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Talking to kids about discrimination

Experts say diversity and discrimination are subjects that need to be addressed with children.

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Discussing discrimination can be hard enough for adults. Talking to kids about the subject can be especially daunting.

People can be discriminated against for any number of reasons, including age, gender, weight, religion, income level, disability, sexual orientation, and race or ethnicity. According to the 2015 APA Stress in America Survey, most Americans feel they have experienced discrimination. However, experiences of day-to-day discrimination are most likely to be reported by racial and ethnic minorities.

Unfortunately, many people are uncomfortable discussing racial differences. But when it comes to talking to children, experts say diversity and discrimination are subjects that shouldn't be ignored.

Children notice

Many people are hesitant to talk to their kids about differences because they don't want to draw attention to them. But whether you talk about those differences or not, kids notice when someone looks different than they do. They also notice when certain groups seem to be treated differently than others.

Studies show that even infants can distinguish skin tones. By early childhood, kids begin to have more favorable opinions of people they perceive as “the same” as they are—even if the similarities are meaningless. In one study, for instance, researchers randomly assigned 6-year-olds to either a green group or an orange group. Later, the kids were more likely to remember positive things about the kids in their own group, and negative things about kids in the other group.¹

When parents avoid talking about differences and discrimination, experts say, children learn that the topic is taboo. Children might come to believe the differences they notice are more important than they really are. And they might be hesitant to ask questions, missing opportunities to challenge and correct stereotypes.

Discussing differences, on the other hand, can help kids appreciate diversity and better recognize discrimination when they see it. In one experiment with 8- to 11-year-olds, researchers read children storybooks that either downplayed racial differences (referred to as a “color-blind” approach) or talked about the value of diversity. Later, when listening to stories that featured examples of racial bias, the children who had read the “color-blind” books were less likely to recognize that bias. Kids who learned about diversity, on the other hand, were better at identifying examples of discrimination.²

The stress of being discriminated against

All children can benefit from talking openly about diversity and bias. But for kids in groups more likely to be a target of discrimination, such conversations can be even more critical.

Perceived discrimination has been linked to physical and mental health problems including anxiety, depression, obesity, high blood pressure, and substance abuse. Many of these problems are believed to stem from the chronic stress associated with being a potential target of discrimination.³

Discrimination-related stress can also affect how kids feel about themselves. It might prevent them from speaking up in class, or from participating in activities that are important to them.

But talking openly with children can prepare them for dealing with discrimination, and help them keep discrimination-related stress in check.

Discussing discrimination

How can you talk to your children about diversity and discrimination? Here are some guidelines to keep in mind.

- Don't expect to have "the talk" about discrimination. It shouldn't be one conversation. Rather, let the discussion be open and ongoing.
- Parents often avoid talking about hard subjects (including sex, underage drinking and discrimination) because they're personally uncomfortable. Keep talking anyway. The discussions get easier over time.
- Use age-appropriate language children can understand, and don't give kids too much information at once. The conversation will get deeper and more nuanced as they get older.

- ■ Learn to respond to children’s questions about differences and bias as they come up naturally. Help children feel that their questions are welcome, or they might come to believe that discussing differences is taboo.
- ■ Help children understand the value of diversity. A diverse set of experiences and viewpoints boosts creativity and helps kids (and adults) better understand the world around them. On the other hand, discrimination hurts everyone—not just the targets of discrimination. When people are discriminated against, we can miss an important opportunity to learn from them.
- ■ Take opportunities to raise discussions based on what you see around you—in real life, books, television shows and even video games. You might ask: “There aren’t many female characters in this video game. What do you think of that?” or “Do you think that show accurately portrays LGBT characters, or does it rely on stereotypes?”
- ■ Help kids learn how to deal with being the potential target of discrimination. Plan ahead by developing healthy comebacks or responses to hurtful discriminatory statements. For example: “What an unkind thing to say.” “Excuse me? Could you repeat that?” “I disagree with you, and here’s why...”
- ■ If you hear children say something discriminatory, don’t just hush them. Use the opportunity as a conversation starter to address their fears and correct their misperceptions.
- ■ Challenge your own assumptions and behavior. Do you laugh at racially insensitive jokes? Do you cross the street to avoid passing people of a different ethnic group? Children learn from your actions as well as your words.
- ■ Broaden their horizons. Think about the diversity of your own friendship and parenting networks and the places where you spend time. When kids are exposed to people from diverse backgrounds, they have more opportunities to learn about others and discover what they have in common.

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