



Talking About Differences Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Two-year-olds are starting to notice and ask 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. Find items (balls, dolls, blocks, crayons, etc.) that you can help your 2-year-old to categorize by color, shape, or size. For example, you could start to sort the crayons by their colors and then ask your child questions to prompt their thinking. You could say, *"Where should we put this pink crayon? Should we put it with the other pink crayons?"* Or, if you are playing with shapes, you could ask your child, *"How are the circle and the square the same?"* Give your child plenty of time to think about it and offer help if needed. *"They are both red."* Also ask, *"How are the circle and the square different? They are different because the square has four sides that are straight and the circle is round."* Make this a fun and interactive activity to explore your child's thinking.
- You can also explore differences between you and your child. You could ask, *"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.

- When reading books to your child, help them to find differences and similarities in the pictures by asking questions. Help them to be successful by talking about what you notice. You could say, *“Do you notice there are three birds in this picture that look the same? Can you point to the birds that look the same?” “What color are the birds?”* Talk about differences as well. *“I see two rabbits in this picture. Can you point to the two rabbits that are different? What do you see that makes them different from each other?”* Offer help if needed. *“They have different colors of fur. What color of fur does each rabbit have? You are right, one rabbit has brown fur and one rabbit has white fur.”*

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 who 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 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?” when they begin to notice these differences. “Why is my hair yellow and your hair is red?” “Why do I have brown skin?” Encourage their curiosity by letting them know it is okay to notice differences and talk about them.
 - Asking “Why?” for a 2-year-old is their way of showing interest, trying to figure out their world, and wanting to engage with you. 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 asks, “Why does that person sound different?” You could say, *“Hearing different languages is interesting to me too. People talk to each other in many different ways. Just like you learned how to talk to me, that person learned to talk in a different way. It is fun to hear those differences.”*
 - 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 difference 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 brown person,"* say, *"a person of color."* Your 2-year-old is listening to you and will eventually 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 2-year-old 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."*

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 at the park. That's great. I also noticed that you were looking at her dark curly hair. I noticed it too! It is beautiful."*
- 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 unfamiliar. In a gentle, non-public way, you can whisper in your child's ear, *"Remember how you enjoyed meeting my friend Susie. Anna is kind too. You might enjoy meeting her today."*
- Actively reflect on how your child is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like, *"You seem worried about talking to that person who is using crutches. I'll go over there with you so that you feel more confident."* Offering comfort when facing new situations can help your child gain a sense of security and face them rather than backing away.
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present new opportunities and challenges.
- Stay engaged. Continue to seek out opportunities for your child to meet and interact with people who are different than they are.

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

- Recognize and call out when it is going well. If your child was scared or shy when encountering people who were different from them on the playground yesterday, but seems perfectly content today, notice their newfound comfort. *“I notice you are feeling happy making new friends at the playground today!”*
- 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. These conversations might start happening naturally during your bedtime routine or when snuggling up to read stories together.
- 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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