

Talking About Differences

Age 12 Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Research shows that children/teens 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/teens 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/teens develop ways to learn from differences and show respect for them.

STEP

1



Get Your Child/Teen 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 your child/teen is reading a book, talk about the characters involved and their similarities and differences. Ask, "What do you notice?" and "What are you wondering?"*
- *Ask about friends and classmates and how they get along. You might ask, "Are there any classmates who are teased because of how they are different? 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 child/teen 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 New Skills

The fundamental purpose of talking about differences among people is to help your child/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 children/teens will notice and learn).
 - “How can I model acceptance, inclusion, and celebration of those different from me?”
- Expose your child/teen 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 children/teens.
- Provide books, toys, and other materials that expose your child/teen to people who are different.
- Encourage your child’s/teen’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. Seek out credible sources.
- Grow empathy. Encourage your child/teen to see the world from others’ points of view.
- If you hear your child/teen say something like, “He talks funny” or “She is dressed weird,” discuss how the words we choose matter. Offer alternative words to help your child/teen be more respectful.
- After hearing them from friends, peers, or pop culture, derogatory terms may creep into your child’s/teen’s language. Discuss offensive words.
 - *“Do you know what that means?”*
 - *“Do you know why that word or phrase might hurt someone?”*

Tip Children/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.

STEP 3



Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- When out in your community with your child/teen, introduce them in conversations with others (e.g., neighbors, the barista, or the grocery cashier).
- Provide opportunities for your child/teen to meet and interact with other children/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.

**STEP
4**



Support Your Child's/Teen'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/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 child/teen 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 Efforts

- No matter how old your child/teen is, your positive reinforcement and encouragement have a significant impact.
- You can reinforce your child's/teen's efforts in many ways. It is important to distinguish between three types of reinforcement – recognition, rewards, and bribes. These three parenting behaviors impact your child's/teen's behavior differently.
 - **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 child/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 child/teen progress to a time when the reward will no longer be needed. Rewards can decrease a child's/teen's internal motivation if used too often.
 - 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 child/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 child/teen will stop arguing and leave 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 child/teen were not familiar 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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