



# Talking About Differences Summary

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## Why Talking About Differences?

Research shows that children/teens are thinking about differences between people and how they should respond to them from a very early age. Parents and those in a parenting role can support children/teens as they make sense of differences among people by talking to them about what they observe. Differences among people can include family structure, (dis)abilities, how much money a family has, religion, culture, spoken language, gender, body size, race, etc. Through honest conversations with you, children/teens develop ways to learn from differences and show respect for them.

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

- Ask questions to explore differences and similarities. *“What do you notice is different between you and me?” “Do you see that I have glasses and you don’t?”*
- When your child/teen is reading books for school or for pleasure, talk about the characters involved and how they are similar and different. Ask, *“What do you notice?”* and *“What are you wondering?”*
- Ask about friends and classmates and how they get along. You might ask, *“Are there any classmates who are teased because of how they are different? How do they feel? What do you do? How could you be more accepting or inclusive?”*

**TIP** You don’t need to wait for your child/teen 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

The fundamental purpose of talking about differences among people is to help your child/teen develop empathy, perspective taking, appreciation of diversity, and respect for others.

- Pay attention to how you interact with people who are different from you.
  - “How do I talk about people who are different from me?”
  - “In what situations do I feel uncomfortable or uneasy when interacting with people who are different from me?”
- Model behaviors (and your children/teens will notice and learn!).

- “How can I model acceptance, inclusion, and celebration of those different from me?”
- Expose your child/teen 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 children/teens.
- Provide books, toys, and other materials that expose your child/teen to people who are different.
- Encourage your child’s/teen’s questions about differences between people. Encouraging curiosity with respectful dialogue helps take away the shame some may associate with the topic of differences.
- Stay informed. What is considered acceptable and respectful language may change. Seek out credible sources.
- Grow empathy. Encourage your child/teen to see the world from others’ points of view.
- If you hear your child/teen say something like, “He talks funny” or “She is dressed weird,” spend some time discussing how the words we choose matter. Offer alternative words to help your child/teen be more appropriate.
- Derogatory terms may creep into your child’s/teen’s language after hearing them from friends, peers, or pop culture. Discuss offensive words.
  - *“Do you know what that means?”*
  - *“Do you know why a person might be hurt by that word or phrase?”*

**TIP** Children/Teens learn first through modeling. If you feel uncomfortable when interacting with people who are different from you, your child/teen will likely pick up on those cues and model your behavior. Formulate new ways of interacting that model what you want your child/teen to mimic when they are with people who are different from them.

### Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills, Confidence, and Develop Habits

- When out in your community with your child/teen, make introductions and involve them in conversations with others (e.g., neighbors, the bank teller, or the grocery cashier).
- Provide opportunities for your child/teen to meet and interact with other children/teens and adults of all ages, races, and cultures.
- Use your family’s media selections to initiate conversations about how differences help us learn more about ourselves and others.
- As a family, volunteer in neighborhoods or with groups you typically would not encounter.

**TIP** 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. Try out a grocery store in a different neighborhood.

## Step 4. **Support** Your Child's/Teen'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."*
- Offer confidence in your child's/teen's ability to face the new. In a gentle, non-public way you can offer some words of confidence.
- Actively reflect on how your child/teen is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like *"You seem worried about talking to someone who speaks differently. I can go with you so that you'll 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."*
- Notice when your child/teen tries something new or talks to you about questions they have about differences among people. These conversations might start happening naturally during mealtime or when snuggling up to read together.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Celebrate one another as well as the wonderful diversity that you are realizing in your world.

**Tip** Be specific. "Good job" seems not to carry much meaning. However, a specific compliment about a pointed behavior -- *"You included a new friend at the park today -- love seeing that!"* -- can promote more of the same.

**Trap** If you focus only on outcomes -- *"You weren't shy today"* -- you miss the chance to influence the process. Better to say -- *"You introduced yourself to our new neighbors, even when the dad spoke to you in Spanish. I love seeing your confidence."*

**Trap** Avoid bribes. A bribe is a promise for a behavior, while praise is special attention after the behavior. While bribes may work in the short term, praise grows lasting motivation for good behavior and effort. For example, instead of saying, *"If you try reaching out to that new student, I'll buy you a smoothie"* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *"You tried to make that new student feel more comfortable by inviting her to sit with you -- love hearing that!"*

**Celebrate yourself** for making it your parenting priority to work on cultivating the social and emotional skills that are most critical for your child's/teen's success today and in their future!

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