

raise a respectful child

Treating people of all races and backgrounds honorably isn't merely politically correct, it's the right thing to do. by MICHELLE CROUCH

WHEN Julianne Weiner's 4-year-old son, Benjamin, started flipping out about going to preschool, she thought it was typical first-day jitters. Then he told her the reason: "I don't want a teacher with brown skin." Weiner, who is white and lives in a diverse neighborhood in Boyds, Maryland, was horrified and confused. "He had been around people of many races," she says. "Our neighbor, who babysat for Ben when he was a toddler, is African-American. But Ben's new teacher, whom he had met at his orientation, was from Africa, so I think it had to do with her accent." Concerned, Weiner e-mailed a psychologist

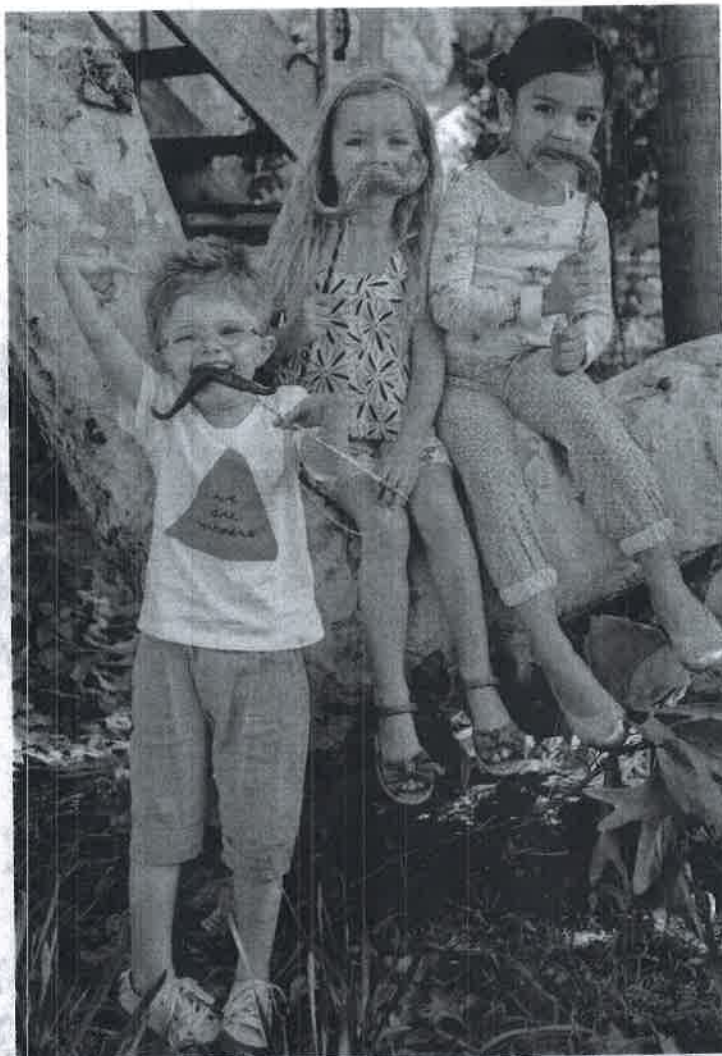
friend, who reassured her that little Ben wasn't being racist.

It's natural for young kids to notice differences in a person's appearance and manner of speaking—and to express curiosity or even fear about them. Many of us can probably share a comparably mortifying moment, whether it was our kid's insensitive comment about someone in a wheelchair or an objectionable question about why a classmate of Asian descent has "squinty" eyes.

Studies have found that infants as young as 3 months instinctively categorize people based on their sex, skin color, and the language they speak. Between 5 and 9 months,

babies begin to learn about race based on experience, according to a study in the journal *Developmental Science*. Research shows that 3- to 5-year-olds not only categorize people by race but express bias based on it. Overcoming these types of inherent prejudice will take a proactive effort on your part, and it needs to start early—before your child's opinions are fully formed.

Tolerance is an absolute necessity in our increasingly global and multicultural society. So-called racial and ethnic minorities now make up the majority of children born in the U.S. By 2043, nearly half of the population will be people of color,



Don't disguise differences—embrace them!

according to U.S. Census projections. Our nation is becoming diverse in other ways too. Islam and Mormonism are among America's fastest-growing religions. Same-sex marriage is legal in 37 states plus the District of Columbia. More than 35 million people now speak Spanish as their primary language at home. And our school system is increasingly placing children with disabilities in regular rather than specialized classrooms.

"Today's kids are going to have to interact with people from many backgrounds and cultures, as well as with those who don't look or act like

they do," says Rebecca Bigler, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, whose research focuses on children's racial attitudes. "Celebrating diversity, not merely tolerating it, is going to be key to their success." She and others share the steps you can take to teach your child how to be open-minded toward others.

👁️ Recognize that your child isn't color-blind

Experts say one big mistake parents make (especially white Americans) is assuming that their children

are unaware of race. "We always hear, 'Oh, my child doesn't even see skin color,'" Dr. Bigler says. "But kids absolutely do notice."

As they grow, children look for cues about what different appearances mean and which ones matter. They quickly realize that some things—whether someone wears a hat, for example—are irrelevant while others, such as sex, are significant because we talk about them constantly ("Boys line up on the left, girls on the right"). What about race? Obviously, we don't say, "Good morning, black and white children," or "Asians, go get your backpacks." But even if you never say a word about ethnicity, racial distinctions are plainly visible to kids. "Many communities are highly segregated, which children notice. You'll be driving through town and your preschooler is thinking, 'Oh, here's where the Chinese people live,'" Dr. Bigler says.

Children's tendency to assign traits based on race accelerates in grade school. So if all the teachers at your child's school are white while only people of color work in the lunchroom and handle security, the inequity will not be lost on your kid. By age 7, most African-American kids believe whites are more likely to hold high-status jobs, according to Dr. Bigler's study findings. "If you don't change your kids' outlook when they're young, they'll come to their own incorrect conclusions," says Kristina Olson, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Washington, who studies racial attitudes among kids.

Kylie White, from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who has two biological white children and two adopted black children, said it took her then 4-year-old daughter, Maran, who is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, only three months to learn enough English to ask, "Why are you yellow and I am purple, Mama?" "I told her she's

special and beautiful because of her skin," White says. A few months later, Maran told her mom that a classmate had taunted her by saying, "You're brown like poo-poo." But Maran's response to the kid made it clear that White's message was getting through: "No. God made me pretty. Me brown like chocolate."

➔ Start talking

Aside from observing skin color, even a preschooler can see that some people are big and others are skinny, that some celebrate Christmas and others Hanukkah, and that certain kids are smarter than others. And if your local gas-station attendant has a thick accent, she'll notice that too.

Are you talking about these differences? Probably not. A study published in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* found that approximately 57 percent of parents of white children never or almost never discussed race with them. Black parents, though, are far more likely to bring it up. "People of color have to prepare their children for uncomfortable moments," says

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Shauna Robinson, of Thousand Oaks, California, who is black. She broached the topic with her then 5-year-old son, Lexington, by reading him *Chocolate Me!*, which is about a boy who is teased for having dark skin and curly hair.

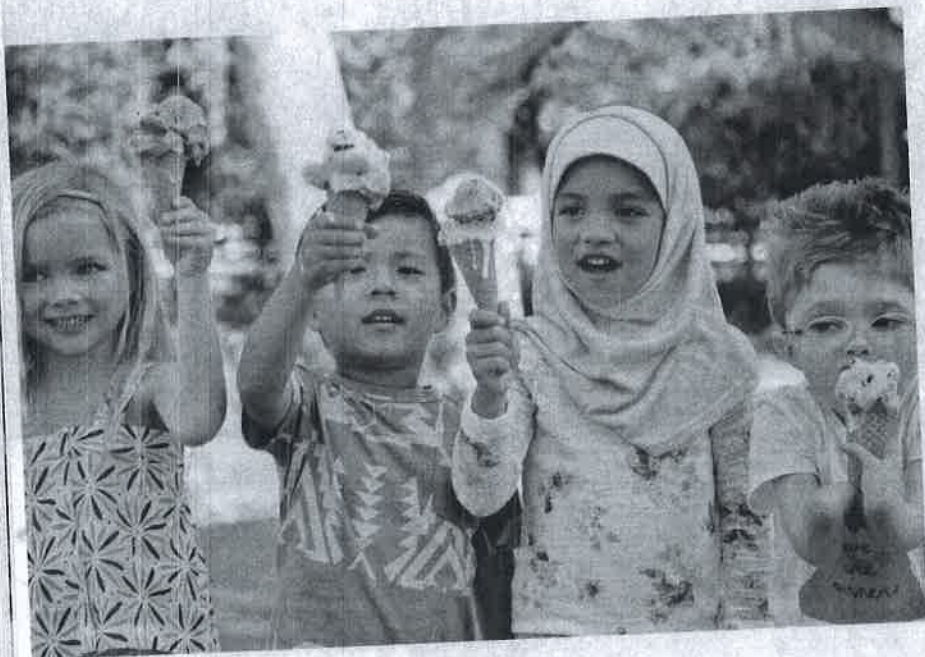
With a child who is 3 or 4, you can explain that people come in a variety of colors, shapes, and sizes. "You could even try holding up a green apple and a red apple," suggests Maureen Costello, director of the Teaching Tolerance project at the Southern Poverty Law Center, in Montgomery, Alabama. "Say, 'They look different on the outside, but they're both apples on the inside, just like people.'" Seek out opportunities to demonstrate your respect and appreciation for these contrasts. You might say, "Look at that girl. Aren't her braids pretty?"

or, "Did you hear that boy speak Italian to his grandma and then English to his friend? I wish I could speak more than one language."

If your child asks something that makes you squirm, do your best to respond matter-of-factly. "We tend to avoid these questions," says Beverly Daniel Tatum, Ph.D., author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. "But that doesn't keep kids from noticing." Dr. Tatum recalls a mortifying moment when her then 4-year-old son pointed to a large woman and said loudly, "Mommy, why is that woman so fat?" "My first response was to say 'Shhh!'" Dr. Tatum says. "Then I caught myself and told him, 'People come in all sizes. Some people are big and some are little, some are tall and some are short.'"

➔ Explain about stereotypes and racism

Kids already have certain biases about other cultures by age 5 or 6. Don't be surprised if your child repeats something derogatory she heard at school and asks, "Why do Muslims hate America?" or perpetuates a stereotype by saying, "All Jews are rich." When she does, let her know that while some people in a group may seem to fit a certain description it doesn't mean everyone is that way. Costello says. That's your cue to introduce the idea of discrimination: "Sometimes people decide that everyone with dark skin is mean or that people who aren't white are bad. That's wrong, and it makes me sad. It's not fair to judge someone without knowing him or her."



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**"Why is that man's
skin dark?"**

"Skin contains something
called melanin, which
makes us different colors.
Some people have
more than others. We're
all part of a beautiful
rainbow, aren't we?"

**"Why does that girl
talk funny?"**

"That's called an accent.
Her family came from
a country where
they speak another
language."

**"Why is he in a
wheelchair?"**

"Some people's legs
don't work, so they need
a chair with wheels to
get from place to place."

**"Why is that woman
so fat?"**

"People come all
shapes and sizes,
and that's what makes
the world such an
interesting place."

**"Why does that man
wear a funny wrap on
his head?"**

"That's called a turban.
He wears it because
it's part of his religion,
like other people may
wear a cross."

Bring up the stereotypes your
child sees in movies and on TV. "If
you turn the sound off on cartoon
shows and ask who's the good guy
and who's the bad guy, kids know
instantly by the way the characters
appear," Dr. Tatum says. The
solution isn't to stop watching but
to point out the problems you see.
For instance, you could watch *The
Little Mermaid*, with its enormous
villain, Ursula. Then say, "It's a
shame that overweight characters
are depicted as evil. I know lots of
nice people who are heavy."

You should also be honest about
the fact that discrimination still
exists. "If you talk about past
inequalities and then tell your child,
'We've fixed that and we're all equal
now,' it can actually encourage
prejudicial beliefs because children
will see remaining inequalities as
the result of how hard people work,"
says Erin Winkler, Ph.D., a diversity
and racism expert at the University
of Wisconsin Milwaukee. "Instead,
talking honestly about systematic
racial bias—like how wealth inequity
is not a reflection of individual
efforts, but rather tied to the legacy
of discrimination—can help your
child understand that these are not
individual issues."

Research bears this out. Dr. Bigler
had elementary-school children
read biographies of famous African
Americans. One group's stories
included details about how the
person had encountered forms of
racial discrimination; the other
group's didn't. Afterward, the kids
whose books included the true
historical context found the subjects
more likable and sympathetic.

● Lead by example

For your child to become truly
open-minded toward all people, you
need to be a positive role model. In a
study in *Child Development*, the lone
factor shown to reduce children's
prejudice was whether their parents

had a friend of another race. "If you say, 'We should be friends with all kinds of people' but the only ones who come over for dinner are those who look like you, what's your child going to think?" Dr. Olson says.

Lots of parents talk a good game about embracing diversity, yet subtly communicate something very different. Do you laugh when you hear a joke about a racial group? Are you willing to point out intolerance when you see it? "We know that kids learn from what they see more than from what they hear," Costello says.

➔ **Expose your child to diversity regularly**

An analysis of more than 500 studies on prejudice published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that the more contact people of all ages have with those from backgrounds that

contrast with their own, the less likely they are to be biased.

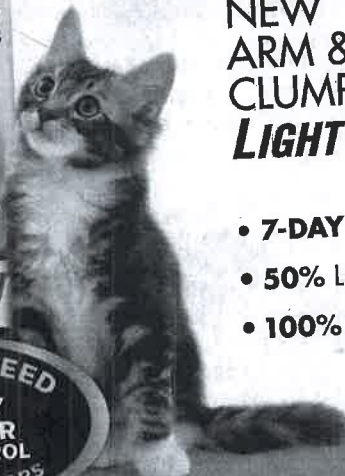
Rebecca Anderson, a mom in Charlotte, North Carolina, chose a preschool for her son Zach where half the children had physical disabilities. "I believed that exposing him to special-needs kids would make him more accepting of all people," she says. When it came time for kindergarten, she and her husband, who are white, decided to send Zach to a Spanish-immersion magnet school that was only about one-quarter white. Now in sixth grade, Zach is not only fluent in Spanish but comfortable around all kinds of people, Anderson says.

If you don't have the option of enrolling your child in a diverse school, look for ethnically mixed sports leagues, libraries, and parks. Attend multicultural festivals. Bring home books that depict kids

of various backgrounds. Show interest in other religions and cultures, and build friendships with people who don't look like you. "If you want your child to become comfortable dealing with all types of people, you have to take her to places where she's going to encounter them," Costello says.

Julianne Weiner's son Ben had already had that type of exposure. So before his first anxious day of preschool, she reminded him about the people he knew and liked who had brown skin. She pointed out that there are many shades of skin, even showing him that his hand is darker than his belly. "None of it seemed to register, and we were worried he'd say something that would offend his teacher," Weiner says. "Instead, Ben had a great year, and that teacher became one of his favorites." ❧

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