.
- If you hear your teen say something like, “He talks funny” or “She is dressed weird,” spend some time discussing how the words we choose matter. Offer alternative words to help your teen be more respectful.
- After hearing them from friends, peers, or pop culture, derogatory terms may creep into your teen's language. Discuss offensive words.
    - *“Do you know what that means?”*
    - *“Do you know why that word or phrase might hurt someone?”*

Tip Teens learn first through modeling. If you feel uncomfortable interacting with people different from you, your child/teen will likely pick up on those cues and model your behavior. Formulate new ways of interacting that model what you want your child/teen to mimic when they are with people who are different from them.



- Provide opportunities for your teen to meet and interact with other teens and adults of all ages, races, and cultures.
- Use your family’s media selections to initiate conversations about how differences help us learn more about ourselves and others.
- As a family, volunteer in neighborhoods or with groups you typically would not encounter.

Tip Notice whether the people in your daily lives are different from your family or if they tend to be similar. If most of your interactions with others are with people similar to you, consider seeking more diverse opportunities. Try out a grocery store in a different neighborhood.



- Recognize effort using "I notice..." statements like: *"I noticed how you were playing and having fun with your classmate who uses a wheelchair. It was great that you picked a game that everyone could play."*
- Offer confidence in your teen's ability to face something new. In a gentle, non-public way, you can offer some words of confidence.
- Actively reflect on how your teen is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like, *"You seem worried about talking to someone who communicates with sign language. Remember, you can always write things down to communicate with them*."



- No matter how old your teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your teen's efforts. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three distinct parenting behaviors have different impacts on your teen's behavior.
    - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *"You included a new friend in your group hangout at the park today -- I love seeing that!* Recognition can include nonverbal acknowledgment such as a smile, high five, or hug.
    - **Rewards** can be helpful in certain situations by providing a concrete, timely, and positive incentive for doing a good job. A reward is determined ahead of time so that the teen knows what to expect, like "*If you try a new type of food for lunch, you may choose what we make for dinner.*" (if you XX, then I'll XX) The goal should be to help your teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a teen's internal motivation.
    - Unlike a reward, bribes aren't planned ahead of time and generally happen when a parent or those in a parenting role is in a crisis (like a teen arguing and refusing to leave a social gathering. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to stop for ice cream on the way home if the teen stops arguing and leaves the event). While bribes can be helpful in the short term to manage stressful situations, they will not grow lasting motivation or behavior change and should be avoided.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after learning about a holiday you and your teen were unfamiliar with, try making a new recipe specific to that culture. Celebrate the incredible diversity that you are realizing in your world.

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