

Promoting Diversity and Inclusion for Our Children: One Day at a Time



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If you are one of the millions of parents raising children in the midst of a global pandemic, social disruptions in the name of racial justice, unprecedented upheaval in education, and more, you too might be confused and questioning how to address some of these issues with your children. The events of the last years highlight the importance of

inclusion more than ever. Consequently, more individuals, families, and communities are having dynamic conversations about diversity, equity, and embracing differences.

Over the past decade, the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion ('DEI') have gained significant attention by institutions across varying fields. Now, what exactly is DEI and how or why should we approach these terms with children? One reason is that we are all part of and benefit from these efforts. [Diversity](#) accounts for all of us being represented within our communities. [Inclusion](#) requires active, intentional, and ongoing efforts for each of us to feel as though we belong. [Equity](#) means providing all people with fair opportunities to attain their full potential. Hence, talking with our children and more importantly, creating diverse, inclusive, and equitable environments allows for them to experience a deeper sense of belonging and in turn, replicate additional safe environments for themselves and others.

There is a common misconception that avoiding conversations about cultural or physical differences will keep children from creating negative ideas about those differences. Similarly, beliefs that conversations preserve a child's innocence or naiveté are equally misled. [Research](#)

tells us children as early as six months old begin developing skills to group individuals by visible physical characteristics, but they do not begin to form opinions about those differences until later. Due to children's hyper-observant nature, by the age of five, most children will begin to articulate a preference for classmates of the same [race](#).

An article published at [The Infant Crier](#) suggests that ignoring children's attention to visible and identified physical differences unintentionally contributes to the prejudice and stereotypes that they gather from society. [Prejudice](#) is a negative attitude about someone or a group rooted typically in limited information, often based on stereotypes. We get that limited information from culture: programs on TV, books we read as children, and jokes we hear people tell. It is so pervasive it becomes part of our psychology even without our conscious awareness. However, you can come to understand that there is a lack of validity to the [stereotypes](#), meaning the more you meet individuals different than yourself, the weaker the stereotypes will be. In that regard, familiarity weakens stereotypes. Hence, rather than remaining silent, children whose parents encourage them to ask questions, have discussions, and interact with different cultures, races, genders, types of families, and physical or mental capabilities develop more compassion, respect and awareness of [self](#).

Having discussed some of the benefits of addressing DEI principles in our homes and communities, let's talk about how to present it to our children. The best way for children to learn about diversity and inclusion is to **see it modeled by trusted adults**. The more opportunities our children practice, experience, and ask questions, the more confident, competent and comfortable they will feel to advocate for themselves and others.

Some additional ideas are as follows:

- Understand the institutional and structural barriers that have excluded and continue to exclude people from marginalized [communities](#).
- Identify your own unconscious [biases](#)

- Highlight friendships based on compatible interests and values including kindness, respect, and empathy
- Encourage children to make friends with peers from different settings, ages, backgrounds, and interests. Model this within your own friendships and acquaintances.
- Encourage questions and answer them openly. Ask why they posed a specific question to you. Provide honest and age-appropriate answers. If you don't know the answer, don't be afraid to say so (e.g., "I need to think about your question and tell you the answer later.")
- Teach your child to reach out to others. Urge them to make other children in their class feel valued. Encourage them to get to know the child who often sits alone at lunch
- Challenge your child to find out one good thing about a child they might regularly say is annoying to them
- Emphasize common similarities (e.g., if a child in the neighborhood has Down syndrome, point out all the similarities they share with your child. They might like the same TV shows, also have a pet fish, or love swimming)
- Avoid using words like "normal," "weird," "us," or "them"
- If inappropriate terms are brought up, gently correct your child or provide a better alternative
- Give your child opportunities to feel capable and competent by modeling or practicing interactions at home or with other familiar people
- Practice taking other's perspectives and praise trying

Lastly, as parents, teaching our children to listen and advocate for others, or reaching out to find safe advocates in teachers, friends, and family can be an empowering tool. Inclusion is, after all, what maintains diversity. Talking openly and positively about differences can help children better understand themselves and those around them. Embracing diversity and inclusion empowers children to engage their world with curiosity, confidence and kindness. It can help children learn to empathize with people who are different from them. It can even make children better learners by allowing them to understand various subjects from multiple points of view.

Overall, these conversations and exercises can sometimes push all of us out of our comfort zone. However, when we listen, pay attention, and celebrate our own and others' differences, the benefits can empower us to flourish, belong, and be our truest, most authentic selves. We will not get every conversation right and we will not be able to answer every question. However, practicing, preparing, and planning can help make the process more enjoyable and less intimidating. We invite you to reflect on some of these tips to see how you can personalize them to your family and community.