

Talking About Differences

Age 8 Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Research shows that children think about differences between people and how they should respond to them from a very early age. Parents or those in a parenting role can support their children as they make sense of differences among people by talking to them about what they observe. Differences can include gender or gender expression, skin color, body size, language, and other attributes they can see or hear. Through honest conversations with you, children develop ways to learn from differences and show respect for them.

STEP

1



GET INPUT

Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Ask questions to explore differences and similarities. “What do you notice is different between you and me?” “Do you see that I have glasses and you don’t?”
- When reading books with your child, look at images of people and ask your child what they notice about the people that make them similar and different. “What do you notice?” and “What are you wondering?”

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

STEP

2



TEACH

Teach New Skills

The fundamental purpose of talking about differences among people is to help your child 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 children will notice and learn).

- “How can I model acceptance, inclusion, and celebration of those different from me?”
- Expose your child to people and experiences different from your own family.
- Provide books, toys, and other materials that expose your child to people who are different.
- Encourage your child’s questions about differences between people. Encouraging curiosity with respectful dialogue helps take away the shame some may associate with the topic of differences.
- Stay informed. What is considered acceptable and respectful language may change.
- Grow empathy. Encourage your child to see the world from others’ points of view.
- If you hear your child 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 child be more respectful.

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

STEP
3



PRACTICE

Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- When out in your community with your child, make introductions and involve your child in conversations with others (e.g., neighbors, the barista, or the grocery cashier).
- Provide opportunities for your child to meet and interact with other children and adults of all ages, races, and cultures.
- Point out similarities and differences (in a respectful way). Talk about how differences help us learn more about ourselves and others.
- Pretend play together. Allow your child to explore roles, characters, and situations that are different from what is typically expected of them.

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.

STEP
4



SUPPORT

Support Your Child’s Development and Success

- 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 child’s ability to face something new. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper some words of confidence.
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like, “You seem worried about talking to someone who speaks differently. I can go with you so that you’ll feel more confident.”

STEP
5



RECOGNIZE

Recognize Efforts

- No matter how old your child is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- There are many ways you can reinforce your child’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 child’s behavior.
 - **Recognize** even small successes to promote positive behaviors and expand confidence: *“You played with some new friends 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 child 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 child progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. If used too often, rewards can decrease a child'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 in the grocery store checkout line and a child is having a tantrum. To avoid disaster, a parent or those in a parenting role offers to buy a sucker if the child will stop the tantrum). 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 child were not familiar with, try making a new recipe specific to that culture. Celebrate the incredible diversity that you are realizing in your world.

This content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Tools for Your Child's Success communities, financial supporters, contributors, SAMHSA, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

© 2023 Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University