

Teaching Tolerance by Celebrating Diversity

By

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Children inherit the earth. Parents hope that when they do it will be a kind and peaceful place that nurtures wishes and cradles dreams. To turn this hope into reality we must teach our children to rejoice in the vitality and richness of diversity.

Diversity lives in every community across the world. Simply put, diversity is what makes us as individuals unique. Diversity can be found in religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and physical attributes. If we raise our children to celebrate these differences and value people regardless of the color of their skin, how they worship or the language they speak then they will indeed inherit a more peaceful planet.

Never Too Early

Children begin to form ideas about themselves and others at a very young age. Two year-olds are aware of gender and physical characteristics such as skin, hair, and eye color. By the age of three children begin to notice cultural and ethnical differences. They feel aspects of gender assignment and see ethnic differences in their peers. They may observe boys playing with cars while girls play with dolls. They also recognize the fact that some people eat different foods and celebrate holidays they do not. Children start forming their individual and ethnic identity around age five. At this stage they have the mental capacity to explore and begin to understand both the differences and similarities that exist within racial and ethnic groups.

Because children start noticing differences at such a young age, it is never too early to begin teaching tolerance. Young children are blessed with the ability to accept differences for what they are, variations on the human experience. It is when they experience uncomfortable or negative reactions that these differences take on adverse significance.

Teaching Tolerance

- **Talk** openly with your children about differences, similarities, and acceptance. Be honest in your communication. Do not tell children that we are all the same because we are not. We have similarities but diversity perpetuates distinct worldviews. These views are to be respected and celebrated. Also, when appropriate, discuss the consequences of intolerance. When parents honestly discuss issues such as racism, stereotypes, and gender bias, they help prepare their children to face these challenges in their lives.
- **Listen** to your children when they talk about differences among their peers. Ask questions and try to formulate a clear picture of how they view their world. In

addition, listen carefully to the questions they ask you about diversity and tolerance. Before you answer make sure you have a good idea of what they are asking and what they really want to know.

- **Answer** children's questions even if you are not sure how. When you ignore or don't answer their questions, children take that to mean the subject is unacceptable to talk about and will not bring it up again. In order to teach tolerance you must maintain open communication. That is not to say that some of their questions will not be difficult to answer. If don't know how to respond tell them you will think about it and talk with them later.
- **Model** the behavior you want children to adopt. Actions speak louder than words and children always look to adults for examples. If are intolerant of differences in others, it practically guarantees your children will be as well.
- **Identify** stereotypes and misinformation. Children are bombarded with information from the media as well as from family and friends. It can be helpful when erroneous or biased comments are pointed out to them. When you do this, ask children how they feel about what was said.
- **Challenge** racist, stereotypical, and prejudicial remarks. Let children know you believe name calling to be hurtful and wrong. Encourage them to empathize with and respect people of all religions, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physicality.
- **Create** opportunities for children to experience a variety of people. Widen your world to include individuals of different cultures, ethnicities, ages, socioeconomic situations, and family structures.
- **Educate** yourself and your children on different cultures and religions. Take advantage of any opportunity to learn about the world in which you live. Attend local cultural festivals and performances, as well as services at different houses of worship. Also, when you meet a person from a background different than yours, engage them in conversation. Ask questions about their culture and customs. They may very well welcome your interest and you may very well find a new friend.
- **Share** traditions and celebrations with members of your community. Seek out families from diverse backgrounds living in your area. Gather together and exchange ideas on how to teach one another about your religions and cultures. Perhaps you could rotate meals, celebrate holidays, and worship together. When children see adults learning from one another, they are encouraged to follow suit.
- **Teach** children to think critically and independently. This will prepare children to question and examine issues of discrimination and intolerance. Once children develop critical thought processes, they will able to determine for themselves when a situation is prejudicial or a stereotype hurtful.