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SHOULD I INITIATE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DIFFERENCES?

From the ADL's Miller Early Childhood Initiative Question Corner

There is no need to wait until children ask questions about differences to begin conversations. However, these discussions will have the greatest impact when they follow from children's interests, and when they are appropriate in length, frequency and content relative to children's intellectual and emotional capacity. Louise Derman-Sparks (1989) writes that awareness of, and talking about, differences in and of itself does not increase prejudice in young children and points out that it should be grounded in a developmental approach (relating conversations to children's ability to understand concepts like race, gender, ability, etc.).

In *Talking About Differences Children Notice*, Elizabeth Crary writes that "preschool children have a natural curiosity that helps them gather information about their world" (1992, 11). During this stage, adults who talk with children about differences can prevent fear and promote respect. "If adults encourage children to talk about differences," states Crary, "children can clarify misconceptions and learn that differences are okay" (1992, 12, 15). For example, an adult who initiates a conversation about disabilities with a child who has been staring at a person in a wheelchair may actually be taking steps to prevent that child from developing discomfort with or prejudices about people with disabilities. Some children, without guidance of an adult, might assume they could "catch" the disability or misunderstand why a person may have a disability. In this instance, engaging the child in conversation may actually prevent that child from forming flawed assumptions that could lead to prejudicial thinking.



While conversations such as the example above can help children to form healthy attitudes toward diversity, well-intentioned adults must take care not to accentuate differences in ways that cause children

to be preoccupied with them or to wholly define themselves by singular aspects of their identity, such as race, religion, or ethnicity. Dr. Marguerite A. Wright in *I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla: Raising Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World*, advises that “unless a young child initiates discussion about skin color, be careful about bringing it up [because] children should not be brought up believing that their skin color or race is the most important thing about them (1998, 75).”

As suggested in *Partner's Against Hate Program Activity Guide: Helping Children Resist Bias and Hate*, carefully establishing a pattern of talking to children about issues of diversity, prejudice, and bias early can help [children] to develop and maintain an open mind as it relates to these issues, and it will help them learn how to engage in thoughtful discussions about diversity as they move into adolescence” (Wotorson, 2001, 25–26).

To find out more about ADL's training and resources on this topic visit www.adl.org/education-outreach.

References