



Talking About Differences Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Three-to-four-year-olds are noticing and asking about differences among people. Not allowing your child to ask questions and talk about these differences can lead to feelings of fear, distrust, and shame. Talking about these differences helps your child develop empathy, perspective taking, appreciation of diversity, and respect for others. Talking about differences between people in positive and non-judgmental ways doesn't divide children or make them wary or fearful of one another. It bonds them together as a community and allows them to be more respectful and inclusive.

Tip These steps are done best when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.

Tip Intentional communication and actively building a healthy parent relationship will support these steps.

Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Ask questions to explore differences and similarities. You might start by asking, *"What do you notice is different between you and me?"* If they struggle to identify differences, offer some suggestions. You could stand together in a mirror and say, *"Do you see that I have blue eyes and you have brown eyes?"* Or, *"I have glasses and you don't."* Explore similarities as well. *"We both have freckles."* *"We both have curly hair."* Give your child plenty of time to look for examples and share their ideas with you. Talk about differences and similarities with others in your family as well (e.g. siblings, grandparents).
- When reading books to your child, look at the images of people and ask your child what they notice about the people that make them similar and different. Ask, *"What do you notice?"* and *"What are you wondering?"* If your child is feeling unsure about how to describe similarities and differences, consider naming what you notice and then leaving plenty of quiet space for them to think of some ideas. You could say, *"I notice that both of the children have dark hair and dark skin."* *"I notice that one person is wearing glasses and the other person is not."*

Tip You don't need to wait for your child to bring up differences among people to start talking about them. Instead, make talking about differences and similarities part of their everyday experiences.

Step 2. Teach New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Expose your child to people and experiences that are different from your own family. Talk about those differences and focus on the positive experience of engaging with people, foods, music, and languages that are new to your child.
- At home, provide books, dolls/toys, and other materials that give your child a chance to see people that are different. Dolls/action figures that have different skin colors and physical abilities, music that represents different cultures, and TV programming that celebrates differences are examples.
- Consider checking books out at the library that show people who live in different types of housing, have disabilities, practice different religions, or who have varied family structures. Be sure to talk about differences in an accepting and inclusive way.
- Encourage your child's questions about differences between people. It is likely your child will ask a lot of questions that start with "Why?" especially when they are curious about differences. "Why does her skin look different?" "Why does that person sound different?" "Why is my hair curly and your hair is straight?" Encourage their curiosity by letting them know it is okay to notice differences and talk about them.
 - Asking "Why?" for a 3-4-year-old is their way of exploring their world and learning about themselves and others. It is okay if you don't know the answer to their question. Acknowledge your child's curiosity, offer age-appropriate information, and talk positively about what your child has pointed out. For example, if your child says, "Why does that person have dark skin?" You could say, *"That is a good question. Let's talk about that. Everyone has skin color. Some people have lighter skin color and some people have darker skin color. They are all beautiful."*
 - Your child may ask questions about differences among people that seem insensitive or offensive to adults. If that happens, don't ignore it. Answer your child's question in a positive and non-judgmental way. For example, if your child points to a person using a wheelchair and asks "Why is that person in that chair?" You might respond to your child by saying, *"Yes, that person is sitting in a wheelchair and using her arms to move the wheels so she can come into the room."*
- Use person-first language. Person-first language is a way to describe a person's differences that names the person before labeling the difference. For example, instead of saying *"the disabled person,"* say, *"a person who has a disability."* Instead of saying *"a black person,"* say, *"a person of color."* Your child is listening to you and will start to mimic the language you use.
- Stay informed. What is considered acceptable or respectful language may change.
- Grow empathy. For example, if your child is hesitant to play with someone who looks or sounds different than they do, ask questions and then support your child by offering encouragement. *"How do you think they would feel if we invited them to play? I bet they would be happy and excited to be invited to play with you. Let's go over and say hello together."*
- If you hear your child say something like, "He talks weird" or "She looks funny," spend time talking with your child about how the words we choose matter. Talk about how describing someone as "weird" or "funny" might hurt the person's feelings. Also explain why someone may talk differently or look differently than they do. Offer alternative words so your child learns what would be more appropriate.

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- When out in your community and while running errands with your child, make introductions and involve your child in conversations with others (e.g., neighbors, the bank teller, or the grocery cashier). Notice whether the people in your daily lives are different from your family, or if they tend to be similar. If most of your interactions with others are with people who are similar to you, consider seeking out opportunities that would offer more diversity.
- Provide opportunities for your child to meet and interact with other children and adults of all ages, races, and cultures. Point out similarities and differences. Talk about how differences help us learn more about ourselves and others.
- Pretend play together. Allow your child to explore roles, characters, and situations that are different from what is normally expected. For example, it is okay when boys play dress up and girls play with toy trucks. It is okay to have stuffed animals play with toy cars to show that different toys can play together just like different kids can play together.

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Recognize effort by using “I notice...” statements like: *“I noticed how you were playing and having fun with your new friend who is in a wheelchair. It was great that you picked a game that everyone could play.”*
- On days with extra challenges when you can see your child is scared of new people or situations, offer confidence in your child's ability to face the new. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child's ear, *“Remember how you enjoyed learning about different kinds of foods? Different kinds of music might be fun to experience too. You might enjoy joining in the group that is playing a new kind of drum.”*
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like *“You seem worried about talking to someone who speaks differently. I'll hold your hand so that you feel more confident.”*

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Recognize and call out when it is going well. *“I noticed you were curious about why our neighbors wear those hats. You were really respectful when you asked them.”*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Notice when your child tries something new or talks to you about questions they have about differences among people.
- Build celebrations into your everyday routines. Promote joy and happiness by laughing, singing, dancing, hugging, and snuggling to appreciate one another.

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