

# How can I speak to my child about diversity and discrimination?

Diversity and discrimination are delicate topics and can be difficult to discuss with children. Children may witness or experience discrimination firsthand, or they may take cues from their parents' distressed reactions to news reports. Either way, they are likely to have questions, and while the topics of discrimination, race and civil rights can be daunting even for adults, having an age-appropriate discussion with children is better than silence.

Consider the following information to learn how to facilitate this discussion and, ultimately, help the child learn how to respect and embrace others' differences.

## When to Talk to a Child about Diversity and Discrimination

It is often said that between the ages of five and eight is a "critical period." During these years in a child's life, they begin to exercise their judgment, largely due to the fact that they are now in school and are faced with new stimuli and decisions to make every day, such as choosing new friends, games, clubs and activities. They begin to form their own opinions, deciding what they like and what they do not like, and what is good and what is bad.

This is the best time to work with the child to help them grasp the importance of diversity and understand that there is zero tolerance for discrimination. By this time, children have not yet had much exposure to people who differ from their own family members. They may not even be aware that there are so many people of different cultural and religious backgrounds out in the world. It is a good idea to start the discussion at this point in time so that when children are exposed to diversity in schools, they are not surprised and are able to embrace and appreciate it.

## Be Honest

Before you begin to discuss diversity and racism with a child, keep in mind that you should be as honest as possible with them. While it is important to talk to them at a level they can understand, avoid sugar-coating the discussion. You must let them know that discrimination and racism is something that does exist in society, and also explain to them that they may experience or witness it at some point in their life. Of course, you should not make the child afraid or paranoid, but try your best to be as realistic as possible.

## Explaining Diversity

The first thing you should explain to the child is that every single person is different. Start off by providing them with simple examples of ways in which you both differ. For example, if you are the child's father and she is your daughter, you could explain how you differ from one another in height, gender or hair length. Once the child grasps this idea that everyone is unique, bring up the following types of diversity with them:

- **Race and physical appearance:** Explain that everyone looks different from one another, whether in height, hair color, hair texture, skin color, eye color, facial features or the types of clothes they wear.
- **Cultural background:** Explain that there are numerous cultures in existence and that everyone enjoys doing different things.
- **Religion:** Explain that there are many kinds of religions which people follow and each one has a different set of beliefs.
- **Traditions and holidays:** Explain that there are a variety of traditions and holidays that are celebrated by people at different times of the year.
- **Language:** Explain that there are many other languages that are spoken by people besides the child's native language(s).
- **Family structure:** Explain that some people have brothers, sisters, no siblings, two parents, one parent or no parents. In addition, mention that different cultures, races, and religions can exist within one family and that everyone in a family is not necessarily the same.

This may be a lot of information for the child to take in, so try not to overwhelm them with it all at once. Consider discussing these different areas of diversity over a period of time. Children do not have extremely long attention spans and may have trouble focusing during a lengthy conversation. Encourage the child to ask questions and to think of their own examples of ways that people can differ from one another. This will make the lesson a mutual conversation and an interactive experience for them.

## Explaining Discrimination and Racism

After you feel that the child has a good understanding of the concept of diversity, you should begin to explain that sometimes people do not accept and appreciate diversity, and that this is wrong.

Start the conversation with a very basic definition of discrimination in words that your child will understand. For example, you can say that “some people treat other people differently because of their race, gender, culture or where they are from.” The child may or may not be able to remember the word “discrimination” and that is OK – the most important thing at this age is to just understand the concept of discrimination and know that it is unacceptable.

If the child is a bit older and you feel that they can remember these terms, you can explain that the word “racism” refers to a specific form of discrimination: when a person treats another person differently because of what race they are.

Help the child understand exactly what you mean by “some people treat other people differently” by giving examples in simple terms. For example:

- One person or group is mean to another person or group
- One person or group is unfair to another person or group
- One person or group says bad things about another person or group
- One person or group tries to hurt another person or group

Reiterate that it is never OK to treat someone badly just because of what they look like. Ask the child how they would feel if someone was mean to them just because of their hair or eye color. Having the child think from the perspective of someone being discriminated against will help them better understand the seriousness of the issue.

## Answering Questions

Naturally, the child will likely ask you questions about race, diversity and discrimination. It is important to let them ask these questions instead of “shushing” them. Ignoring their questions can leave them feeling confused and with even more questions. Be receptive – it is better for them to ask you a blunt question such as, “Why does that person talk weird?” or, “Why does that person have different skin color?” than to ask the person they are referring to directly.

Remember: The child likely does not mean any harm. Children are just naturally curious beings and they do not always realize that their questions may sound rude.

Use these questions as teaching moments. In the case of “Why does that person talk weird?” you can explain that everyone has a different way of speaking and many people even know different languages. Gently remind your child that this is not “weird,” but that differences like these are what make each person unique, interesting and exciting.

If you are ever unsure about how to respond to a question, do not avoid it or change the subject. Inform the child that they have asked a good question and that you will provide an answer to them soon. This will give you some time to formulate an appropriate answer for the child.

# How can I encourage tolerance and acceptance in my child?

When most children begin school, they are exposed to other students and teachers of various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. If a child has rarely encountered people of diverse backgrounds prior to starting school, this may be an eye-opening experience for them. Some children may become overwhelmed by the amount of diversity surrounding them while others may be very excited to learn more about their peers' backgrounds.

Sometimes, young children say things to people of other races and ethnicities that may come across as rude or insensitive. Most of the time, they do not mean any harm but are simply curious about others' differences and want to learn more. School-age children are very easy to influence, so it is important to encourage them to be tolerant and accepting of diversity at this young age. This will set the foundation for their future interactions with people of diverse backgrounds.

Consider the following information to learn more about how to encourage tolerant and accepting behavior in children.

## Avoid Encouraging 'Color-Blindness'

Many believe that taking a "color-blind" approach to race and ethnicity is the key to tolerance. Being "color-blind" or "race-blind" refers to the ideology that one should not pay attention to others' race, ethnicity, or culture. The goal is to view everyone as the same.

To many, this may sound like a safe approach: ignoring race and personal differences in order to treat people as equally as possible. However, this ideology can have grave consequences. Many people feel that their culture, ethnicity, race and religion define who they are. When someone tries to be "color-blind" by ignoring another person's personal characteristics and beliefs, they are disregarding part of their identity. Color blindness can additionally lead to erasure of any struggles or difficulties that others may have had to overcome because of their background or identity.

Encourage your child to embrace others' differences and to be tolerant and accepting of them. Remind them that every single person has a unique background and different experiences that they can share with other people. Let your child know that it is OK to celebrate their own unique traits with others and vice versa. Emphasize that tolerance and acceptance is important because individuality is what makes the world exciting.

## Facilitate Exposure to Other Cultures

Exposing your child to the customs, traditions and celebrations of other cultures is a great way to show them what diversity truly means. Children thrive on hands-on experiences. Here are some examples:

- If there is a parade or festival in your area in honor of a cultural holiday or celebration, take your child to experience it.
- If your town or city has a cultural center, make regular visits there to learn about multi-cultural events and activities you and your child can participate in.
- When you go out to eat with your child, pick unfamiliar cuisines to enjoy.
- Cook new types of food and dessert at home with your child.
- Teach them basic words and phrases such as "hi", "bye" or "I love you" in other languages.
- Encourage them to pick out age-appropriate multicultural books from the library.
- Create various arts and crafts with your child from different cultures.

Enjoying the traditions, customs and characteristics of other cultures in ways like these helps children understand that diversity is exciting because there is so much to learn from others.

## Be Gentle with Your Child

The way you act toward your child will influence how tolerant they are to others. If they feel loved and cared for, they are more likely to pass this care and respect along to others they meet. However, if they feel that they are being hurt or treated unfairly by you or another family member, it may be difficult for them to grasp the concepts of tolerance and acceptance. Their logic will be, "If I am not treated nicely, why do I need to be nice to others?"

Of course, most of the time, parents do not mean to emotionally hurt their children. However, simply saying “No!” or “Stop that!” when a child does something undesirable may leave them feeling hurt and embarrassed. Children need an explanation for why their behavior was wrong. Being scolded without explanation can be confusing and make them feel like they are simply a bad person.

Take the time to let your child know how much you appreciate them. They are young and may need a reminder every now and then that your love is unconditional. Giving them this unconditional love can inspire them to be tolerant, appreciative and accepting of others, too.

## **Be a Role Model**

One of the most important things you can do to encourage tolerance and acceptance in your child is to be a good role model. When children are young, they look to their family members for guidance on how to behave and react. They will remember what you do in certain situations and emulate you when they experience the same situations in the future.

Keep a close eye on your own words and actions to ensure you are teaching your child the morals and values that you want to teach them. Sometimes, adults inadvertently say things that are not meant to be offensive or hurtful, but can be easily misinterpreted by children. Be cautious of how your future actions can influence your child’s young mind.

## **How to Handle Intolerant Behavior**

Eventually, your child may witness racial intolerance or insensitivity in some form, if they have not already. A common example of this is students at school ridiculing or bullying another student for how they look, sound or dress.

Often times, young children do not intend to hurt other students in this way. They often times feel pressured by a peer or group of peers to participate in bullying because they are afraid of becoming isolated for standing up for the bullied student. Let your child know that although it may not be easy to stand by their own opinion and beliefs, it is the right thing to do. Ask your child how they would feel if someone made fun of their skin color and appearance. Your child will likely say that they would feel bad, sad or angry. Remind them that these are the same feelings that another student who is being bullied would feel, too.

Instruct your child to never participate in this kind of behavior. If your child can, they should try to help the individual get away from the bullies. If this is not possible, your child should tell a teacher or other member of the administration about the incident so it can be put to an end before it escalates even further.

If the intolerant behavior is directed toward your child, they should calmly distance themselves from the bullies and inform a teacher or the administration about the behavior. Remind them to always tell you or another family member they can trust if they are ever faced with intolerance. Knowing they always have someone to talk to will put them at ease.

# How can I help my LGBTQ child?

Providing support to your child is paramount and can make all the difference for parents of children and teens who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning. Often, LGBTQ children can feel ostracized by their family when parents do not accept them; studies have shown that parents' rejection of an LGBTQ child can fuel mental health problems. While it may take time for the LGBTQ child to understand and accept their identity, the same is true for parents and other family members.

The following are ways parents can make their children feel affirmed and keep them safe and healthy.

## Consider the Facts

There are many different ways a parent might feel about their child coming out; while some accept it easily, and some embrace it wholly, others may need more time to understand or respect their child's identity. However you may feel, it is important to learn the facts surrounding LGBTQ youth.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), studies show that LGBTQ children who are accepted by their families are less inclined to:

- Experience depression
- Attempt suicide
- Use drugs and alcohol
- Become infected with sexually transmitted diseases

## Other facts to consider:

- Your child's identity is not "just a phase." In fact, most LGBTQ youth are aware of their sexual orientation or gender identity by the start of adolescence.
- There is no "cure." Some parents push their children to undergo conversion therapy to change a child's sexual orientation or gender identity. Research indicates this therapy is not effective and is alternatively harmful.
- Homosexuality is not a choice. Sexual orientation is caused by factors such as genetics and the biology of brain development.

Similar to your child's self-acceptance journey, there are definitive stages most parents experience when presented with change. While not everyone will experience these emotions in the same order, it is important to note that these feelings are normal and can be worked through.

- **Stage 1: Denial.** When your child comes out, you may feel initial denial or doubt. While this may be the case, it is important to trust your child's word. You may feel afraid of how your child being "out" will change the perception of your family.
- **Stage 2: Grief.** You may grieve the child you "knew" as you mourn the disappearance of the life you envisioned for them. However, fundamental goals and visions for your child, such as love, happiness, or starting a family can endure.
- **Stage 3: Blame/ guilt.** You may find yourself determining "why" your child is LGBTQ or wonder where you went wrong. The truth is your child's identity is normal and results from complex biological, genetic, and hormonal factors.
- **Stage 4: Fear.** You may fear telling the truth about your LGBTQ child, particularly how others will react. At times, this fear may be justified if you sense someone may be hostile to you and/or your family. Your child should determine when and how is best to discuss their identity with others.
- **Stage 5: Anger.** You may feel angry at yourself for not recognizing the truth sooner and at a religious community, or other family members for rejecting your child. It is important to realize that anger can be a healthy emotion as long as it is not directed at your child for expressing their identity.
- **Stage 6: Self-realization.** At this stage, you may realize that it is you and not your child that must change. Find ways to support your child by surrounding your family with a loving and supporting community, or reconsider the family picture to reflect this new reality.
- **Stage 7: Acceptance.** This stage includes loving your LGBTQ child for who they are, unconditionally. At this stage, you are a source of hope and encouragement for your child.

## Affirm Your Child

To create a healthy dynamic, parents and families of LGBTQ youth can:

- **Be open to listening and talking.** Many LGBTQ individuals may be afraid to come out due to religious, societal, or family pressures. By offering a non-judgmental ear you affirm that they are worthy of being heard. Ask them what you can do for them.
- **Challenge homophobia and transphobia.** In a recent report by Human Rights Campaign, 67 percent of LGBTQ youth said they have heard family members make negative comments about LGBTQ people. Make your child feel safe by sending the message that offensive remarks and attitudes will not be tolerated in and out of the home; normalizing hateful words or simply ignoring them perpetuates violence towards LGBTQ youth.
- **Let them know they are loved.** A simple “I love you” can go a long way and let your child know they are supported as they are.

## Stay Involved

One of the best ways to support an LGBTQ child is to stay involved in their life and give them hope for the future. You can do this by:

- **Looking out for bullying.** Bullies typically target those they deem “different” out of fear, ignorance, and insecurity. If you see behavioral changes in your child, declining grades, or engagement in risky behavior, it may be time to reach out to a teacher or guidance counselor.
- **Encouraging healthy relationships.** Parents who show interest in who their child spends time with significantly lower the danger and health risks associated with teens in unhealthy relationships.
- **Connecting your child with LGBTQ resources, organizations, and events.** Doing so will make them feel less alone.
- **Seeking out resources and education.** Strive to deepen your understanding of LGBTQ youth experiences.