

September 3, 2019

Imagine strolling down the sidewalk with your young child. In what feels like the loudest voice possible your child points to someone nearby and says, “Mommy, why does she have one leg?” As a parent a cloud of uncomfortableness hovers over you and part of you wants to become invisible and sink into the sidewalk. Have you experienced a similar situation?



Young children can be direct and unfiltered as they observe differences and similarities among people. This can make a parent or caregiver uncomfortable, particularly in public spaces. A young child’s unfiltered, direct approach is usually not intended to be hurtful or disrespectful. Instead it shows the developing curiosity that is inside all children. The idea that a child’s curiosity was the motivation for such a direct question can be easily forgotten/overlooked when you are in the moment of experiencing a discomfort or embarrassment.

It is important to help children understand and learn to accept differences among people. Not discussing or dismissing children’s observations, comments or questions will not help them gain understanding of differences among people. Those uncomfortable moments are excellent teachable moments.

Treat all questions with respect and seriousness. Instead of silencing children with a “shhh”, you might say something like: “You are right, she does look different from us. We probably look different to her too.”

Exposure to diversity will help encourage young children to embrace differences and can be done as a natural part of everyday living. Helping children have a positive self-image can also help them be comfortable with human differences. Children who are comfortable with themselves are less likely to criticize others.

The article [How Do Children Learn Prejudice?](#) by the Anti-Defamation League states, “Children’s opinions are influenced by what the people around them think, do and say.” This suggests that “prejudice does not come from children’s awareness of differences among people, but from their perception of negative attitudes about those differences”

Some things to do to help children appreciate diversity:

- Choose toys, books and media that have images that reflect all types of people (e.g., variety of backgrounds, ages, abilities, skin color, hair color, etc.)
- Help children feel positive about themselves and others
- Teach children to value things that make people different and similar
- Expose children to diversity rich environments
- Support children’s curiosity by providing them with honest, factual, age-appropriate information when they ask questions about differences