



By Karen Stephens

Tips for Teaching Kids to Respect and Enjoy Diversity

Much of a child's self concept is developed by age six. During the preschool years children create a mental picture of who they are, including physical and personality characteristics. Through experience, they learn to recognize their strengths, unique talents, and gifts, as well as their weaknesses, challenges, and limitations.

From their perceptions they gradually create a sense of self, their self-image. It becomes more detailed as children venture beyond the home. As they observe life, they begin noting similarities and differences among people. This is how they become confident in what makes them unique from any other person on earth.

As children develop their self image, they simultaneously learn that all others have a unique identity as well. Throughout the process, children are full of questions about people, especially why they look and act the way they do. It's a sign of intelligence when children ask questions, but the grilling can become tedious and even unnerving for parents.

Children ask questions so they can better understand how individuality affects human existence. It's up to parents to help children learn to live harmoniously — even joyously — within all the similarities and differences; side by side, day in and day out, until we're all old and gray. Living comfortably within diversity is a primary ingredient for living a good life on our very, very populated planet.

Giving children opportunities to encounter the realities of uniqueness — and therefore difference — is a first step in teaching children about diversity. Helping them respond respectfully, without a sense of superiority or inferiority is a more refined skill.

Valuing diversity takes much more than mere exposure. Sharing values must include specific ways of recognizing and appreciating the creative impulse that spawns diversity.

Based on children's age, understanding, and previous experience, we must give them repeated chances to satisfy their curiosity about anything new or novel. By thoughtfully and skillfully responding to kids' investigations and questions, we can teach them to behave compassionately and ethically in a world of diversity.

In this series we've looked at ways parents can respond to children when they bluntly ask questions about diversity, such as commenting on someone's appearance or ethnic background. Parents are even more on the firing line when children repeat prejudicial slurs or make derogatory remarks about a whole group of people.

As when children first try out cussing, a child's first use of a prejudicial slur is usually innocent mimicry. They've probably overheard the term used by a family member, a movie character, or another child on the playground. And so, they test our sensitivities to the slur by trying it out. They use it to get our attention, especially to get our reaction.

Sometimes when a child first uses a discriminatory word, we're so shocked we pretend we didn't hear it. We completely ignore the comment hoping the behavior will just go away. But our silence most likely conveys to children our agreement with, even our tolerance for the slur. Our lack of confidence (or backbone) in addressing sensitive issues ends up reinforcing — rather than negating — biased stereotypes that limit interaction.

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There are added dangers to silence in the face of biased labels. Remember, children do as we do, not as we say. And so, if parents have preached equality for all, and the importance of being kind by respecting others' feelings, our silence on biased namecalling is more than a little confusing. To build their sense of trust, kids need us to be consistent and credible. They are quick to spy hypocrisy — especially in their parents.

Tolerating behavior that is intolerable doesn't build children's respect for adult authority. Whenever children use a degrading word, explain its hurtful intent and factually explain its meaning. Firmly, but kindly, state your intolerance of namecalling of any kind.

On the other hand, rather than being silent, sometimes a parent blows up and over-reacts when a child makes an observation, asks a question, or uses a derogatory term. They falsely jump to the conclusion that any comment about difference is bigotry, rather than mere curiosity. And so they shame children profusely, sometimes to tears.

For example, suppose at a birthday party five-year-old Lydia comments on her African-American friend's hairstyle by asking, "How come Kamaria's hair is full of all those beads? How does she wash it?"

An unprepared parent might angrily respond, "Oh, Lydia, that's terrible to say. How can you embarrass me like that? She can wear as many beads as she wants and I don't want to hear another word about it. Where on earth did you learn to ask such impolite questions? It must come from your father's side of the family."

That response, tainted with humiliating inference, is not helpful or enlightening. It puts Lydia on the defensive. And it stages obstacles for future communication. It conveys that differences are taboo, unmentionable topics, rather than realities to be recognized, discussed, and ultimately appreciated.

In response to Lydia's valid questions, a calmer, less accusatory reaction would do a better job of conveying acceptance and appreciation for diversity. A simpler reply, that truly addressed the content of the question, would help Lydia learn that people have many different opinions on what makes hair beautiful.

For instance, mom could have matter-of-factly replied, "Kamaria likes decorating her hair with lots of different colored beads, like you use bows. We can ask her how she washes her hair. I bet she uses water and shampoo just like we do."

As a follow up to Lydia's curiosity, there are other ways to help her explore hair decoration. Mom could suggest Lydia ask Kamaria what she liked about beads and where she bought them. She could ask Lydia to think of reasons Kamaria used many beads.

Providing first hand experiences is another way a parent could help Lydia keep an open mind about hair style preferences. Perhaps Lydia could watch while Kamaria had her beads replaced. And for the fun of it, she could have some beads put into her own hair.

Kids also love to pretend playing beauty parlor. Lydia could play hair stylist by fixing her dolls' hair with a bunch of different decorations — like bows, beads, hats, or flowers. Even better, mom and dad could let her go to town on their own floppy mops. (Yes, it takes a brave parent to endure such doting, but the fun is worth your time. Just be sure your child gives you a new hairdo after work, not before!)

Lydia could look at a picture book about hairstyles around the world, like Karin Buisa Badt's *Hair There and Everywhere*. Peter Spier's *People* shows how people from all regions dress and adorn themselves. *Children from Australia to Zimbabwe: A Photographic Journey Around the World* by Maya Ajmera and Anna Rhesa Versola (Charlesbridge, 2001) sheds light on how children all over the planet are often the same, and sometimes different.

Children can be introduced to a world of difference. With you by their side, they'll find life among us fascinating and infinitely interesting.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.