

Speaking to Children about Diversity and Discrimination

Diversity and discrimination are delicate topics and can be difficult to discuss with children. But given the widespread civil unrest related to the senseless deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and other African-Americans recently, it may be impossible even for young children to be left unaware.

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 them 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 him or her:

- **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 him or her.

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 (being a boy or a girl), 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 him or her soon. This will give you some time to formulate an appropriate answer for the child.

Resources

- Scholastic.com – Addressing Children’s Questions About Differences: www.scholastic.com/browse/subarticle.jsp?id=4459
- National Diversity Council: www.nationaldiversitycouncil.org
- American Psychological Association – Psychology and Racism: www.apa.org/pi/oema/programs/racism
- NPR - Talking Race With Young Children: <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/24/716700866/talking-race-with-young-children?fbclid=IwAR262i36JkNreR2lYg0pPPHDPL9u6iyHSVkMV2vrR3Ehdl-1oG-0ZlXKMrY>
- Embrace Race: <https://www.embracerace.org>

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