

Diversity and Differences

Boston University Children's Center
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Anti-bias education puts into practice the belief that children of every race, gender, religion, multicultural background, and physical and learning ability should be afforded the same opportunities to learn and develop to their fullest potential. This does not mean that differences among the children are ignored and everyone is viewed as being the same. In fact, it means that the diversity of our community is recognized, talked about, and celebrated. From these practices children begin to develop and take pride in their own self-identity as well as learn how to be open to and embrace the experiences of others. A community that acknowledges and celebrates its differences is a community in which everyone feels welcomed and included.

Acknowledging differences can sometimes mean uncomfortable conversations may take place. It can feel awkward when your child makes a remark in public such as, "That person has no leg!" or "Is that person a girl or a boy?" However, ignoring the question or shushing your child can make them feel badly or ashamed for noticing different physical characteristics in people. It can also make the person your child is talking about feel as though they should also feel badly for looking a certain way. Children are concrete and literal learners, so instead of shutting down their question, you can capitalize on the first-hand experience they are getting and provide straight forward, simple answers such as, "Yes that person does only have one leg. Some people have two legs, some have one, and some people have none." There is no need to provide any more information, unless your child asks more questions.

Apart from potentially being a little embarrassed in public, you may also be concerned that the remarks your child is saying could be considered racist, sexist, or discriminatory. While they may come across this way, this does not mean your child is discriminating against anyone. They are simply stating what they see. However, if their observations go without being discussed, they may begin to create categorizations or stereotypes of people and make discriminatory comments in the future. When you talk to your child about the differences they notice, you can also point out the many similarities between themselves and the person they are talking about. This will strengthen your child's sense of commonality and build connection and empathy for others, allowing your child to view the differences of others in a non-judgmental way. Let's take a look at some of the differences your child may point out about others and how you can address their observations.



Multiculturalism

When you hear the word multicultural, ethnic diversity may be the first thing that comes to mind. However, multiculturalism has many different layers- as small as the culture of your nuclear family, to the culture of your neighborhood, to regional culture, and so on. Culture includes but is not limited to: art, music, verbal communication, and leadership structures. The same way celebrating a certain holiday is part of the culture of a certain religion, having a weekly Sunday dinner may be part of your family's culture!

Everyone has a cultural background, and at the Center we are always looking for families to share theirs with us, whether it's bringing in traditional clothing or sharing a favorite recipe. By sharing our cultures with one another, we strengthen and celebrate the diversity of our community while also gaining a greater understanding of others.

Learning Diversity

Diversity isn't just limited to physical differences. Everyone learns differently, meaning one person may receive information better when it is visual, while someone else may need hands-on experience to comprehend a certain concept.

At the Center, we understand that all children develop at their own pace, and we strive to meet them where they are developmentally and structure our curriculum in a way that supports how they learn. You may notice that when you give your child a direction at home verbally, such as "Go brush your teeth" that they need multiple prompts to complete the task. However, when you supplement this direction with a picture of someone brushing their teeth or acting out tooth-brushing, your child might complete the task right away on their own. Or your child may only need the verbal reminder. Everyone learns differently, and that is OK.

Discovering the best ways to share information with your child at home will enable them to continue to grow in a way that is developmentally appropriate.

References:

<http://www.aldenhabacon.com/13-tips-how-to-talk-to-children-about-diversity>

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1539-talking-to-toddlers-about-differences>

Gender Expression

While there are only two biological sexes, male and female, there are many forms of gender expression. You should allow your child to wear what they feel comfortable in, regardless of whether it's considered "boy clothing" or "girl clothing." Your child may see a boy in a dress, and say "Boys can't wear dresses." A simple statement such as, "Everyone can wear whatever clothing they choose," may be enough to satisfy your child. If they continue to insist boys can't wear dresses, you may want to open up the discussion to ask them why they think this is the case and then help to correct their assumptions.

It is also important to avoid labeling toys as "for girls" or "for boys." Any child can play with any toy, regardless of their gender. You may also want to refrain from labeling anyone you don't know as a girl or a boy, and instead refer to them as a person and use they/them pronouns.

Religion

At the Center, we are more than happy to celebrate any of the holidays celebrated by the families in our community. This is a great way to share and learn about the cultural traditions of our children and families. If your child asks a question about another religion or a religious holiday such as, "How come they celebrate Christmas but we don't?" you can give a simple answer such as, "Some people believe in different things. The things they believe in means they celebrate Christmas. The things we believe means we celebrate other holidays. It's ok for people to believe in different things and to celebrate different holidays." A straightforward, matter-of-fact response will answer your child's question as concretely as possible and in a developmentally appropriate way.

LGBT Families

All different types of family structures are accepted and celebrated at the Center. If your child comes from a family with a mother and a father and then sees a family with two mothers, they may say, "Where is that child's daddy?" An appropriate response to this would be, "That child has two mommies in their family." If your child asks why, you can make a more general statement about all families being different. You can explain that just because your family is a certain way doesn't mean everyone's is, and give examples of different family structures of people your child knows.

Physical Differences

Some physical differences your child might notice include those of people who are differently abled. For instance, your child may see someone with a prosthetic leg and say, "What is that?" An appropriate response would be, "That is that person's helper leg. It's called a prosthetic leg and they use it to walk." Keep your response short and simple, only answering what your child has asked. If they continue to ask questions, take their lead when answering them.

Body diversity can also be included in the category of physical differences. For instance, your child may comment on the weight of a stranger and say, "That person is so fat!" You can reply, "That person is big. People's bodies can be big or small and short or tall." These comments might make you feel embarrassed, but reacting calmly and respectfully will help your child understand that differences are normal and acceptable.

Children may also make comments on the color of another person's skin. For more specific advice on these conversations, please see our resource sheets on Race and Racism.