

HELPING CHILDREN LEARN TOLERANCE

Both research and experience with young children indicate that children notice differences in people from a surprisingly early age. Whether it is skin colour, voices, hair texture, size, or other aspects of appearance, they note them, try to understand and experience them, and sooner or later accept them. In other words, children are not born with prejudices and biases. They accept differences unless or until they are taught differently. And as is the case with so much important learning, children learn attitudes towards difference from the important people around them, from what they observe and experience.

Today more than ever we need to do all that we can to help children grow up with strong convictions and values *and* with comfort with difference. After all, today's terrorists were once children whose potential could have been channeled in many ways. Children today will grow up as citizens of the world. Our interdependence on others both near and far increases rather than decreases. We must ensure that children grow up with skills and sensitivities that help them take their place effectively, comfortably and constructively as global citizens.

This means that in our personal and family life we must go beyond celebrating diversity. Celebrating diversity is fun, pleasurable and it's easy. It's about embracing such things as food, music, stories, craft, dress and holidays and festivals from a variety of cultures. We are very fortunate in Australia that diversity is all around us to be enjoyed.

However if children are to grow up to be effective community members we must go beyond celebrating. Dealing with diversity isn't all fun and celebration.

Honouring diversity is a more appropriate term and concept than *celebrating diversity* to describe what should be happening. *Honouring* includes delighting in the attractive and enriching aspects of difference and goes far beyond that to include engaging in the struggles to come to terms with difference that confronts, that challenges our most fundamental beliefs.

Cultural difference is just one kind of difference. In fact, it may be easier to be respectful of some differences if we can attribute them (whether accurate or not) to cultural background. For example, someone who wants their child to be vegetarian because of religion may be supported more readily than someone who wants that. Someone from a non-Anglo Australian culture who sleeps in the same bed with their young child may be viewed less judgmentally than an Anglo-Australian parent would be who chooses to do the same thing. It is as though in some situations religion or culture or language legitimises differences. There are many categories of diversity, some of them more confronting than cultural diversity.

Thinking of going beyond celebrating to honouring diversity relates to including children with disabilities in the life of the community. It requires acknowledging and addressing the disability and going beyond it to acknowledge the child, the person, who has the disability.

Parents have a critical role to play in helping children to be both alert to and alarmed by racism, bias, discrimination and exclusion, and to translate that alertness and alarm into constructive action to produce a better world.

Parents and families shaping the attitudes of children towards difference, difference of all kinds, and in the times we live in there is hardly anything more important than helping children adopt strong values and also not be threatened by difference.

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