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HOW SHOULD I RESPOND WHEN CHILDREN NOTICE DIFFERENCES IN OTHERS?

From the ADL's Miller Early Childhood Initiative Question Corner

Young children can be blunt and direct as they notice and talk about the differences they notice among people. That can sometimes make their parent or caregiver feel uncomfortable, especially in public settings. Remember that young children's initial observations about difference do not intend to be hurtful; instead, it shows their developing curiosity and awareness of the diversity in the world in which we live.

In order to help children understand and develop comfort with differences, avoid dismissing children's observations. Instead turn their observations into a teachable moment using the following tips:

- Treat all questions with respect and seriousness, no matter how awkward or embarrassing (or even funny) they may seem to you. It's important not to silence children by saying things such as, "Shhh. That man does look different. Just pretend you didn't notice it." Say things such as, "You're right. That man does look different from us. We must look different to him, too."
- Understand what children are really asking. It is important that you understand what is being asked and why. A good way to do this is first to repeat the question back to be sure you understand what he or she really wants to know.
- Answer questions as clearly and honestly as you can. Give short, simple answers that children can understand. Avoid over explaining. If you don't know an answer, say so and make a plan to find out. Give children simple, factual answers to questions rather than saying things such as, "We're all the same underneath our skin."
- Don't be afraid of mistakes. Correct yourself if you give a wrong or incomplete answer.

Excerpted from *Bias-Free Foundations: Early Childhood Activities for Families* (2001, 6–7).