

When Do Awareness and Attitudes about Differences Develop?

Early Childhood Question Corner

Between the ages of 2 and 5, children's brains grow at their fastest rate, and this is when their learning about themselves and the world around them is most formative. It is also when attitudes are shaped. The following descriptions provide a general overview of the developmental stages through which children pass with regard to awareness of identity and difference. [Note: While these stages provide a useful framework for understanding how children develop, it is important to note that not all children will experience them in a linear way, and that children may not conform exactly to the age ranges stated below.]

Two- and Three-Year Olds

- Become increasingly aware of the physical aspects of identity, such as skin color, hair color and texture, eye shape and color, as well as other physical characteristics.
- Become aware of gender differences.
- May begin to notice obvious physical disabilities, such as a person using a wheelchair.
- Organize their self-concepts around physical features and motor performance, such as "I have long hair." "I can jump high."
- Begin to become aware of the cultural aspects of gender such as clothes, behavior and roles.

- May also be aware of ethnic identity, noticing such things as children eating foods of different cultures or speaking different languages.
- May begin to show signs of “pre-prejudices” (the ideas and feelings in very young children that may later develop into real prejudices when reinforced by biases that exist in society). May show fear of approaching people that look different than themselves, or may only play with dolls or children that look like themselves.

Three- and Four-Year Olds

- Seek explanations for differences.
- Are aware of their own and others’ physical characteristics and differences in gender.
- Want to know about their identity: how they got their skin, hair and eye color.
- May question why racial group “color” names are different from the actual skin colors. May make comments such as “I’m not black; I’m brown!”
- May be curious about variations within their extended family and the reason why two people with different skin colors may be considered part of the same group.
- May question why various religious beliefs and holiday observances are different.
- Begin to wonder if skin, hair and eye color will remain constant as they begin to recognize that getting older brings physical changes. May ask questions such as, “Will my skin color change when I grow up?” and “Will you always be white?”
- May begin to ask questions about people with obvious physical disabilities and their physical differences.

Four- And Five-Year Olds

- Begin to build a group ethnic identity.
- Can more fully explore the range of difference and similarity within and between racial and ethnic groups.
- Begin to understand scientific explanation for differences in skin color, hair texture and eye shape.
- Are more aware of family traditions and family history.

Keep the above stages in mind when deciding about discussion topics and activities. To find out more about ADL's training and resources on this topic visit www.adl.org/education-outreach.

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