

Article



Teaching Diversity: A Place to Begin

Building positive identities and a respect for differences means weaving diversity into the fabric of children's everyday lives. Working with families is an important first step in helping children accept, understand, and value their rich and varied world.

By [Janet Gonzalez-Mena](#), [Dora Pulido-Tobiassen](#)

Talking About Differences Here are some ways to promote effective communication.

- 1. Be available.** Try to talk to parents as often as possible. Also, remember that body language can reveal whether you are anxious or in a hurry. If you are calm and relaxed, a family will feel that they can be open with you.
- 2. Be informative.** As you know, families appreciate knowing what goes on during the day. Keep a few notes and don't always focus on problems.
- 3. Be receptive.** Help parents feel comfortable talking to you by setting aside your judgments. Strive to listen beyond their words to uncover unspoken messages.
- 4. Figure out problems together.** If a parent is unhappy, try to get the root of the problem. Are issues based on cultural differences, or could it be something else?
- 5. Don't assume.** Some parents will never raise an issue or disagree with a person they consider to be an authority. It is our responsibility to open up possibilities for parents to talk to us about their opinions and reasons for how they choose to care for their child.

We all want children to grow up in a world free from bias and discrimination, to reach for their dreams and feel that whatever they want to accomplish in life is possible. We want them to feel loved and included and never to experience the pain of rejection or exclusion. But the reality is that we do live in a world in which racism and other forms of bias continue to affect us. Discrimination hurts and leaves scars that can last a lifetime, affecting goals, ambitions, life choices, and feelings of self-worth.

How can we best prepare children to meet the challenges and reap the benefits of the increasingly diverse world they will inherit? We can raise children to celebrate and value diversity and to be proud of themselves and their family traditions. We can teach children to respect and value people regardless of the color of their skin, their physical abilities, or the language they speak.

How to Begin

As our nation grows increasingly diverse, there has never been a better opportunity for us to learn to live respectfully together and benefit from one another's wisdom and experiences. But sometimes fear, uncertainty, or discomfort prevent people from talking to each other. This is especially true when it comes to the topics of race and racism, cultural differences, language and bilingualism, and the myriad questions that arise in a world where these issues have such a powerful place in children's lives. As professionals who partner with families to nurture young children, parents often

regard us as a resource on a wide range of issues connected to diversity. We are in a unique position to engage in conversations that ask us to consider important questions such as:

- What does it mean to be a parent raising a child in this diverse world?
- What does it mean to be a young child growing up in this diverse world?

Addressing Diversity

Almost every aspect of child-rearing — including feeding, diapering, and toilet training — is influenced by cultural beliefs and values. How we talk to young children, touch them, bathe them, dress them, and see to their napping needs are all cultural behaviors. Over time, children learn who they are and what to do through these experiences — absorbing a sense of their routines, traditions, languages, cultures, and national or racial identities.

There are many equally valid ways to raise healthy children who thrive in the world. Professional knowledge and experience are important, but we must never forget how much we can learn from the families we work with. For example: Rose comes to pick up her daughter, Pia, at their child care program and asks the teacher why her 13-month-old's shoes are in the cubby instead of on her feet. She requests that Pia always wear her shoes except when she is taking a nap.

The teacher explains that she believes that the best thing for a child who is learning to walk is to go barefoot because her little feet need room to grow, and bare feet are better for balance and control. The nurse practitioner at the clinic where Rose takes Pia and her other children has mentioned this too. He recommends flexible soft leather booties instead of the stiff dressy shoes that Rose has selected. Though both the teacher and the nurse practitioner have good points, what might they learn if they put themselves in Rose's "shoes"?

- Is Rose an immigrant to the United States who worries that Americans will think her ignorant if her child is not wearing shoes?
- Does Rose choose dressy shoes for Pia because she does not want anyone to think she cannot provide the very best for her child?
- Is Rose receiving government financial assistance as she tries to raise her family and worrying that bare feet will stigmatize her daughter as a "welfare child"?
- Is Rose from a part of the world where children contract parasites through their feet if they do not wear shoes?
- In Rose's culture, do people believe children catch colds from bare feet?

As you know, diversity is a complex concept, and there is not one single set of right answers for any one person or family. Only by understanding each other can Rose and the professionals who are concerned about Pia agree on how to resolve their differing points of view. The outcome depends on dialogue — a discussion with the goal of understanding each other's perspectives.

Developing Cultural Sensitivity

Even within a particular ethnic group, diverse care-giving practices may abound. Without specific cultural information, we can inadvertently use practices and approaches that counter parents' efforts. For example, many of us who work with families believe that building self-esteem involves praising children and avoiding negative remarks that undermine their sense of worth. What then is our reaction when an immigrant Chinese mother not only downplays her baby son's first wobbly steps but goes on to describe him as "clumsy"?

To us, such a remark may be upsetting, but a mother from a different culture may have very different notions about what her son needs. She may believe that praising children leads to pride and that pride gets in the way of humility, which is an important character trait for her son to develop. Her goal may be to help her son learn to put others before himself, a common value in cultures more oriented toward the group than the individual. When parents' practices differ from our professional beliefs, some of us may try to change behaviors without understanding that these parents' motives may be different from — but no less valid than — our own. To prevent this, we must become skilled at talking with parents about differences.

Getting to Know Families

One of our first objectives as professionals is to find out how a family's practices relate to their goals for their children. Granted, if the children you work with come from a variety of cultures, the task may seem overwhelming. But just as you get to know each child and her needs, you can also get to know individual families and understand their needs and cultural priorities. As you work in partnership with families, keep in mind that many parents are eager to explain the connections between what they do and their cultural beliefs. Other parents may not have articulated these thoughts before or do not realize that differences exist.

If you perceive a difference in child-rearing practices, the best approach is to ask parents about that difference while being careful not to appear critical. You may want to observe how parents interact with their children, thinking of yourself as a learner rather than an expert. By staying open-minded, you may emerge with valuable insights into specific child-rearing practices.

As we strive to be culturally sensitive to families, we are faced with this question: Is it important for children to receive "culturally consistent" care from all the adults who are concerned with their well-being?

Inevitably, situations arise when we strongly disagree with a family's practice even after we understand its roots. When this happens, it's important to keep in mind that different ways of doing things aren't necessarily bad or harmful in and of themselves. Children are resilient, as all of us who work with them know. They adapt and thrive and are able to appreciate that care, comfort, and love come in different forms, in different contexts, and from different people. But if the differences are not met with acceptance, respect, and understanding by the adults involved, it can lead to difficulties and misunderstandings. According to Carol Brunson Phillips, executive director of the Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition, culturally sensitive care can make a difference as to whether or not a child is able to remain firmly rooted in her own culture and become a part of other cultures as well; that is, to become truly bicultural. If the right balance isn't found, a child may feel forced to choose one culture and give up the other — or flounder between cultures without a sense of belonging.

Some children may have a difficult time developing a sense of who they are and where they belong when our interactions are quite different from those of their parents and family. Others adapt more easily. It's always important to consider the parents' goals as well as the child's personality — and to adjust our decisions by observing how the child responds. Upon careful exploration, if we believe that a particular practice is harmful to a child, it's important to help parents understand the implications.

But most situations do not approach the point where a child is in danger. Probably the most important element in bridging children's worlds is for the adults who care for them to feel comfortable and accepting of their differences. When adults are uncomfortable, afraid, or judgmental, they can't be supportive of children. That's why open, respectful dialogue about cultural practices is essential. At the same time, we must be careful not to give messages, either spoken or unspoken, that what we think is superior to their home culture. Otherwise, children may develop a negative view of themselves and their families.

Learning to Appreciate Differences

Because young children form ideas about themselves and other people long before they start kindergarten, it is important to begin teaching anti-bias lessons early. If we reinforce these lessons, children will learn to appreciate, rather than fear, differences and to recognize bias and stereotypes when they see them. Children learn early on — from television, books, magazines, photographs, and, of course, interactions — how others view people like themselves. Uncomfortable reactions can alert children to the negative significance some people put on differences. In other words, the differences in eye or skin color can simply become a category of human variation — or those differences can take on a particular negative significance.

If what children do at home is never mentioned or, worse, is considered strange by other children and adults, children may refuse to speak their home language, eat certain foods, wear certain clothes, follow certain religious practices. As some children begin to compare their appearance or life with others, they may start expressing their concerns about being

different. We know that children need to be reassured that differences are fine. More than that, we need to work with parents to help bridge the norms, the attitudes, and the ways of doing things in children's cross-cultural worlds — and to counteract any demeaning and harmful messages.

The following suggestions are designed to help you teach children to not only value diversity but also to resist prejudice and discrimination.

- Teach children to be critical thinkers, specifically about prejudice and discrimination. Critical thinking is when we strive to understand issues through examining and questioning. Young children can begin to develop these skills, to know when a word or an image is unfair or hurtful.
- Respond to children's questions and comments about differences even if you're not sure what to say. Children often interpret a lack of response to mean that it's not acceptable to talk about differences. If you're unsure about what to say, try: "I need to think about your question and talk to you later." Or, you can always go back to a child and say: "Yesterday you asked me a question about... Let's talk about it." Another useful response: "I don't really like what I told you this morning. I've given it some more thought, and here's what I really should have said."
- Listen carefully to what children are saying. Ask a few questions before answering to get a clearer idea of what they really want to know and the ideas they already have on the subject.
- Shape your response to the child's age and personality. Generally, children want to know why people are different, what this means, and how those differences relate to them. Remember that children's questions and comments are a way for them to gather information about aspects of their identity and usually do not stem from bias or prejudice.
- Share with families and colleagues ideas for responding to children's questions. You'll gain new ideas and insights as you exchange experiences, and you can clarify what works best for you and your children.
- If children are nonverbal, observe and respond to their curiosity. For example, if a child is staring at or patting the head of a child whose hair is very different from hers, you can say, "He has straight hair, and you have curly hair."
- Model the behaviors and attitudes you want children to develop. Pay particular attention to situations that can either promote prejudice or inhibit a child's openness to diversity. Make sure your program reflects diversity in books, magazines, dolls, puzzles, paintings, music, and so on.
- Don't let racist and prejudicial remarks go by without intervening. It's important to let children know from a very early age that name-calling of any kind, whether it's about someone's religion, race, ethnic background, or sexual orientation, is hurtful and wrong.
- Try to create opportunities for children to interact and make friends with people who are different from them. As you know, children learn best from concrete experiences.
- Involve families in sharing their traditions. In fact, instead of deciding yourself which tradition you would like to expose children to, ask families what they would like to share.
- Try to expose children to role models from their own culture as well as to those from other cultures. Remember: Seeing adults developing positive relationships with people who are different offers an important model and teaches children to value such relationships.

As professionals who work with families, our willingness to talk openly about identity and to help foster a positive sense of self in children can make an enormous difference in affirming the rich diversity of our human community and helping children make bridges across cultures and traditions. Some people fear that by affirming children's identities in terms of home cultures and traditions, we may be promoting separatism. That is not the case. The more that children have a solid grounding and understanding about who they are and where they came from, the more they learn to move with grace and confidence among communities different from their own, and the closer we get to building a world of respect, curiosity, sharing, and humanity.

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