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Answering Children's Questions about Peers with Special Needs

by Victoria Youcha and Karren Ikeda Wood

It was the fourth of July and all the neighborhood families gathered to watch fireworks. Sara's mother noticed her staring at a little boy on the blanket next to them. He didn't have arms and was using his feet to play with toys and eat his dinner. Sara pulled her arms inside her T-shirt and took off her shoes. She tried to use her feet to play with her toys. Sara's mother said to her, "I see you noticed that boy doesn't have arms. He uses his feet well to eat and play, doesn't he?" On the way home, Sara commented to her mother, "He really does have arms, doesn't he, mom? They're just inside his shirt, right?" Sara was still trying to understand what she saw.

Children and adults notice and comment when they see a person who looks or acts differently. If you respond to questions about disabilities with clear and accurate information, you let children know that it is acceptable to talk openly about differences. Your words provide a positive model they can use to talk sensitively and respectfully about differences and disabilities. Your answers help them learn about and understand those differences. Talking about differences, including disabilities, helps ALL children and their families.

Your children embody diversity. By acknowledging and accepting variations in age, language, race, size, religion, family composition, and cultural background, you help everyone see both similarities and variations. A disability becomes just one more difference.

What Children Notice

Infants and toddlers notice obvious differences in physical appearance, especially faces that are different. For example, some babies will cry when a stranger approaches, such as a man with a beard who looks different from their clean shaven father.

Two and three year olds notice other differences but don't always have the verbal ability to ask questions or comment on what they see. They may indicate this awareness through their facial expressions or behavior. For example, you may notice a child with a concerned look on her face when she sees a child return after having the chicken pox. A child may also be unwilling to sit near another child whose differences bother him.

Older children both observe and comment on differences, especially notably visible ones. These may be physical abilities, such as the way a person walks, or characteristics, such as size or the absence of limbs. As children become more sophisticated, they notice differences in behavior and language, such as frequent temper tantrums, crying, or unusual speech.

Children don't automatically think that differences are bad, but they do ask questions and make comments as they try to make sense of what they see. They look to the adults around them for reactions. It is up to you, the teacher, to lead the way.

People First Language

When you talk about a child with a disability, it is important to emphasize the person before the special need. A label or diagnosis does not tell you about who someone is, what they are like, what they think, or what they can do. Say "children who are deaf" or "the woman who is blind." Using a descriptive term may give more information that a diagnosis — "Jenny has trouble walking" rather than "Jenny has cerebral palsy."

The same rule applies when you talk about any equipment or devices that a person with a disability uses.

Refer to a person who "uses a wheelchair" instead of saying "she is wheelchair-bound." Talk about a child who "wears a hearing aid," rather than an "aided child."

Use the correct name for the disability. For example, Down syndrome is the accepted term rather than mongoloid. Try to avoid generalizations that tend to glorify the disability, such as "retarded children are always so happy." There is as much variation among people with disabilities as there is within the general population. Describing the disability does not describe the person.

Answering Children's Questions

Know how to respond to embarrassing questions. Children ask questions about things they can see and experience directly. As a teacher or a parent, you have probably been asked difficult questions by children. Children are quite candid and may make comments which surprise you. Be prepared! Children ask questions to learn about their world and satisfy their inquiring minds. They ponder answers you give them, and may come back with even more questions. Not responding to a question may lead the child to believe that what they asked should not be discussed. For example, if a child in your classroom asks, "What's the matter with her?" simply state that "There's nothing the matter. Amy is not able to walk, so she uses a special chair to get around." You can help children understand about a classmate who is blind by explaining that "Miguel's eyes don't work well, so he uses his ears and hands to know where things are." This is your opportunity to communicate positive values about differences.

Be brief and factual. Children absorb information in small doses. They may want a simple explanation without extensive details. Your responses should be direct and concrete with examples that they can understand. A child may ask, "How come he can't talk?" You might answer, "Johnny doesn't talk with words, but he can talk with his hands. Here, let me show you." "How come she's so short?" "Laurie's body grows more slowly. No one in our class is exactly the same size. We all grow differently."

Use concrete words. Use descriptive words that a child will understand. Try to relate the explanation to a child's own experiences. For example, "Remember when you wore earmuffs in the winter and it was hard to hear what I was saying? That's what Jennifer hears most of the time." "Think about what you see at night. It's dark and you can only see shapes and a little light, that's what seeing is like for Michael."

Answer the feeling behind the question or the unasked question. Look at the expression on a child's face and watch her body language. Listen to the tone of her voice. Does she have a question but not know how to ask it? Remember that children notice differences even if they don't always talk about them. Children sometimes have a hard time finding the words to express what they are thinking. You may have to voice the questions when you see a child react but not ask. If a child looks fearful and shies away from a person, you might comment, "That man's hand looks scary to you, doesn't it?" You might see a child staring. This is an opportunity to use the "some children" technique. For example, you can say, "Some children wonder if wearing a brace hurts," or "Some children wonder how you get into a car in a wheelchair. Do you wonder about that?" Then you can provide the answer. You can say, "Sometimes a person has to be picked up and moved into the car. Sometimes a person is able to stand and sit down in the car. Some people have special cars and the wheelchair rolls into the car."

Name the feelings. Differences can be frightening or upsetting when they are not understood. You can help by acknowledging and labeling children's reactions. For example, "I noticed you didn't want to sit next to Brian.

Communicating Positive Values

1. **Communicate dignity and respect for each individual.** Help children verbalize their feelings and think about how others feel. Let children know that even though each of them is different, they are all valued and important members of the class.

2. **Acknowledge differences.** Children notice differences all the time. You can acknowledge those differences and provide simple, factual explanations in a matter-of-fact and caring tone of voice.

3. **Focus on similarities.** Find common ground to help children see what they share and recognize that a disability is just one part of a person. For example, you can talk about everyone who has a brother, or who likes ice cream.

4. **Emphasize each child's abilities.** This helps children recognize that although they are each different, they are all capable and important. Talk about the things each child does well, then talk about things that are hard to learn.

It scares me when he screams. Does it scare you, too? He needs our help to learn to use words. Let's tell him that his screaming frightens us." In another situation, "I know it makes you sad when Felicia won't play with you, but right now Felicia can't run. She needs to rest. Let's invite her to play after nap time."

Model empathy and caring. Children learn by watching others and noting their reactions. They hear how words are spoken and see how attitudes are demonstrated through facial expression and body language. By being a caring empathetic teacher, you will demonstrate that these are qualities that you value in others. "We are going to walk down the hallway in pairs quietly. It helps the children in the other classes to work if we are quiet. Be good friends and remind each other how to walk quietly."

Privacy and Confidentiality

All families have the right to privacy and confidentiality about personal information given to the program. Let everyone know that personal information will not be disclosed without specific permission. Although there may be questions about the child with disabilities from parents or other staff, classroom staff must not disclose any information about the child or family unless specific permission has been given by the family.

Families should be informed at the time of enrollment that your program is open to all children, including those with special needs. Parents of children with disabilities have been answering questions about their children since they were born. Ask them for suggestions about how to answer questions. Some children with disabilities are also used to being asked questions and would prefer to give their own answers.

All children deserve courtesy and respect and should be valued for who they are. Children with disabilities are more alike than different from other children. Teachers can help children value each other by communicating positively about differences, including disabilities, and answering children's questions appropriately.

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This article is based on material from the authors' new book, *Child Care and the ADA: A Handbook for Inclusive Programs* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1995). For orders, call (800) 638-3775.

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