

Discussing Differences

Relevant Satellite Accreditation Standards

IV. Supporting Children's Development

D. The provider assures respect for the diversity that exists within the community.

2. The provider models positive regard for all differences and responds warmly and factually to children's feelings or questions about them.



The Basics

Humans evolved to cooperate with one another and create social groups, and therefore children are keen observers of others' characteristics, behaviors, and abilities. Our brains naturally recognize *familiar* (I've come across this before and know what to expect) and *novel* social information (this is new for me, and I should pay more attention). Children notice similarities and differences in physical characteristics (such as eye shape, hair, and skin color), physical abilities, and language beginning in infancy.

Why should we talk about differences? How adults respond to children's curious questions and statements about others impacts their perception of *diversity*, or differences in physical characteristics, abilities, behaviors, language, identities, and beliefs among people. When adults avoid early conversations about diversity, toddlers and preschoolers internalize (often inaccurate or harmful) beliefs about differences (Sullivan, 2020). Exposure to and discussion of differences among people in a factual, positive way increases children's empathy towards and inclusion of those who look, speak, act, or think differently than themselves (Alonge, 2024). When similarities and differences are discussed openly, children learn to...

- **celebrate** what makes everyone unique, including themselves and their own identity.
- recognize differences among people as a **normal**, natural part of life.

How can I discuss differences? Educators play an important role in normalizing and celebrating diversity in their program and the broader community. Below are strategies for educators to use when talking about differences among people.

- Be factual, direct, and honest – *“You have blonde hair, and your friend has black hair. You both have brown eyes!”* or *“You are right. My skin tone is lighter than yours. There are so many different skin tones. We both love pancakes for breakfast. We are the same and different in many ways.”*
- Model respect for diversity among people – *“He uses a wheelchair to help him move around. Everyone’s body is different!”*
- Welcome conversation – *“You noticed your friend is using headphones. Those help keep their body calm. What helps keep your body calm?”*
- Incorporate books and materials that represent diversity – *“You noticed our book character has two dads. Some children have two dads. Every family is unique.”*

I want to learn more!

- [PBS KIDS Talk About Differences and Similarities](#) (Video)
- [We are different, we are the same: Teaching young children about diversity](#) (Resource)
- [Celebrating the Differences That Make All Children Unique!](#) (Article)
- [Talking to Children About Racial Bias](#) (Article)
- [Activities that Promote Racial and Cultural Awareness](#) (Article)

Books available through Satellite’s lending library:

(for Satellite participating programs only)

- *Spotlight on Young Children: Equity and Diversity* (Gillanders, 2019)
- *The Exceptional Child: Inclusion in Early Childhood Education* (Allen, 1996)
- *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (Derman-Sparks, 2010)

