

# Learning to Live Together-Children and Cultural Diversity

## Tips for Parents

Children of all ages are fascinated by the similarities and differences between themselves and others. Noticing how they are alike or different from other children helps them gain a sense of their own identity, as well as their identity as a member of global community that's made up of different ethnic, racial, and religious groups.



Noticing differences and likenesses usually begins at home. Siblings might compare among themselves the texture of their hair, the color of their eyes or the shapes of their noses. This sorting and organizing is a natural part of growing up. The problem starts if those differences are seen as negative.



Parents and teachers need to be alert to children's signals. They should look out for a bias toward others because of physical attributes, culture or ethnicity. Whatever the signal parents and teachers need to help children develop a direction that is healthy, open and trusting toward others.

## Parents can help

Because prejudice is such a tough issue, parents can feel uncomfortable teaching children about cultural diversity. Often, parents try to stop children from noticing or commenting on what they see. They simply say, "It's not polite to stare." Sometimes because of their own discomfort, they quickly change the subject of differences when it comes up.

By shying away from open discussion of the differences that kids observe, parents send a message. What they are saying, without even knowing it, is that there's something wrong with those differences. Children pick up on a parent's nervousness and feel that there's something bad going on.



Parents should provide a safe environment where differences can be discussed and information is shared that shatters stereotypes. They need to feel confident enough not only to talk about equality and the worth of all people but to set an example that reinforces those statements. Children follow their parents' lead closely.

To discourage stereotyping, find books showing people of various races and ethnic backgrounds as leaders. Give your child chances to meet and play with children of different backgrounds. Visit cultural festivals and other ethnic celebrations. Direct experience with all kinds of people can be the most powerful tool for breaking down stereotypes.

Take seriously your child's comments and questions about prejudice. Be as clear and honest as you can when you answer. You don't have to overload your child with information, but you do have to respond.

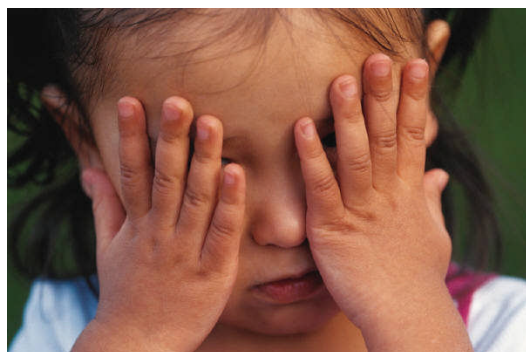
### Using the right words

Sometimes kids bring home slurs, taunts and teases that they hear from other kids (or sometimes adults). How do you deal with that? There's no easy answer. But you do need to speak up in some way, telling your child why it's wrong to repeat the insults.

Young children who use racist words are usually repeating things they have heard used in anger or fear at a time of conflict. When you intervene, stopping the name-calling and making the kids apologize is a good start, but a discussion can be even more useful. The real issue may be an argument over a toy or something similar. Help children realize what the problem really is. Help them understand that it doesn't have anything to do with skin color.

By the second or third grade, the problem goes deeper. At this age, it's important to make it clear to kids that racial attacks will not be tolerated. An 8- or 9-year-old who makes racial slurs often is usually a frustrated and insecure child. Or else he has been taught to act that way on purpose by older people. Frank, straightforward discussions are crucial to breaking down the child's belief that one person is superior over another because of race or other factors.

Parents can't censor everything their children hear outside the home, but they can certainly counter it. Children need to be reminded that all people are valuable and worthy of respect and that ultimately, hate hurts the one who hates.



### Dealing with fear and anger

Even the youngest children can be exposed regularly to racism, sometimes in violent forms. This happens by way of the media, if not in everyday life.

How can parents explain racism without adding to the fear? It's not easy. But again, honesty and openness are critical. If your child is afraid that someone is going to burn her house down or come after her, reassure her as best you can that she's

safe and going to be okay.

It's also okay to admit your own anger toward an incident. It shows your child that it's normal to be concerned when someone is being treated badly or unfairly.

Explain that we all have to find ways to express our anger without hurting ourselves or others. Help your child act, not react. Children, like adults, can handle their feelings of frustration and anger in many ways. They don't have to resort to violence.

When a child is a victim of racial slurs, tell her that those names are used to make her feel bad. And tell her she shouldn't feel bad. Explain that she is not a bad person, no matter what anyone says. Tell her how you feel proud of who you are, and she should feel the same.

If possible, speak to the offending child's parents. If they aren't available or don't respond, speak to the child directly. The child may be unaware of the harm in her actions. Or she may need to be reminded that this type of behavior will not be tolerated.



### **How much should you say?**

What you tell your child should depend on her age and curiosity. A 4-year-old won't understand a dissertation on the history of racism and oppression. But when she asks questions about something she's seen or heard, she needs some honest information to go on. If she wants more, she'll ask for it.

## **10 Children's books that address diversity**

1. **Mediopollito/Half-Chicken.** Author: Ada, A. F. (1999). Las Vegas, NV: Sagebrush Press. Ages: 4-8.
2. **La Estrella de Angel/Angel's Kite.** Author: Blanco, A. (1998). San Francisco: Children's Book Press. Ages: 4-8
3. **The Runaway Bunny/El Conejito Andarin.** Author: Brown, M. W. (1942). Harper Festival. Ages: Baby to Preschool.
4. **Peltios/Hair.** Author: Cisneros, S. (1997). New York: Dragonfly Books. Ages 4-8.
5. **Abuela/Grandmother.** Author: Dorros, A. (1995). New York: Dutton Children's Books. Ages: 4-8.
6. **One Afternoon** by [Yumi Heo](#) (Orchard Books, 1994).
7. **Amazing Grace** by Mary Hoffman. Dial. 1991
8. **Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)** by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard. (Clarion. 1991)
9. **Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky** by Faith Ringgold. (Crown, 1992)
10. **Do Like Kyla** by Angela Johnson. (Orchard. 1990)

# Ten Strategies for dealing with diversity

## The Starting Place -- Set the Stage for Creative Use of Diversity

**Strategy 1: Strengthen the prerequisites for positive use of diversity.** Respect others, seek understanding of differences

**Strategy 2: Enjoy and celebrate diversity** - Variety is the spice of life. *Viva la difference!* Sameness is downright boring.

**Strategy 3: Translate differences into uniqueness.** For example, we need more multi-culturalism that attempts to spread a broad understanding of many cultures, or which helps diverse people get grounded in their own diverse cultures, not as superior to others, but as intensely valid and their own. Also, people's stories are particularly powerful at opening our hearts and minds to each other as unique beings with much in common, rather than seeing our differences as problems.

**Strategy 4: Help/let differences self-organize.** People use their different passions to help them gather together in groups for dialogue and action.

**Strategy 5: Set aside differences to focus on common ground.** This doesn't mean denying our differences -- just don't let them get in the way of all we have in common.

**Strategy 6: Connect differences to create synergy.** Use differences to deal with strengths and weaknesses and create emergent phenomena. People's different [personality types](#) and learning styles, for example can be used together to great advantage. The fast-moving person can help get things done, while the reflective person can make sure that what's done makes sense.

**Strategy 7: Use diversity as a resource.** If you've got solar power *and* electricity, you're in good shape for both cloudy days and blackouts. Differences can help teach variation.

**Strategy 8: Use differences to increase understanding of complex issues.** Everyone has a piece of the Big Picture. If people really listen to each other, they'll get a bigger picture of what's going on. The trick is to include truly diverse perspectives in the conversation -- and then listen.

**Strategy 9: Work through differences to resolve conflict.** Usually this requires the conflicted people hearing each other well, and *feeling heard*.

**Strategy 10: Highlight differences for broad social benefit.** For example, some websites, magazines, books, etc. describe what diverse people think about certain public issues so that citizens can understand the different perspectives and trade-offs and make up their own minds.

# EDUCATION IS POWER!!!