

13 Tips on How to Talk to Children About Diversity and Difference



Talking about other people's differences with children can be extremely awkward. In fact, many parents equate having a conversation about a passerby's disability to be like having the sex talk. However, if you're a parent who aspires to raise children with a deep capacity for inclusion, these uncomfortable conversations are inevitable.

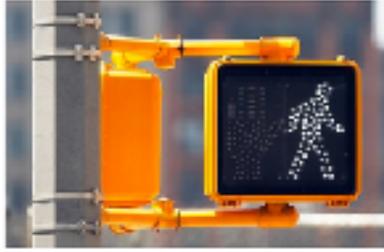
Exposure to diversity is an important practice. But keep in mind, research shows that regular contact with or proximity to diversity does not actually result in learning. Exposure can normalize that diversity and make it feel more acceptable, but it doesn't necessarily mean children will be able to explain or make sense of the diversity. That's where you come in.

Below are 13 tips to managing the "diversity talk" when it comes up -- and trust me, it will.

1. Talk about diversity in the same way you would talk about safety.

When it comes to teaching safety, most parents get it. You talk about safety, you demonstrate it, you ask your kids to spell it back to you. AND you don't care if it might seem a bit over the top. The priority is their safety. According to Marguerite Wright, psychologist and author of *I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children*, "If you don't acknowledge differences, you fail to prepare your child to live in a multiethnic society." That adage is true for gender identity, disability, Indigenous People and transphobia.

When it comes to safety, we know that children learn more over time: the short-term goal is to establish basic literacy; the medium-term goal is to practice safe behaviours; and the long-term goal is the ability to make decisions that result in their safety.



Short-Term:
Basic safety
literacy.



Medium-Term:
Able to practice
safe behaviour.

Long-Term:
Able to make
decisions that
result in safety.

Talking about diversity is exactly the same:

- The short-term goal is to establish basic literacy about race, gender, disability, respect, empathy, etc.;
- The medium-term goal is to learn inclusive behaviours and language; and
- The long-term goal is using inclusive language and practicing inclusive behaviours.

2. It's OK to be afraid, but get over it.

The fear of bringing people's differences up is really no different from the sex talk. If you had parents who were good at it (and few were), then it's more likely that you have the vocabulary and experience of talking about sex. Similarly, many parents are nervous that the sex talk will encourage their children to become more sexual. That's a silly proposition because almost all parents are already in a losing battle with media. But, as a result, many parents avoid the talk. Not talking about sex leaves your children unprepared to make good decisions about their sexual health. Worse, avoidance can leave an imprint on children that talking about sex is taboo.

Similarly, the anxiety of talking about race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and disability, for example, can come from a lack of communication in our own childhoods. It can also come from the fear of sounding like a bigot. The solution is very simple: get informed, learn the language and terms, and grow some confidence about the topics. Talking about people's diversity does heighten children's awareness: it gives them a maturity about things like race and disability.

A lot of kids don't have the freedom of *not being aware* of their difference. It's on their minds all the time because it affects their mobility and how they are perceived by others and themselves. Not having to consider how those around

you will treat you because of you skin colour, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression or faith is what is known as "privilege".

3. Intentionally look for teaching moments and material.

Actively look for subtle openings that create the opportunity for you to talk about diversity. I encourage parents to use the moments and material already at their disposal: events, advertising and pointing out bad behaviour.

EVENTS

We are blessed to live in a place where diversity is regularly celebrated in public events. Take your kids.

ADVERTISING

Ask your kids why they think you're crying as you watch those tear-jerker Tim Hortons commercials.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4hnQs0w_LU

POINT OUT BAD BEHAVIOUR

Do you point out when your see kids riding their bikes without a helmet? Same thing.



4. Match the message to your audience.

This is Communications 101. A deep history lesson about the racist origins of the children's song "Ten Little Indians" is lost on anyone below the age of a parent. Knowing that history is for you, so you have the conviction to say, "Just don't sing it. It's a terrible song." Ensure your message is appropriate for the age and capacity of the child you are addressing.

Teaching inclusive language should be just like teaching manners or grammar. As children get older, we can add to the understanding of why we never use the word "Aboriginals" or "disabled" to refer to someone. In the beginning, we just establish the habit of using inclusive language like "Aboriginal person" or "person with a disability".

5. Accept that your child will say discriminatory things, and that doesn't mean your child is racist.

Don't over-react to their comments or questions. BUT, don't ignore it either. According to Susan Linn, a psychologist at the Judge Baker Children's Center at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Talking to Children about Racism, Prejudice and Diversity*, the key is responding in a non-judgemental way. There are also a few key phrases that will help:

- "Let's talk about that for a minute ..."
- "What made you notice that?"
- "What made you say that"

Don't be afraid to apologize for something they've said, and when appropriate, privately talk to your child about their language.

6. Teach your kids how to use inclusive language by discouraging and avoiding labeling.

This will require some practice, because you likely use labels like race all the time. Use people's names or use the most neutral descriptors possible. Be specific.

Labels generally carry complex meaning, like the term Canadian or Asian. There is a subtle difference between referring to someone as the "Asian kid", versus "that child from Asia." The first has assumptions about their identity, which might not be true, especially if that "Asian kid" is actually born in Canada. Maybe what you actually mean is that "Asian looking kid" or that "kid whose family is from Asia"?

If all this seems complex, it's because it is. Refer to people by their names. Take the time to think about how you would explain to your child that labels cause us to lose sight of the person and their individuality, and focus on the label

(for adults, we refer to this as stereotyping). Children understand uniqueness. It's what makes them special.

7. Use respectful language.

This is especially true when referring to ethnicity, gender identity and expression, indigenous people, and especially when talking about disability. According to Varda Epstein, writer on kars4kids.org:

“When talking to kids about disabilities it’s important to use the right terminology. Children are always watching and listening, so we need to be careful with our speech. For instance, it’s important to make a distinction between the disability and the person who lives with it. It’s better, for instance, to speak of someone as “having autism” or being “on the autism spectrum” as opposed to saying, “He’s autistic.”

If you’re not sure of the proper terminology to describe a disability, Mobility International USA has a [helpful tip sheet](#).

Unfortunately, kids also pick up on what they hear from their friends. If you hear your child using a derogatory term for a person with a disability, for instance, “Retard,” firmly correct your child, explaining that the term is hurtful. You might say, “How would you feel if you had an intellectual disability and someone called you a retard?”

8. Break down "them and us" by pointing out similarities.

When setting the stage for cross-cultural interaction or dialogue, the first goal is establishing a strong sense of commonality. This is true with our own children, because it is in the imagined similarity that children (and adults) begin to build empathy for others. Children will not be able to talk about cultural or personal differences in a non-judgemental way unless they have some sense of similarity.

9. When talking to children about disability, emphasize strengths.

Don't ignore disabilities. Pretending they are not noticeable is a disservice to both those with disabilities and your child. If another child requires a support or accommodation because of a disability, having ignored that disability will make it harder for your child to understand why the support is needed. Worse, they will think the support is unfair or unnecessary.

Children notice physical and intellectual disabilities in other children and adults. What they don't automatically do is judge them as a weakness or strength. It is up to you to help build a non-judgemental response to the differences. This is best achieved by focusing on people's strengths. This is what is meant by "seeing past someone's disability."



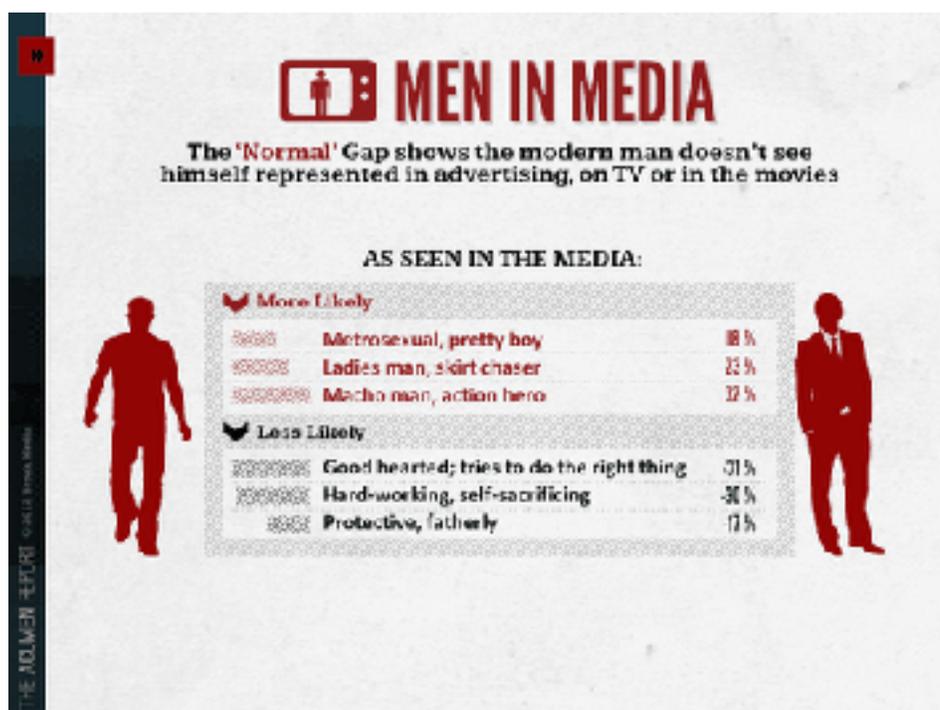
Fortunately, throughout Canada, school age children learn about one of Canada's greatest heroes, Terry Fox. Pictures of Terry Fox running are likely the most prominent image of a person with a disability in our minds. He is not remembered as a person with a disability, but for his heroic effort to raise awareness about cancer.

10. Filter television media, and talk about what your child sees.

Children's television programs are generally more visually diverse, often featuring more visible diversity. According to Ziba Kashaf, author on babycenter.com:

"The media too often transmits stereotypes and distortions regarding race. While school-age kids understand that TV is not reality, they easily pick up on subtle messages about race and culture, so step in to challenge any racial stereotypes you see. If a news story about a racially charged incident comes on, take it as a "teaching moment" to discuss tolerance."

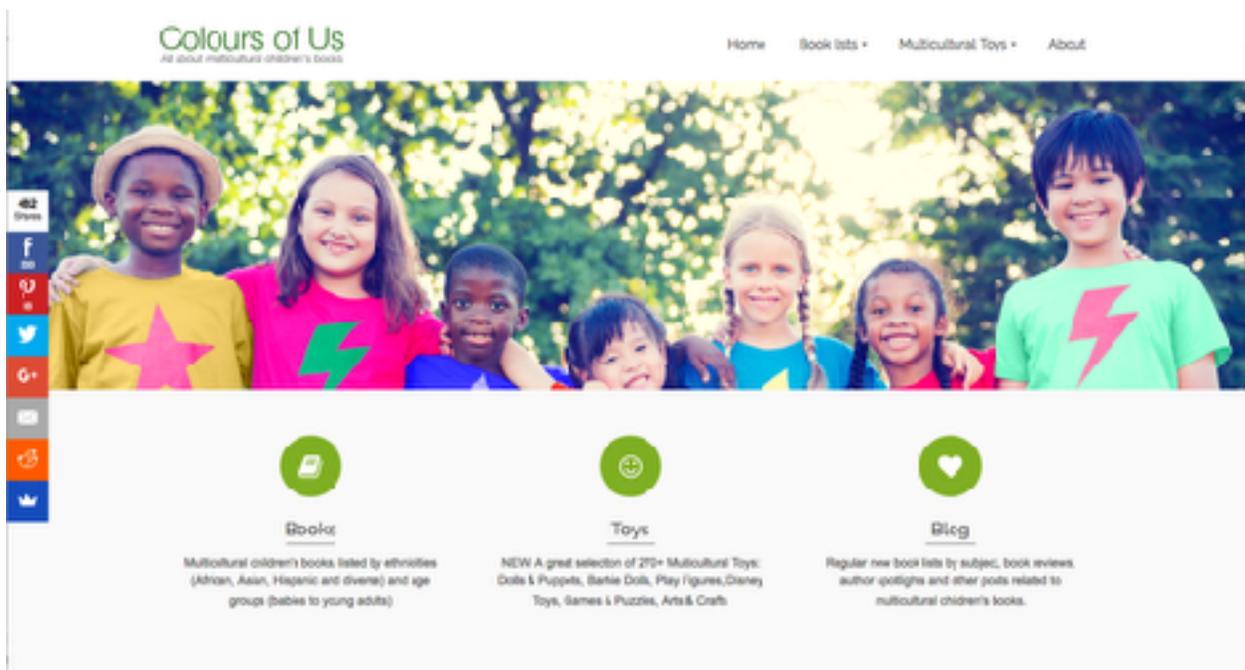
Stereotypes in media are often subtle and created over time and extended exposure. Having some literacy around common everyday stereotyping is an important part of media consumption, beginning with you as a parent.



11. Seek out diversity in media.

According to researchers on unconscious bias, **exposure to counter-stereotypical images is the most impactful intervention of unconscious bias**. If you're a family that watches a lot of television, don't let all those judgemental parents who hermetically seal their kids from TV get to you. You're not alone. That said, when children are exposed to a lot of media messages (and mine are), you will want to disrupt the unconscious stereotyping that they're being exposed to. Seek out children's books and movies that offer counter-stereotypical images. Building that habit of seeking out media that reflects the diversity of the world will be good for you and them.

The website **Colours of Us** is an endless resource of books and toys that reinforce multiculturalism and pluralism.



12. Don't over do it.

Over-parenting is a real issue today. Over-talking about anything (including safety) can actually cause adults and children to tune you out. Keep it casual and let the children's books do the heavy lifting for you. Most importantly, we know that children listen to what you do, far more than what you say.

13. Model inclusive behaviour and language.

Children learn through observational learning or imitation before they can even speak. In fact, I have learned so much about myself from observing the behaviour they have picked up from me. Adjust your behaviour, learn to use

inclusive language, and most of all, be prepared to be rebuked by your kids. It's OK to let them know they're right when they catch you doing or saying something racist, ableist, sexist and homophobic.

More great resources:

- [5 Tips for Talking About Racism With Kids](#)
- [How to talk to your child about race \(ages 5 to 8\)](#)
- [Talking to Kids About Disabilities: 6 Tips \(kars4kids.org\)](#)
- [How to Talk to your Child about Gender](#)

Talking About Sexual Orientation:

Many parents find talking about sexual orientation particularly challenging because they assume it requires having a talk about sex. The following article on everydayfeminism.com helps to dispel that myth:

- [How to Talk to Your Kids About Sexuality and Sexual Orientation](#)
- [How to Support Your Child Who Is Questioning Their Sexual Orientation](#)