

INCLUSIVE AND EMPATHETIC

4 Tips for Exploring and Celebrating Difference with Young Children



One of the most powerful things we can do to plant seeds of inclusivity and compassion in early childhood is to guide children in exploring and celebrating human difference. Children are naturally curious and drawn to things that are new to them. We can help scaffold their learning about difference and channel that curiosity into appreciation of all that makes our human family diverse.

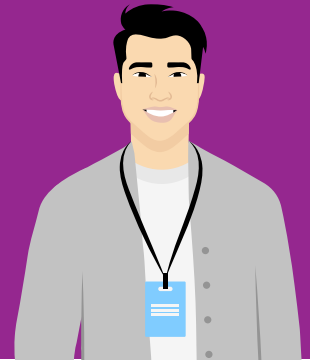
1. Make space for children's respectful curiosity
2. Frame human difference as positive
3. Explore difference in many domains.
4. Appreciate many kinds of difference.

1. Make space for children's respectful curiosity

- Let your child know that it's *okay to notice different skin colors*, hair textures and styles, and facial features, whether with respect to toys, characters in books, or elsewhere in the world. Model these observations as well ("Wow, I love how all the children on this page look so different! This little boy has beautiful, deep brown skin, this child has a pale, peachy skin color, and this girl has warm, reddish-beige skin. What else do you notice about them?"). Check out books to help you like *Shades of People* by Sheila Kelly and Shelley Rotner, *All the Colors We Are/Todos Los Colores de Nuestra Piel* by Katie Kissinger and Chris Bohnhoff, and *Our Skin: A First Conversation About Race* by Megan Madison, Jessica Ralli, and Isabel Roxas.
- Be observant, keeping in mind that young children may express curiosity nonverbally, through looking, pointing, or reaching out to touch someone. These moments are opportunities for adults to recognize the child's curiosity, affirm the observation, and guide interactions in positive directions ("Are you noticing Ariel's hair texture is different from yours? Yes, people have all different kinds of hair! Let's remember to ask our friends for permission before we touch their bodies, though.>").
- It's important for kids to see adults being respectfully curious, too. This provides concrete examples of how to explore and build their curiosity cross-culturally.

- Encourage children to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences by asking questions of them and welcoming their questions. An initial response to a direct question might be, “Well, what do *you* think?”
- If a child makes a negative racial comment, ask, nonjudgmentally, “What makes you say that?” These questions can help you understand more about how the child is thinking and consider how to respond. If the comment is directed at someone in a public setting, consider whether it might be appropriate to model **respectfully** asking someone about a difference your child noticed. Many people will be happy to help your child engage in a learning moment — though keep in mind they are never obligated to do so!

When you know better, do better — as your circumstances allow. While you may not engage in all of these practices consistently, if we hold ourselves accountable to routinely doing what we can, our kids, families, and communities will all do better.



2. Frame human difference as positive

- From early in our children’s lives, we can consciously counteract the common message that different = bad, and instead frame human diversity as a strength and something to be valued. We can do this by bringing books, toys, and decor into the home or classroom that highlight diversity, and also by being mindful of the way we talk about difference (“We’re all different, and that is what makes human beings so beautiful as a group!” “Wow, it’s so interesting to get to know someone whose life is so different from mine!” “Raya’s family celebrates this holiday. How cool is that?”). Check out Jess Hong’s book, [Lovely](#), for young children.
- If a child calls someone or something ‘weird,’ we can question that framing (“Hmm, is that ‘weird,’ or is it just different?” “It might seem a little weird because it’s not what we’re used to, but it’s really just a different way of...”).
- Recognize the difference between egalitarianism — the belief that all people should be equal — and colorblindness. We all (including children) see skin color and notice race; not talking about them doesn’t change that. Rather, not talking about race communicates to children that there is something bad about racial differences and hinders our ability to engage race-based inequities and injustices. We can communicate our beliefs that all people feel love, pain, friendship, etc., and our desire to live in a world where all people are treated with dignity, respect, and fairness, while also acknowledging that people ARE treated differently and have different experiences based on race, skin color, and culture. In short: human difference is beautiful and we are all part of the human family, but race does matter in people’s lives. Talk about both of these realities.

3. Explore difference in many domains.

There are many different ways to explore racial and cultural differences with children. Here are just a few ideas:

- It’s worth saying over and over again: Books are an incredible way to explore and spark conversation about difference with young children. Spend time looking at pictures and illustrations. Ask children

what they see. For infants and toddlers, in particular, model out loud and follow their nonverbal signals (like pointing to a particular illustration). Remember that reading the books is not enough; the key is engaging in conversation with kids about characters, images, and emotions and explicitly noting connections to race.

- Movies, TV, and videos also offer many opportunities to talk about people and characters featured. What do they look like? Who is the main character and who is supporting? Are all princesses White? Do they have to be? Do we see examples of princesses, doctors, families, and superheroes who look as diverse as the human family?
- Consider toys and classroom and home decor (like artwork and fabrics) that draw from different cultures (while keeping in mind the difference between [cultural appreciation and appropriation](#)). Buy directly from artists and crafters who are members of the community from which the design or style originates.
- Find authentic ways to expose children to a range of music and languages they are less familiar with, and follow your curiosities about where they come from.
- Expose children to a wide variety of foods, whether you're cooking at home, getting takeout, having dinner at a friend's house, or eating in a restaurant. Early exposure can help children appreciate the tastes and textures of different cuisines — and be less likely to think later on that these are “weird” or “gross.”
- Bring children to museums and cultural events to explore the histories and especially the modern-day cultures of different groups. Remember to bring a critical lens along to reflect on whether these spaces are created by members of the community in question and whether they portray these cultures as multidimensional and complex.
- Provide tools for children to explore race through their artwork. Consider which friends and family members you prompt your child to draw and what images are available around them as models. Make sure they have materials that represent a wide range of skin tones. Try starting with a material other than white paper (e.g., brown grocery bags). Get other ideas from our [Drawing Across the Color Line webinar and action guide](#).
- For educators, consider representation of many different backgrounds in the images and language posted in your classroom, the names you use in assignments and test questions, and of course, in the curriculum you use.

4. Appreciate many kinds of difference.

- Though at EmbraceRace we focus on children's racial learning, truly embracing diversity means appreciating all kinds of difference. Many other social identities intersect with race to shape our lived experience. Exploring and celebrating difference across all these domains helps solidify the message that each person is unique and we should strive toward inclusivity for all. Together with children, [practice generating questions about other people's experiences!](#)
- Consider [differently-abled bodies](#). Talking about the physical differences associated with race, like skin color, hair, and facial features, naturally extends to acknowledging that all bodies are different. Physical differences are often related to different experiences of the world, but regardless of difference we should treat everyone with kindness and respect, and think about their unique needs. Check out books that highlight the strengths and personalities of people with disabilities, like [Just Ask!](#) by Justice Sonia Sotomayor and Rafael López. For more ideas, consult your librarian and check out the [Disability booklist](#) from Social Justice Books!

- Consider [neurodiversity](#). Some differences we can't necessarily see, but people have different ways of processing and interacting with others, including folks with autism, sensory processing differences, Down's syndrome, and learning differences. Remember that you don't need to be an expert on particular topics to explore and learn about them with your child. Check out books like [A Friend for Henry](#) by Jenn Bailey and Mika Song. For more ideas, consult your librarian and check out the [Disability booklist](#) from Social Justice Books!
- Consider [gender identity and expression](#). Helping children embrace difference means challenging common messages that boys and girls have to look or act a certain way and pushing their thinking beyond the gender binary. Asking questions is a good way to do this. Check out books that challenge traditional gender norms, like [Julián Is a Mermaid](#) by Jessica Love. For more ideas, consult your librarian and check out the [Gender Identity booklist](#) from Social Justice Books!
- Consider linguistic diversity. In the U.S., approximately [22% of children speak a language other than English at home](#) (most commonly Spanish, but [many others as well](#)), a figure that will likely continue to grow. Research suggests that bilingualism may be related to greater ability to choose what to pay attention to, flexible thinking, and might even be protective against dementia (including Alzheimer's disease) in later life. Even if they are not learning multiple languages fluently, children will benefit socially from an appreciation of the great variation in how humans communicate and express themselves. Check out books that incorporate multiple languages, like [Otsaliheliga: We Are Grateful](#) by Traci Sorell and titles from Social Justice Books' [Spanish/Bilingual Booklist](#).
- Consider religious and spiritual diversity. Children get powerful messages early on that certain religions are more accepted and welcomed over others. Helping children embrace differences across religion and spirituality can help decrease intolerance and violence that is often the result of "othering" and fearing what is unfamiliar. Encourage respectful curiosity about different religious traditions and holiday, or even what people wear to express their faith (e.g., hijab, yarmulke, etc.). Check out books like [The Proudest Blue](#) by Ibtihaj Muhammad and titles from Social Justice Books' [Muslim](#) and [Jewish Identity and History](#) booklists.

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EmbraceRace is a multiracial community of parents, teachers, experts, and other caring adults who support each other to meet the challenges that race poses to our children, families, and communities. We welcome your participation.

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