

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

Joan E. LeFebvre
Area Family Living Agent
University of Wisconsin-Extension
Vilas, Forest, Florence Counties

Teach Preschoolers How To Resist Bias

During the preschool years, children are developing their own self-identity and their ideas about others. They are learning that they are *like* other people in many ways and *different* in others. What a child learns during the preschool years can help them to form a strong, positive self-concept and grow up to respect and interact comfortably with people different from them-selves. If they don't have these learning experiences, they are likely to take on biases common in our society.

As early as age 2, children begin to see differences in gender, race, ethnicity and ability. They are open to both the positive and negative attitudes their families and society have toward these differences. That's why it's so important for parents and teachers to show their young children how to value, accept and comfortably interact with diverse people.

Typical comments are: "Girls aren't strong." "Boys can't play house." "You're a baby in that wheelchair; you can't walk." "Only light skinned kids can play with us." Many adults find it hard to accept that preschoolers make these kind of statements. But young people absorb values about differences so parents must help them learn how to resist biases and prejudices.

Many parents try to avoid or sidestep their children's natural curiosity about differences. Parents may try to ignore or admonish a child who asks why a person is in a wheelchair or has a different skin color. But these are opportunities to explain why people are different, and teach children that being different doesn't make them better or worse than anyone else.

By ignoring children's curiosity and refusing to explain differences, parents teach their kids that some differences are not acceptable. Because they aren't given the information to attach positive value to specific differences, children are left to absorb the biases of society.

Many of us feel uncomfortable with the idea that we live in a biased society that places value on people according to their differences. It's tempting to try to deny important differences between people by telling our children that "people are all the same." But that's not reality.

There are steps parents and teachers can take to help children resist bias:

- ▶ Provide books, dolls, toys, television programs and pictures that reflect diverse images that children may not see else-where. Examples are: women in non-traditional roles; people of color in leadership roles; and people with disabilities doing activities familiar to children.
- ▶ Show your children that you value diversity in the friends you choose and in the people and companies you choose for various services, such as physicians, car mechanics, and teachers.
- ▶ Make a family rule that it is unacceptable to tease someone because of his or her identity. Try to find out why a child feels a bias, while supporting the child who has been hurt.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for children to interact with other children who are racially or culturally different and with people who have various disabilities. If these opportunities are unavailable in your community, look for them in schools, after-school activities, day camps, places of worship and cultural events.

- ▶ Talk positively about your child's physical characteristics and cultural background. Tell stories about people from your ethnic group of whom you are especially proud. Include people who have stood up against bias and injustice. Help children learn the difference between feelings of superiority and feelings of self-esteem and pride in their heritage.
- ▶ Respectfully listen to and answer children's questions about themselves and others. Do not ignore questions, change the subject or admonish.
- ▶ Teach children to recognize stereotypes and caricatures of different groups. Young children can become adept at spotting unfair descriptions in books and on television.

Research shows that the acquisition of racial attitudes follows a pattern similar to that of any other aspect of intellectual and social development. First is the awareness of differences; second is learning the language to describe differences; and third is a fuller understanding of what attributes belong to different groups of people. Two main pitfalls of this developmental process are the formation of stereotypes and hostility. Stereotyping refers to the tendency to attribute characteristics to an individual, which he may or may not have, simply on the basis of his race or other group membership. This kind of categorization is typical and normal for a preschooler and is a function of their as yet limited intellectual capacities. Racial hostility most often develops as a result of attitudes picked up from parents, people in the neighborhood, the media, etc. However, in young children it is also related to some extent to their need to feel that they belong.

Let your youngster's reactions, comments, questions be your guide to introducing new information, experiences and ideas.

"Why is that girl in a wheelchair?"

Inappropriate

"Shh, it's not nice to ask." (admonishing)

"I'll tell you another time." (sidestepping)

Acting as if you didn't hear the question. (avoiding)

Appropriate

"She is using a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her move around."

"Why is Jamal's skin so dark?"

Inappropriate

"His skin color doesn't matter. We are all the same underneath." This response denies the child's question, changing the subject to one of similarity when the child is asking about a difference.

Appropriate

"Jamal's skin is dark brown because his mom/dad (or birth mom/dad) has dark brown skin." This is enough for 2 or 3 year olds. As children get older, you can add an explanation of melanin: "We all have a special chemical in our skin called melanin. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is dark. If you have only a little, your skin is light. How much melanin you have in your skin depends on how much your parents have in theirs."

"Why does Miyoko speak funny?"

Inappropriate

"Miyoko can't help how she speaks. Let's not say anything about it." This response implies agreement with the child's comment that Miyoko's speech is unacceptable, while also telling the child to "not notice," and be polite.

Appropriate

"Miyoko doesn't speak funny, she speaks differently than you do. She speaks Japanese because that's what her mom and dad speak. You speak English like your mom and dad. It is okay to ask questions about what Miyoko is saying, but it is not okay to say that her speech sounds funny because that can hurt her feelings."

Our children are living in a society in which diversity is an ever increasing reality. Omitting to teach our children to counter biases ill equips them to live effectively and fairly with diversity.

Sources:

Louise Derman-Sparks, Maria Gutierrez, and Carol Brunson Phillips, "Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias" National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1989.
Peg Thomas, UW-Extension Family Living Agent, "Parents Can Teach Preschoolers How to Resist Bias," 1994.

Author: Joan E. LeFebvre, Professor, Department of Family Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
 Reviewer: Vicki Washington, Assistant to the Chancellor for Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Madison

For more information on Parenting and Child Development, contact: JOAN E. LEFEBVRE, Area Family Living Agent, University of Wisconsin-Extension, P O Box 369, Courthouse, Eagle River WI 54521, 715-479-3653, FAX 715-479-3605, E-Mail joan.lefebvre@ces.uwex.edu
 March, 1996

Updated August, 1997