

You are currently browsing the ADL archive website.
Consider visiting our [new website](#) !



What to Tell Your Child About Prejudice and Discrimination

Introduction

The population of our nation is becoming increasingly diverse. Here are some suggestions to help your child get along with people of varied backgrounds and abilities in the United States today.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, **people of color are expected to grow from 30.9 percent of the population in 2000 to 36.2 percent of the population in 2020.** For Americans younger than 40, there are 2 white people for every person of color. Among children younger than 10 years old, the ratio is 1.5 to 1. Thus our schools are increasingly educating children who come from a wide range of backgrounds, abilities, and experiences. And the workforce of the near future will be composed of a majority of women and people of color.

While today's changing demographics are compelling, historically the United States has always been challenged to find effective ways for its diverse populations to live and work well together. To ensure their potential for success, **we must prepare all children to live and work harmoniously and productively alongside others who represent various and many racial and cultural groups, backgrounds and abilities in our society.** One of the greatest obstacles to creating such a future is prejudice. While many of us would like to believe that prejudice is a problem of the past, this is not the case. Incidents of prejudice and discrimination occur every day. For example, on a daily basis:

- Some people are called hurtful names or are excluded from participating in events;
- Some people are unfairly excluded from jobs, neighborhoods, bank loans, educational opportunities, social events and clubs;
- Some people are attacked and beaten;
- Some people's homes, places of worship, or cemeteries are vandalized; and
- Some people are unfairly paid less than others for doing equal work.

Such instances of discrimination are far from rare. If we are to have a just society, it is up to each of us to take a stand against such unfair practices and attitudes. **We must teach our children that there is no place for prejudice or discrimination in our communities, homes, schools or places of work.**

Learning Prejudice

Despite the best efforts of many parents and teachers, children still learn prejudice and practice discrimination. How does this happen?

Prejudice is learned through living in and observing a society where prejudices exist.

Children's opinions are influenced by what the people around them think, do and say. Even if you, as a parent, are a model of tolerance, your children are still exposed to other people who may not respect differences.

A child may observe that some people won't associate with members of certain groups or that members of some groups rarely, if ever, occupy influential positions in the school or community. A child may overhear some people or groups put down by jokes. **If no one addresses these instances of exclusion, a child may grow up thinking that this is the way it is supposed to be, and that people who have been discriminated against deserve this treatment because they are inferior in some way.** This is why it is so important to address issues of

prejudice and discrimination when and wherever they occur, to point out inequities, and to let children know such ideas and actions are unacceptable in a democratic society.

Media Influence & Self-Image

Children also observe and are exposed to prejudice by watching television, reading books and magazines, or even studying school textbooks that present stereotyped views of various groups of people. In addition to stereotypes, some books present misinformation; others exclude important information about some groups in any positive way. Television shows and books exert undue influence when they are the only exposure a child has to certain groups. Although some improvements have been made, it is not difficult to find TV shows that depict some well-established stereotypes.

Children who have poor self-images are more vulnerable to developing prejudices. They may try to bolster their own worth by finding a group of people whom they can put down. An insecure child might think, "I may not be very good but I am better than those people." For some, putting down others may serve a psychological function, allowing them to feel more important and powerful than those they put down.

Some children may exclude or make fun of others because they believe it is the popular thing to do. Children may begin to use unkind names for different groups if they feel it will help them to be more accepted by their peers. Over time, such actions can result in prejudice and discrimination against specific groups. **All children notice differences. This is developmentally appropriate and, by itself, not a problem; but when negative values are attached to those differences, problems occur.**

Responding to Children's Questions and Comments

Find out more about what your children think in order to know what misconceptions may need to be corrected. After you have determined what they think, respond with a simple, "I'm trying to understand why you said that, but I don't see it that way." Be direct. Be brief. Use language your children will understand. Questions that might be addressed include the following:

"How is a prejudice different from a dislike?"

Prejudice is having an opinion or idea about a member of a group without really knowing that individual. A dislike is based on information about and experiences with a specific individual.

"Why don't people like those people? Why do people call them names?"

One answer could be: "Some people make judgments about a whole group people without knowing very much about them. Sometimes people are afraid of those who seem different from them and, unfortunately, they express that with name-calling and negative treatment. When people grow up with these ideas, sometimes it's hard to get rid of them."

It is important for children to know that they can help to overcome racism, sexism and all forms of bigotry. Show them how the choices they make can help to create a fairer world: "When a lot of children like you grow up, differences will become less and less important, and people will respect each other even for their differences."

"Why do those people look (or act) so funny? Why can't he walk? Why do they believe such strange things?"

Children need to realize that all people are different. It is important to communicate to children that we often think others are different simply because they are unfamiliar to us. We don't think our own beliefs and appearances are strange or funny because they are what we're used to. Point out that we must appear different to others, too.

"I don't like (name of group) people."

Such a comment needs to be handled carefully. It is important that you address such comments without making your children become defensive. With young children, the tone of the discussion should be one of exploring their thinking. A discussion might go as follows:

"You sound as if you know all the people who are (name of group), and that you don't like any of them. You can

only like or dislike people you know. If you don't know someone, you can't have a good reason for liking or not liking them. There are children you may not like to play with, but their skin color (religion, accent, appearance, size, etc.) should have nothing to do with it." Discuss with your children the character traits they look for in their friends, such as kindness, honesty, etc.

"Name-calling? I didn't mean anything!"

Often young children do not know the meaning of the words they use, but they do know that the words will get a reaction from the victim. Children need to learn that such language can hurt other people, and is as bad as throwing rocks. Children who yell a racist or other hurtful name in anger should be talked to right away. They must learn not to throw objects at or say hurtful words to other children. Children need to understand that they have made a mistake and have hurt someone. A discussion might include the following ideas:

"You were angry at Tom and you called him a hurtful name. You need to know that words can hurt. When people get hurt by words, they don't get cuts or bruises on the outside, but they are hurt on the inside. You may have been really upset at something Tom did; but instead of telling him what you didn't like, you called him a word that is used to hurt people. If you told Tom what you didn't like, it might have helped him to change his behavior. Name-calling is unfair. It hurts people, and it doesn't solve anything." Help children think about solutions. Try to elicit a few options from them, and then ask which ones they would like to try. "If you are angry with Tom, what can you do to let him know how you feel without calling him a name?"

In an effort to educate the namecaller, it is important not to ignore the child who has been called hurtful names. Be sure to give time and attention to children who have been victimized by name-calling; they need to be reassured that their race, religion, gender, accent, disability, sexual orientation or appearance do not make them deserving targets.

What Can Parents Do About Prejudice?

- **Accept each of your children as unique and special.** Let your children know that you recognize and appreciate their individual qualities. Children who feel good about themselves are less likely to be prejudiced. Also, notice unique and special qualities in other people and discuss them with your children.
- **Help your children become sensitive to other people's feelings.** Studies indicate that caring, empathic children are less likely to be prejudiced. Share stories and books with your children that help them to understand the points of view of other people. When personal conflicts occur, encourage your children to think about how the other person might be feeling.
- **Make sure your children understand that prejudice and discrimination are unfair.** Make it a firm rule that no person should be excluded or teased on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, accent, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or appearance. Point out and discuss discrimination when you see it.
- **Teach your children respect and an appreciation for differences by providing opportunities for interaction with people of diverse groups.** Studies show that children playing and working together toward common goals develop positive attitudes about one another. Sports teams, bands, school clubs and community programs are examples of activities that can help to counter the effects of homogeneous neighborhoods. In addition to firsthand experiences, provide opportunities for children to learn about people through books, television programs, concerts or other programs that show positive insights into other cultures.
- **Help children recognize instances of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination.** Make sure they know how to respond to such attitudes and behaviors when they see them in action. Television news and entertainment shows, movies and newspapers often provide opportunities for discussion. According to recent studies, encouraging children's critical thinking ability may be the best antidote to prejudice.
- **Encourage your children to create positive change.** Talk to your children about how they can respond to prejudiced thinking or acts of discrimination they observe. Painting over racist graffiti, writing letters to a television producer who promotes stereotyped programming, or confronting a peer's discriminatory behavior are all appropriate actions. Confronting classmates is particularly hard for children, so they need to have a ready made response to such instances. If another child is called a hurtful name, an observer might simply say, "Don't call him/her that. Call him/her by his/her name." Or,

if your child is the victim, "Don't call me that. That's not fair." or "You don't like to be called bad names and neither do I." In all cases, try to help your child to feel comfortable in pointing out unfairness.

- **Take appropriate action against prejudice and discrimination.** For example, if other adults use bigoted language around you or your children, you should not ignore it. Your children need to know that such behavior is unacceptable even if it is from a familiar adult. A simple phrase will do: "Please don't talk that way around me or my children." or "That kind of joke offends me." Adults need to hold themselves to the same standards they want their children to follow.

Definitions

Prejudice:

Attitudes or opinions about a person or group simply because the person belongs to a specific religion, race, nationality, or other group. Prejudices involve strong feelings that are difficult to change. Prejudice is pre-judging. A person who thinks, "I don't want (name of group) living in my neighborhood," is expressing a prejudice.

Discrimination:

When people act on the basis of their prejudices or stereotypes, they are discriminating. Discrimination may mean putting other people down, not allowing them to participate in activities, restricting their access to work or to live in certain neighborhoods, or denying them something they are entitled to by right and law.

Stereotype:

Oversimplified generalization about a group of people. When people say that all members of a specific nationality, religion, race or gender are "cheap," "lazy," "criminal" or "dumb," they are expressing stereotypes. All groups have both cheap and generous individuals. All groups have individuals who commit crimes. To label an entire group based on the actions of some is to engage in stereotyping. Even when a stereotype is positive, such as when people in one racial group are thought to be superior athletes, the consequences of stereotyping are negative.

Scapegoating:

Blaming an individual or group when the fault actually lies elsewhere. Prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory acts can lead to scapegoating.