

RESEARCH NOTES

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Children are remarkably good at observing differences in the world. This is an important developmental learning strategy. Adults can support children as they make sense of differences by talking to them about what they observe.

THE TAKE HOME:

1. Noticing differences between objects, people, and places is part of child development.
2. Adults can support children's learning by encouraging them to notice and reflect on differences in the world.
3. Children use their observations to figure out how they should treat others and how others should treat them.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

- Children notice differences in the world around them all the time. This is a useful strategy as children learn about the world. Through this process of critical observation, infants begin to form categories. For example, detecting differences in the leaves on a tree helps children learn about nature. Noticing differences between people helps children construct their own social identity.
- Talking about differences is an effective way to decrease biases and racism. Research shows that taking a “color-blind” approach, or pretending that differences do not exist, is not effective. In fact, if adults don't help children process their observations, children will create their own ideas about what these differences mean.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- Children may ask why one leaf on a tree is brown and the rest are green. Or they might ask about differences in people around them, such as skin color, daily practices and routines, language, and physical abilities. When they say, “that woman talks funny” they are really just letting you know that they notice something different. Adults can help children make sense of the differences they notice.
- When adults encourage children's natural tendency to notice differences, they let children know that it is ok to make observations about the world. This relates to children's later ability to use the inquiry cycle and scientific reasoning.
- Adults' actions influence children's attitudes about differences more than what they say. For example, look for children's books that represent children of different genders, cultural group, and abilities. This conveys to children that all genders, cultural groups, and abilities are valued.



TRY THIS!

- Reflect on your engagement with parents and colleagues when cultural differences are noticed or pointed out. Not all adults feel comfortable talking about racial and cultural differences for various reasons. Adults can use tools such as self-reflection, peer-reflection, and reflective supervision to think and talk through their own experiences of feeling different in order to help children process what they are observing.
- Recognize when children notice differences between people and guide the discussion. For example, if a child says that a peer's wheelchair makes him "look like a robot," you can say, "some people use wheelchairs to get around, some people use their feet. Both are able to go where they want to go! But people in wheelchairs are people just like you." Have a conversation. Be open to children's questions and curiosity about the differences they notice. You do not need to have all of the answers. It is most important to be willing to have a conversation.
- Adults affirm a child's observational skills by encouraging them to notice and reflect on what they see. You or a parent might ask, "what happens when we put this bottle of water in the refrigerator?"
- Read books. Talk about differences that appear in the books you read with children. You could say, "this girl has red hair. Her hair looks different than the brown hair on this girl. I also have brown hair. You have blonde hair. Hair comes in many colors."
- Incorporate activities associated with diverse cultures, genders, and physical and mental abilities into your planned learning experiences. Invite children and families to identify culturally relevant toys in their home.
- Reflect on your personal biases and worldview. How do they influence your work? Reflecting on personal biases and worldview encourages vulnerability and change, both personally and professionally.

LEARN MORE:

HEAD START CHILD HEALTH, OFFICE OF MINORITY HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER

<https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=1&lvlid=3>

SUPPORTING SCHOOL READINESS AND SUCCESS OF YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS PROJECT:
REFLECTIONS ON A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/young-african-american-boys-project-guide.pdf>



CONNECTING AT HOME

TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Noticing differences and similarities in the world is important for children. It's how they learn. Engage children in conversations about differences and similarities between people, places, and things. Be open to their questions and observations.

HAVE A CONVERSATION

Be open to your child's questions and curiosity around differences. Ask them what they think. They will learn by talking with you.

RECOGNIZE AND GUIDE

Guide and support the conversation when your child recognizes differences between people. Your child might notice that her friend's skin is lighter than her skin. You can explain that everyone's skin is a different color, just like our hair color and eye color are unique to us. We are all human, each with a unique set of characteristics.

CONNECT

Talk about your family traditions with your child. Why do you eat the food that you do on certain holidays? What in your home represents your culture? What traditions do you keep? Why are they meaningful? Explore foods and music from other cultures and communities.

READ BOOKS

Go to the library and find a new book. Talk about differences you see in the illustrations. For example, do the characters have different hair colors or styles? What are the differences between cars and trucks and animals?

