



By Karen Stephens

Responding to Kids' Questions About Difference

Children find human appearance fascinating. From birth, infants respond first and foremost to the pattern of the human face: two eyes side by side, a nose in the middle, and a mouth below. When tested, infants gaze longer and more often at that pattern than all others. Without a doubt, their loving interest — their adoration — promotes a lasting attachment bond between them and the lucky recipient, most often mom or dad.

Fascination with physical appearance continues throughout the first couple years of life. Similarities seem to be grasped first. By age three or four, children begin taking particular note of differences as well.

Children's attention to the details of difference can be disconcerting. My preschool students never fail to comment on my "uniqueness." I've been asked why my front tooth crosses in front of the other. And once, after I'd dramatically pronounced "The End" of a story, a child piped up loud and clear, "How come your pointer finger is so crooked like that?" My finger's arthritis apparently stole the show.

I'm sure you've had similar experiences. Responding to children's comments is one of parents' tougher jobs. Honest, uninhibited tikes haven't learned to censor themselves, so they can put parents on the spot about a variety of somewhat touchy issues.

Their questions take us off guard at the most inopportune times, and often when we're least prepared. On top of that, it's just very hard anticipating what they might pick up on next. At a movie they may ask why the person in the next seat is so fat, or why he has hairs coming out of his ears or nose. Talk about embarrassing!

Gradually children learn to be more discreet — and gracious — about their observations. Parents are inevitably the primary role models for children as they take in a world of varying human characteristics. From us they learn how to respect, accept, and appreciate people's similarities and differences. Certainly there are others who influence children's attitudes, such as worship centers, child care, and school. And yes, factors such as television, movie, and music affect kids' values. But the most potent teachers are parents. And the lessons we teach endure a lifetime.

In the majority of cases, that's a dandy plan. Most parents are upstanding, friendly, trusting, and fair. But some, as you know, are not. Instead of teaching that differences are an interesting perk in life, they teach that differences are bad. Or they teach that differences make some folks superior and others inferior, or some worthy and others not.

The manner in which we respond to children's perceptions influences whether they retain their natural warmth and accepting attitude toward others. The way we respond to their curiosity will help them address the real — as well as the imagined — implications of difference. If we honestly and respectfully answer children's questions, we'll nurture an appreciation for the diversity that is the saving grace of human existence. After all, if humans weren't adaptable and different, how could we survive all of earth's climates?

Someday your child will ask blunt, frank questions about differences. They'll blurt out a comment about someone's color, size, shape, features, abilities, or accent, etc.

When it happens, don't jump to false conclusions and assume your child is prejudiced, bigoted or an "-ist" of one kind or another. And it's not a good idea to shame them, shush

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them up, or make them “Take it back,” either. Those over-reactions infer that differences are bad and unspeakable. It slams the door shut on open discussion.

Simply consider childrens’ questions about difference as a doorway to a teachable moment. Questions present an ideal chance to honestly share your experiences, values, and beliefs. They offer a chance to teach manners, courtesy, and respect. When you respond, keep it simple. Gear comments to your child’s age, experiences, and ability to understand.

Following are topics children in my life have brought up. Perhaps the responses I share can guide you the next time your kids pose stumbers of their own. Stay calm and good luck!

- A teacher reached up high to get laundry soap from a shelf. The bottom of her blouse creeped up to reveal a bit of her midriff. An amazed four-year-old African-American girl exclaimed, “You’re white there, too?!” Though she was tempted to laugh, the teacher didn’t. She responded calmly that yes, her whole body was white. She was matter-of-fact without becoming defensive. Her answer was enough to satisfy the girl’s inquisitiveness.
- A white child asked a teacher how her skin “got brown.” Before she could answer he posed his own hypothesis: “Did you drink chocolate milk or something?” The astute teacher responded that drinking chocolate milk had nothing to do with her skin color. She said she had dark skin because her mother and father both have dark skin. It’s important to note that the teacher didn’t say, “That’s not a nice question,” “That’s not polite,” or “How dare you?” She took his question at face value and assumed he had only the best of intentions. She used it as a teachable moment. Her response was the child’s first lesson in genetics.
- A five year old told a teacher that his father said a classmate was a “wop.” Instead of attacking the father for insensitivity, she shed light on the term by providing factual information: “Tony’s family is Italian. That means one of their relatives has lived in a country named Italy. Wop isn’t a word they like to be called. It’s a word someone made up to make Italians feel bad.” That response conveyed the message that some words carry hurtful messages. The teacher showed a lot of poise and restraint. She didn’t namecall the father, but she also didn’t condone the cultural slur. She helped the child think of what the word would mean from his friend Tony’s point of view. Not an easy feat for a preschooler.
- When struggling over Legos™ a preschooler called another a “butthead fatso.” A very (very!) patient teacher said, “Tara is my friend. Calling her names hurts her feelings and won’t make her share with you. Find another way to tell her you’re frustrated.” By focusing on feelings as well as behavior, the teacher was able to guide the namecaller into more productive communication. She also guided decision making by helping each child analyze cause and effect. If the teacher hadn’t said anything, her silence could have condoned the namecalling. Her simple response, however, respectfully noted the inappropriate behavior was unacceptable and wouldn’t be tolerated.
- In my teaching days, a child asked out loud why another child’s eyes were “droopy.” The eyes belonged to a child of Asian descent. I responded, “Different people have different shaped eyes. Yoon Sook’s eyes are almond shaped. His mom and dad’s are, too.” At that point there wasn’t need to go further. Children, like adults, grasp differences best when learned in small, progressive steps. With continued intellectual development, and exposure to diversity, he would grasp more fully varying features due to racial genetics.

In all those cases, adults took the time to help children consider the whys and wherefores of difference. How we respond to children’s questions conveys our attitudes, values, and beliefs. Take time to give your children positive ones to adopt.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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