



Talking About Differences Summary

Why Talking About Differences?

Teens ages 15-19 will not only be noting differences in the world, they may be directly seeking more diversity as they venture into life after high school, whether that involves college or the work world. Parents and those in a parenting role can support teens as they make sense of differences among people by talking to them about what they observe and creating a safe, trusting space to raise issues.

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

- Ask questions to explore differences and similarities in their world. *“As you interact with or observe more students at school events, have you noticed anyone who struggles, is left out, or even targeted because of a difference?”*
- When your 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 about the characters?”* and *“How are they similar or different from you?”*
- Ask about friends and classmates and how they get along. You might ask, *“Are there any classmates who are criticized 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 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 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 teen will notice and learn!).
 - “How can I model acceptance, inclusion, and celebration of those different from me?”

- Expose your teen to people and experiences that are different from your own family. Talk about and celebrate those differences including racial, cultural, belief, and perspective differences.
- Provide books, games, and other materials that expose your teen to people who are different.
- Encourage your teen's questions about differences between people. If they utter judgments about their peers' character or image, no matter the judgment, look for ways to reframe viewing with empathy and appreciation.
- Stay informed. What is considered acceptable and respectful language may change. Seek out credible sources.
- Grow empathy. Encourage your teen to see the world from others' points of view.
- If you hear your 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 teen be more appropriate.
- Derogatory terms may creep into your 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 Teens learn first through modeling. If you feel uncomfortable when interacting with people who are different from you, your teen will likely pick up on those cues and model your behavior. Formulate new ways of interacting that model what you want your teen to mimic when they are with people who are different from them.

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

- Provide opportunities for your teen to meet and interact with other 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 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 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 teen is feeling when approaching challenges. You can offer reflections like, *"You seem worried about talking to someone who communicates with*

sign language. Remember, you can always write things down if you are struggling to understand."

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 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 driving 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 in your friend group hangout 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 teen's success today and in their future!

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