

# Inclusivity

## Teaching your kids about tolerance and acceptance

### We are all different!

While we all share being human, we are all different in many ways. No two people share the same traits: hair color, vocal quality, fingerprints, genetic profiles, and much more. These human differences are expressed by our race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as by our personalities and our physical and mental abilities. They combine to make each of us "one of a kind"—unique individuals with distinct identities.

### What it is:

Tolerance and acceptance refers to an attitude of openness and respect for the differences that exist among people, including race and ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and people with physical, mental, or intellectual disabilities. It focuses on learning from one another, valuing cultural differences, rejecting stereotypes and respecting one another.

### What it is not:

Tolerance and acceptance is not about accepting bad behavior. We do not want to teach our kids to approve of behavior that is disrespectful, hurtful, or illegal.

### Why teach tolerance and acceptance?

During their early years, it is important for parents and teachers to help kids discover the beauty and power of diversity, and adopt an attitude of tolerance and acceptance.

Kids learn about the world in small steps, focusing first on recognizing images, sounds, objects, and people. From an early age, attitudes, like approval, tolerance, and acceptance quickly emerge as children reflect the mindsets expressed by family members.

Presenting positive mindsets like tolerance and acceptance will nourish curiosity, empathy, patience, and flexibility.

By talking about and demonstrating acceptance of diversity, you will encourage respect for others as well as a deeper understanding of self.





*Here are some specific examples:*

## *How to teach tolerance and acceptance:*

### **Learning to treat others with tolerance and acceptance begins with you.**

It is not uncommon to be embarrassed or shocked by children's questions or statements. Kids are naïve, and come to each new encounter with fresh, open minds. They notice new things, and things that seem different. With few prior experiences to help children filter their reactions, their expressions may be startling and seem inappropriate, but they are simply attempts to make sense of their world.

Although many remarks come suddenly, passionately, publicly, and at extreme levels of volume, it is important to respond in a manner that is calm, caring, positive, matter-of-fact, and non-judgmental. This is not always easy, but entirely possible, and important to master—especially since these moments may provide some of your best opportunities to help shape attitudes and perceptions, and cement your place as a trusted advisor.



## *People with Disabilities*

Some people are born with special needs, while others acquire them as a result of an accident or illness. When children ask or comment about people with disabilities, we should be comfortable explaining that all people are unique. People with disabilities have challenges that may make doing some things difficult, so they need various means of assistance or support. Sometimes these can be seen — like a person needing a wheelchair, or a mechanical limb — while others are more difficult to recognize — like a person with a learning disability.

## *LGBT*

Children may be curious about family structures that are different from theirs. The answer may be simple for a younger child's question. "Why does Tommy have two daddies?" For example: "Family structures can look different. Some kids have two moms, two dads, or a mom and a dad. In some families, a single parent raises the children, and sometimes grandparents or foster parents raise children. As the child matures, however, the questions and answers become more complex.

## *Diversity and Race*

It is important to talk early and often about race, and to expose children to people of various ethnicities. When we avoid these experiences and conversations with children, we risk nurturing racial prejudice. If you do not live in an ethnically diverse neighborhood, select picture books, TV shows, and movies that include kids of all colors, cultures, and religions doing everyday things.

# How to talk to your kids about tolerance and acceptance

Here are some general tips:

*Be a good example*

The first step for effective teaching is being a good example. Demonstrate respect and consideration for all—regardless of their differences.

*Be respectful*

Instead of shushing and showing embarrassment about an awkward question or comment, show respect and courtesy for their thoughts. Stay calm, and use the moment as an opportunity to show that you value their thoughts and want to connect with them in a meaningful way.

*Be available*

Make time for discussion and meaningful dialog with your child. When questions arise, be prepared to put other issues aside and show genuine interest in their thoughts and experiences. Always be available for more discussion. This will communicate that it is ok to notice and discuss anything, so long as it is done with respect.

*Be prepared*

Whether you are a parent, grandparent, teacher, or caregiver of any kind, it is a good idea to think about diversity issues in advance so you are neither surprised, nor embarrassed, and can respond to sensitive topics with care and confidence.

*Be safe*

Create a safe space for your kids—physically, socially, and emotionally. Choose a comfortable environment to have meaningful discussions with your child where they will feel safe and secure.

*Be direct*

Always answer the question asked, or respond to the comment. If you do not know the answer, it is alright to “find out, and get back to” them. Just, be sure to follow up with an answer.

*Be age appropriate*

At an early age, children can be reminded that people are different in many ways. It is rare to find two people who look, sound, or act alike. “We are all people, and our differences are normal. Look at the children in your school (or day care). They are all children, going to school together, but do any of them look like you, or like exactly the same things you like?” Discussions of this kind can pave the way for more sensitive topics as they grow and develop.

*Be positive*

Be calm, and use positive language that demonstrates care and respect for the child, for the question or comment, and for the situation. Avoid using ridicule or stereotypes when discussing human differences.

# How to talk to your kids about tolerance and acceptance

Here are some general scenarios:

*You're in a public space  
and your child says:*

*What you say:*

**Daddy, Suzi at school has two moms, and they are married!  
How is that possible?**

Many families have different structures. Some have a mom and a dad, while others have two moms, or two dads. Some have just one mom, or one dad, and some have grandparents or foster parents raising the children. What is important for kids is that the adults they live with are safe and loving. I'll bet Suzi and her moms do fun things, just like you and I.

**One of my friends at school is being bullied because he is gay.  
What can I do?**

"You have done the right thing by letting me know. Bullying for any reason is dangerous and hurtful and must be stopped. How do you think that you can support your friend?" —Use active listening and support your child as they process this question. Also, as the adult, you can help too. Connect with the school teacher or school counselor and follow the process for reporting bullying at your child's school.

**Mommy, why is that person in a wheelchair?**

There are many reasons for a person to use a wheelchair. She may have been born with a disability that makes it difficult for her to walk, or she may need to use it as a result of an injury or illness, or it may be painful or dangerous for her to walk. The wheelchair gives her a great way to go places, just like us. And here we are, all together, at the grocery store!

**Tony's parents are white and he's brown.  
How could that happen?**

There are many reasons why a person's skin color may be different from his parents. Skin-color, hair color and texture, the shape of people's eyes, and their height are just some of the things that are passed along in our genes from grandparents to parents to children. One simple answer may be that Tony's birth parents were brown skinned, and these are his adopted parents. This is something we could ask Tony and his parents. I'm sure they would enjoy talking about their heritage. Would you like to do that?