

## **Celebrating Diversity and Combatting Prejudice**

As the holiday season is fast approaching, the children are chatting excitedly about their upcoming family traditions. Some are similar to others and some are very unique. It's the perfect time to reflect upon how we can teach children to accept, respect, and celebrate each other's differences. The earlier we start these conversations, the more we can help our children live and eventually work harmoniously alongside people that may be different from themselves. By teaching children to respect each other's differences, we can combat future prejudice and discrimination.

So where should you start? Accept each of your own children as unique and special. Make sure they feel that you value their ideas and opinions, and celebrate diversity within your own family. Let your children know that you recognize and appreciate their individual qualities. In my house, my children often give themselves special names for their special qualities. One of my boys is the "family finder" because he has a good eye for finding little items that most of us don't see. My other son calls himself the "math whiz" (no explanation needed), and my daughter is the "sunshine princess" because she has a way of making everybody laugh no matter what situation we find ourselves in. Children who feel good about themselves and their special qualities are most likely to appreciate others for their special qualities.

Explain to your children that we are all similar in some ways and different in others. In a recent classroom presentation, I had children stand in groups and change their groups based on various qualities that I would call out (e.g. same height, same color shirt, same religion, oldest child in family, etc.) The students quickly recognized that each time I called out a different quality, they found themselves standing with different groups of children. None of them were with the same group of people all the time. They also acknowledged how difficult it was when they found themselves standing alone because there was no one else with that particular quality. This led children to show empathy for anyone who was isolated from a group. When children are more sensitive to other's feelings and more empathic, they are also less likely to engage in prejudicial behavior.

Encourage your child's friendships with people who are different from them. Studies show that children playing and working together toward common goals develop positive attitudes about one another. Sports teams, bands, school clubs and community programs are examples of activities that can help bring different groups of children together. In addition to firsthand experiences, provide opportunities for children to learn about people through books, television educational programs, concerts, or other programs that show positive insights into other cultures.

Children are not born with prejudice, but they do notice differences and may comment or question these differences. Answer kids questions about differences honestly and respectfully. This teaches that it is acceptable to notice and discuss differences as long as it is done with respect. Talking about differences only becomes problematic when we assign negative values, unfair expectations, and limitations to people based on those differences. It is important to communicate to children that we may think others are

unusual in some ways simply because they are unfamiliar to us. We don't think our own beliefs and appearances are strange because they are what we're used to. Point out that we must appear unusual to others in some ways too.

Make sure to stress that we should never stereotype a whole group of people based on perceived differences. What we see on the outside has nothing to do with what is on the inside. If your child says that they don't like a certain group of people explain to them that they can only like or dislike people they know. If they don't know someone, they can't have a good reason for liking or not liking them. There may be children they don't like to play with, but their skin color (religion, accent, appearance, size, etc.) should have nothing to do with it. Instead, focus your child on the character traits they look for in friends, such as kindness, honesty, etc.

Besides teaching children to accept, respect, and celebrate diversity, we must simultaneously address any prejudicial comments and behaviors whenever they arise. Discriminatory remarks made by children usually don't come from malicious intent, but rather lack of understanding. Teaching Tolerance magazine recommends the following four basic strategies to deter prejudicial behavior:

1. **Interrupt** – You must speak up against every biased remark, every time you hear it, in the moment, without exception. Even letting one remark slide can send an inconsistent message that sometimes that language is acceptable, while at other times it isn't. Anytime you let it pass, it's an opportunity missed. So if you're riding in the car with your child and his/her peers, and someone makes a biased remark, address it immediately. Early, firm, intervention sends the message that those types of comments will never be tolerated. Biased jokes should also be interrupted. For example, you may say something like, "Stop, I don't like ethnic jokes". This may not stop every "joke", but the more it is interrupted, the more likely it is to be curtailed.
2. **Question** – Exploratory questions to biased remarks can be a powerful tool. If you overhear something, you can say, "What do you mean?", or "Tell me more". Once they give you more information, you can tease out the reasons behind their thinking and frame and tailor an appropriate response. The goal is to understand the root of the speaker's prejudicial thinking, and then help add context and information to dispel them. Watch for nonverbal taunts too, and question those as well. If a child fundamentally mocks another's mannerisms, call the offenders attention to the issue and explore the reasoning behind the behavior.
3. **Educate** – Sometimes ignorance or lack of exposure to certain populations causes prejudice. Other times, children simply don't know the negative power behind certain words or phrases. For example if you overhear a child using the expression, "That's so gay", address it immediately as an offensive phrase. You can offer background and context to encourage a person to choose a different expression. Furthermore, don't ask children to stop saying something because of a personal issue tied to your own life. For example don't say, "I don't like that talk because my brother has a disability." The goal is not to have students avoid

slurs in front of targeted people, rather to eliminate the slurs no matter who may be within earshot.

4. **Echo** – It's powerful to be the first voice to interrupt bias. However, it's even more powerful when there is a second, third, or fourth voice to join in the interruption. If someone has said something biased in a group, and not one, but four people speak up, the echoing power of those voices has a multiplying effect. The echoing voices can reiterate the anti-bias message. You can also thank the first person for speaking up by saying something like, "Thank you, I have a lot of respect for you for speaking up like that, and I totally agree with you".

We live in a world of different races, religions, cultures, sexual orientations, and abilities. Parents and educators have to work together to celebrate the uniqueness of each child and have them appreciate the special things that every other child has to offer. While we cannot teach children about all the different people they may come into contact with, we can teach them to be more accepting of all types of people. Remind your child that you should always treat others the way you want to be treated. Together let's educate our children to celebrate diversity, be compassionate, and fight for equality for all. As Maya Angelou says, "When you know better, you do better."

*Elyssa Crimeni*

Elyssa Crimeni

School Psychologist

—