

PARENT Talk



Dealing with Differences

Just as no two fingerprints are exactly alike, no two people are exactly alike. If everyone had the same appearance, emotions, culture and abilities, life would be monotonous. People can learn from each other's differences. New discoveries about people occur because of diverse perspectives. Differences make life more interesting!

What are differences?

Differences in people include ethnic, religious, racial and physical challenges in hearing, sight, and orthopedic characteristics. Common differences in the classroom are stuttering and dyslexia. Differences are also present in the way people develop mentally and physically.

Sometimes people look only for differences. If the focus is on differences, then stigmas or labels can develop. Society uses labels to classify people in many different ways, for example: Mother, Engineer, Woman, Black, Wife, Disabled. An individual can be all these things and more. However, when individuals are labeled as one thing, they become that one thing only in other's eyes. This limits opportunities.

The problem with labels

It is dehumanizing to refer to people by a devalued label. Stigmas and labels pose limiting barriers. The cycle can continue to build when stereotypes are used to explain what people do not understand. Society tends to substitute stereotypes for reality. Such prejudices decrease the opportunities for those who are considered different.

To avoid those pitfalls, certain skills are needed – discovering commonalities among people is an important skill. Parents who discuss similarities with their children help prevent prejudices.

Children mimic adults around them

Kids are mirrors to the responses and actions of those around them, especially parents. Therefore, adults need to set a positive example when confronted with diverse people. By doing so, parents help children look beyond differences to underlying feelings and experiences shared by all. Teaching children to accept differences reduces and eliminates prejudice.

Parents need to see how their children truly feel and respond to diverse people. Children, depending on their age, respond differently. Telling a child how to react can set the stage for fear.

Instead, let situations occur and listen to your child's comments without passing judgment, even if you don't approve. For example: if your child describes a classmate who is undergoing chemotherapy for cancer by saying, "He's bald and looks really ugly," don't respond with, "You shouldn't say that." Instead, try asking questions. "What makes you say that?" "Does that scare you?" "Are you still friends even though he looks different from you?" "Do you worry that this may happen to you?"

It takes a while for children to answer these questions and to come up with questions of their own. In time, children will find commonalities. Children need to learn that prejudice isolates. Everyone is disabled to some extent at some time in their lives. Parents and children need to realize mental disabilities can happen to anyone at any time. Physical disabilities alter a person's life. However, it is ability, not disability that counts. By helping your child accept and tolerate differences, you can better prepare your child.

People who are experiencing mental or developmental disabilities are developing individuals like everyone else. They can live, experience, and achieve at their own rate of growth and to the best of their ability.

Many people use differences and disabilities as building blocks for greater self-esteem. This challenge makes for increased tolerance of others, a broader range of experience and a greater appreciation of life. It also gives hope to others.

Acceptance of each other's differences allows people to be themselves, thus, giving them dignity.

It takes time and patience to help your child deal with diversity in a positive, constructive way.

If you need more help ...

Resources are available to help you and your child deal with diversity. If you need more advice, call Crisis Services at (810) 257-3740 where a counselor is always available. ©