

# The Parent's Corner

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## TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT DIVERSITY

January 2022 | By Katie McDonough, MSW, LCSW

As children learn and grow, they naturally begin spotting differences in others. They notice differences in hair color, skin color, height or clothing. They may pick up on differences in behavior or abilities. However, it is society that teaches children to assign biases to these differences. Unfortunately, these biases or lack of understanding can result in exclusion of peers, bullying, harassment, or discrimination- all of which can leave lasting emotional scars on children and deepen feelings of inadequacy. Even small comments or unintentional actions by peers, over time, may become ingrained memories that affect one's self worth. So, how do parents teach our kids about the beauty of diversity and acceptance from a young age?

- 1. Begin with basic concepts.** From a young age, begin by explaining diversity in simple terms that your child will understand. Explain that so many things on Earth are diverse: types of plants (small bushes, huge oak trees, types of flowers), breeds of dogs (short-haired, long-haired, big Great Danes or small Chihuahuas), or candy (chewy, hard, sour or sweet). Discuss how boring life would be if every plant we saw, dog we owned, or type of candy at the grocery store were completely identical. Diversity adds excitement and uniqueness to life.
- 2. Branch out to more complex ideas.** As your child starts to understand the idea of diversity, begin to incorporate the idea that humans are also diverse. Point out physical differences -- that some have to wear glasses, use an inhaler, may get burnt more easily in the sun, have different color skin or an accent. Make sure to circle back to the idea that these differences are an appreciated part of life, and that no difference makes someone less-than.
- 3. Teach inner differences in creative ways.** When your child has learned the basic idea of physical diversity, introduce the idea of inner diversity. During the holidays, take time to explain to your children about holidays other children around the world celebrate. Make art projects, cook food, read books or watch movies that represent different cultures and discuss them with your children. Open up WindowSwap or Google Maps and explore a different region of the globe with your child. Volunteer at an organization together. Strive to incorporate a variety of experiences and material into your child's life that exposes them to individuals different from themselves.
- 4. Discuss racism, discrimination and social justice.** Unfortunately for many minority groups, having these conversations with your children may be inevitable from a young age due to the fact that ongoing discrimination and racism is prevalent in society. These may be conversations that are essential for your child's safety and survival. Every child, from any background, will benefit from education on acceptance and understanding of those around them from different cultures, race, socioeconomic status or mental/physical abilities. We must also teach our children about ways to stand up for others when we see discriminatory behavior taking place. Instilling in your child the mindset that differences should be accepted and appreciated as they grow will allow them to carry this into their interactions with others as they continue relationships throughout their lives.

**As always, your School Partnership Program (SPP) Therapist is in your corner if you need extra support!**