

Teaching Tolerance at Home



“Why is my hair in braids and not long and bouncy like Megan’s?”

“Why is that man in a wheelchair?”

“How did Derrick get two moms?”

As early as age two, according to research, children begin to take note of differences in other people. Now that your child has moved beyond simply noticing the similarities and differences he shares with others, he is learning how such characteristics – and people’s attitudes about such characteristics- have the power to make him feel included or excluded among peers.

During these years, your child is likely to be on the receiving or giving end of such exclusion: being picked last for a basketball game because he’s too short or too heavy; not inviting a classmate to a party because she speaks with a “funny” accent; being called names because of his skin color or religion. While parental influence plays a critical role in how children view and respond to difference, the preteen and teenage years mark a period when various outside sources also are competing for influence. Television and video games perpetuate stereotypes about good guys and bad guys. Toy isles limit girls to pink princess boxes and boys to trucks and action figures. Classmates and friends use language that puts down certain groups of people: “That’s so gay.” “That’s so retarded.”

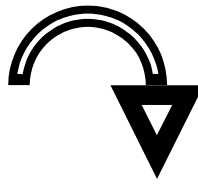
This is the time when the values you emphasized early on – and the behaviors you modeled all along – are put into action. Have you created open, honest dialogue about the many issues that define difference – race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, ability, etc? Have you fostered a healthy sense of self-esteem by discussing positive aspects of your heritage? Have you emphasized the value of diversity?

Too often, we label children’s questions and observations about differences as impolite. Rather than seizing the teachable moment, we ignore or discourage such remarks because they make us uneasy. The five year old, for example, who surprises you with a question: “Is that man who is wearing a turban a terrorist?” Or the 9-year-old who wants to know if the man wearing baggy pants and a backwards cap belongs to a gang.

Seizing these moments as learning opportunities, rather than embarrassing moments to be hushed or ignored, can help your child get past stereotypes and prejudicial images and into a deeper understanding of the world around her/him. Experts say honest and age-appropriate dialogue about these issues is the best approach. And while your words always are important, your actions now are more important than ever before. Preteens and teens are quick to identify and reject hypocrisy.

While your views may not be those your children seek first -or at all - with so many outside influences competing for their attention, it is important that you continue to share them and encourage them to share their views, too.

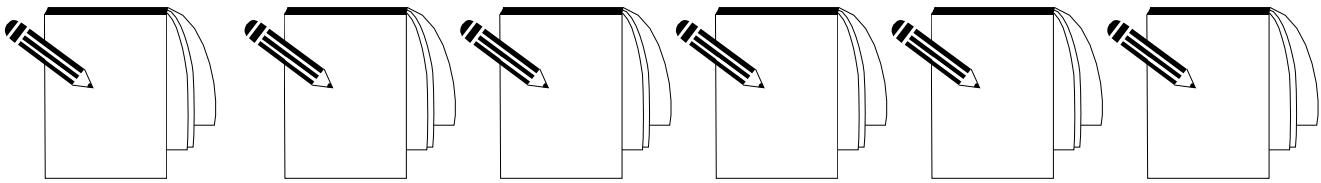
There will be moments that provide learning opportunities for your child and yourselves. Here is some advice parents have found successful:



- ☑ **Model it.** As parents, we are our kid’s first teachers. When it comes to teaching tolerance, actions speak louder than words. When you say that boys and girls are equal but refuse to buy your son an Easy Bake Oven because it is a “girls’ toy,” What message do you send? Your actions, both subtle and overt, are what they will emulate.
- ☑ **Acknowledge differences.** Rather than teaching children that we are all the same, acknowledge the many ways people are different, and emphasize some of the positive aspects of our differences – language diversity, various music and cooking styles, for example. Likewise, be honest about instances, historical and current, when people have been mistreated because of their differences. Encourage your children to talk about what makes them different, and discuss ways that may have helped or hurt him at times. After that, finding similarities becomes even more powerful, creating a sense of common ground.
- ☑ **Challenge intolerance.** If your child says or does something indicating bias or prejudice, don’t meet the action with silence. Silence indicates acceptance, and a simple command – “Don’t say that” – is not enough. First try to find the root of the action or comment: “What made you say that about Sam?” Then, explain why the action or comment was unacceptable.
- ☑ **Seize Teachable moments.** Look for everyday activities that can serve as springboards for discussion. School-age children respond better to lessons that involve real-life examples than to artificial or staged discussions about issues. For example, if you’re watching TV together, talk about why certain groups often are portrayed in stereotypical roles.
- ☑ **Emphasize the positive.** Just as you should challenge your child’s actions if they indicate bias or prejudice, it’s important to praise him/her for behavior that shows respect and empathy for others. Catch your child treating people kindly, let them know you noticed, and discuss why it is a desirable behavior.
- ☑ **Keep Talking.** Many people believe the last thing teens are interested in is having a conversation with parents. But even if your teen does not initiate conversations about issues of difference, find ways to bring those topics up with them. Use current issues from the news, such as the immigration debate or same-sex marriage, as a springboard for discussion. Ask your teen what they think about the issues.
- ☑ **Stay involved.** Messages about differences exist all around your teen: the Internet, songs, music videos, reality shows, ads and commercials, social cliques at school. Know the websites your teen enjoys visiting; take time to listen to or watch the music and shows they enjoy. Then discuss the messages they send. Ask your teen about the group or groups they most identify with at school. Discuss the labels or stereotypes that are associated with such groups.

Conversations about tolerance are rarely easy, and sometimes we don’t have the answers. What we do have is time, patience and the desire to help our kids grow into adults who value and honor diversity.





Personal Bias: A Reflection Exercise

The personal biases we hold as parents significantly influence what we teach, and don't teach, our children about valuing differences. Some of us may have internalized negative attitudes because of racism, bias or discrimination that we experienced growing up. Others of us may have been raised in families where parents and other relatives conveyed racist and discriminatory attitudes about other groups. Even if we do not openly display such behavior, it may affect our beliefs about others on a subconscious level. Knowingly or unknowingly, we can pass along many of these unspoken beliefs to our children.

This calls on us to take on the crucial work of reflecting upon and addressing our personal biases. No matter how open-minded or accepting we believe ourselves to be, and no matter how good a job we think we are doing when it comes to raising tolerant children, the fact remains: We all carry prejudice and biases.

Use these journal prompts to explore your experiences with and attitudes about differences.

1. The first time I became aware of differences was when.....

2. As I was growing up, my parent(s) taught me that people who were different from us were.....

3. As I was growing up, my parent(s) taught me that people who were like us were.....

4. A time I was mistreated because of my own differences was when.....

5. A time I mistreated someone for being different was.....

6. I feel most comfortable when I am around people who.....

7. I feel least comfortable when I am around people who.....

8. The memories I have of differences affect my parenting by.....
