

Talking About Differences

Age 4 Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Four-year-olds are noticing and asking about differences among people. Not allowing your child to ask questions and talk about these differences can lead to feelings of fear, distrust, and shame. Talking about these differences helps your child develop empathy, perspective-taking, appreciation of diversity, and respect for others. Talking about differences between people in positive and non-judgmental ways doesn't divide children or make them wary or fearful of one another. It bonds them as a community and allows them to be more respectful and inclusive.

Tip: These steps are done best when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.

Tip: Intentional communication and building a healthy parent relationship will support these steps.

STEP

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Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- Ask questions to explore differences and similarities. You might start by asking, *“What do you notice is different between you and me?”* If they have difficulty identifying differences, offer some suggestions. You could stand together in a mirror and say, *“Do you see that I have blue eyes and you have brown eyes?”* Or, *“I have glasses, and you don’t.”* Explore similarities as well. *“We both have freckles.” “We both have curly hair.”* Give your child plenty of time to look for examples and share their ideas with you. Talk about differences and similarities with others in your family (e.g., siblings, grandparents).
- When reading books to your child, look at the images of people and ask your child what they notice about the people that make them similar and different. Ask, *“What do you notice?”* and *“What are you wondering?”* If your child is unsure about how to describe similarities and differences, consider naming what you notice and leaving plenty of quiet space for them to think of some ideas. You could say, *“I notice both children have dark hair and skin.” “I notice that one person is wearing glasses and the other is not.”*

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

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Teach New Skills

- Expose your child to people and experiences different from your own family. Talk about those differences and focus on the positive experience of engaging with people, foods, music, and languages that are new to your child.
- At home, provide books, dolls/toys, and other materials that give your child a chance to see people who are different. Dolls/action figures with different skin colors and physical abilities, music representing different cultures, and TV show celebrating differences are examples.
- Consider checking out books at the library that show people who live in different types of housing, have disabilities, practice different religions, or have varied family structures. Be sure to talk about differences in an accepting and inclusive way.
- Encourage your child's questions about differences between people. Your child will likely ask many questions that start with "Why?" especially when they are curious about differences. "Why does her skin look different?" "Why does that person sound different?" "Why is my hair curly, and your hair is straight?" Encourage their curiosity by letting them know noticing differences and talking about them is okay.
 - Asking "Why?" for a 3-4-year-old is their way of exploring their world and learning about themselves and others. It is okay if you don't know the answer to their question. Acknowledge your child's curiosity, offer age-appropriate information, and talk positively about what your child has pointed out. For example, if your child says, "Why does that person have dark skin?" You could say, "*That is a good question. Let's talk about that. Everyone has a skin color. Some people have lighter skin color, and others have darker skin color. They are all beautiful.*"
 - Your child may ask questions about differences among people that seem insensitive or offensive to adults. If that happens, don't ignore it. Answer your child's question in a positive and non-judgmental way. For example, if your child points to a person using a wheelchair and asks, "Why is that person in that chair?" You might respond to your child by saying, "*Yes, that person is sitting in a wheelchair and using her arms to move the wheels so she can come into the room.*"
- Use person-first language. Person-first language is a way to describe a person's differences, and it names the person before labeling the difference. For example, instead of saying "*the disabled person,*" say "*a person who has a disability.*" Instead of "*a black person,*" say "*a person of color.*" Your child is listening to you and will start mimicking your language.
- Grow empathy. For example, if your child is hesitant to play with someone who looks or sounds different than they do, ask questions and then support your child by offering encouragement. "*How would they feel if we invited them to play? I bet they would be happy and excited to be invited to play with you. Let's go over and say hello together.*"

- If you hear your child say something like, “He talks weird” or “She looks funny,” spend time talking with your child about how the words we choose matter. Talk about how describing someone as “weird” or “funny” might hurt the person’s feelings. Also, explain why someone may talk differently or look differently than they do. Offer alternative words so your child learns what would be more appropriate.

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Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- When out in your community and while running errands with your child, make introductions and involve your child in conversations with others (e.g., neighbors, the barista, or the grocery cashier). 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 opportunities that would offer more diversity.
- 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. 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 usually expected. For example, it is okay when boys play dress up, and girls play with toy trucks. It is okay to have stuffed animals play with toy cars to show that different toys can play together like other kids.

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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 new friend in a wheelchair. It was great that you picked a game that everyone could play.*”
- On days with extra challenges, when you can see your child is scared of new people or situations, offer confidence in your child’s ability to face the new. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child’s ear, “*Remember how you enjoyed learning about different foods? Different kinds of music might be fun to experience, too. You might enjoy joining the group playing a new kind of drum.*”
- 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’ll hold your hand so that you feel more confident.*” Offering comfort when facing new situations can help your child gain a sense of security and face them rather than backing away.

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Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice.
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after completing your bedtime routine, snuggle and read before bed.

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