# Helping Young Children Learn About Difference

youngstar
Wisconsin's Child Care Quality Rating & Improvement System

One of the most wonderful things about young children is their abundant curiosity; it only makes sense that children would be curious about each other as well. In most early childhood settings, children have many opportunities to explore both similarities and differences with other children of varied abilities. Let's look at a few ideas that you can use to help children learn to understand and celebrate differences as well as similarities in the people around them.

It is important to realize that children look to you as a model for how to act in unfamiliar situations. They will mirror your attitudes toward other children whether you reflect acceptance or discomfort.

**It is vital that you:**

- Assess your own feelings about a child's inclusion
- Learn to overcome any fears or concerns
- Get any training you may need

**Children are more interested in what the child *can* do and in how the child can interact with them.**
You may hope that labeling children to explain a disability will help them understand why a particular child looks or acts differently. In reality, labels explain very little to young children (or anyone else, for that matter). Being told that a child has Down Syndrome, for example, does not provide any information about why the child moves or talks the way she does.

**It is much better to give children the information they need when they need it, and children's comments or questions clearly tell you what information they need.**
Some providers try to anticipate children's need to know by preparing them ahead of time. This isn't helpful. When a topic comes up, it is best to respond briefly, with an answer that matches the simplicity of the question. If a child asks, "Why doesn't Jamie walk?", you might say, "His muscles are not as strong as yours," or "His body works differently so he gets around in his wheelchair." It is unnecessary to give more information than children ask for; instead, wait for more questions. Sometimes, you might even be able to encourage children to ask the child with the disability their question. You could say, "Maybe Jamie would like to tell you himself why he doesn't walk."

**It may be difficult for children to verbalize the complexity of their feelings about people with disabilities.**
Very young children often do not appear to notice differences, while older children tend to freely express their curiosity or discomfort with another child's appearance or behavior. Depending on the situation and the child, preschool children may verbalize what they are thinking or feeling; other times, their actions show they are curious or anxious.

**Young children may express their thoughts in cautious reactions:** avoiding child who drools, imitating another child's behavior or by incorporating their concerns into paly. Although it can be unnerving to see a child's curiosity or discomfort played out so vividly, it provides a wonderful opportunity for you to talk about children's feelings and offer simple explanations. By listening and watching closely, you can observe what information children may need in order to understand and be comfortable with any child.

**Create an environment that is safe for questions and comments from the children while at the same time looking for ways to directly teach sensitivity and respect for individual differences.**

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**A Child Care Provider's Question**

*I've just enrolled a child with cerebral palsy. The child has severe delays, very limited motor skills, and seizures. I'm concerned about how to prepare the other children so they aren't frightened by his behavior.*

First, you do not need to prepare the children for the enrollment of a child with a disability by doing any more than you would for any other child who is entering your program. Young children will not understand what cerebral palsy is, and if you try to describe seizures, delayed motor skills, or different sounding speech, you may set up a situation where the children expect to see this child as different or unusual. What you can do is prepare by learning as much as possible about the child's abilities and disabilities. For example, find out as much as you can about the seizures so that you know how often they occur, what they look like, and what you need to do when one occurs. Discuss with coworkers what will happen if the child has a seizure during each part of your routine. If you are prepared and relaxed, the children are not likely to be afraid. They probably will, however, want to talk about it afterward, particularly if they have never seen a seizure before.

Be prepared for questions and do not be concerned if children experiment with different-sounding speech patterns, pretend that they cannot walk, or begin to role play or pretend that a favorite doll is having a seizure. These behaviors are perfectly common ways for children to learn about disabilities, and if not discouraged, they will not last long.

The key to helping young children understand each other is to talk about differences associated with a child's disabilities only when children are ready to talk– when they ask questions or express their curiosity. Typically, children will ask an initial question that is relatively simple and easy to answer. Often this is done partly to test your reaction and gauge your response. If children see that you are willing to talk about these issues, they will generally come back to you whenever they need more information. Your job is to give children the information they need– when they need it– in a way that is calm, honest, and straightforward.

**RESOURCES**

- **Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning** http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/
- **Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards** http://www.collaboratingpartners.com/wmels-about.php
- **Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices** http://www.dec-sped.org/recommendedpractices

**TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES**

- **The Registry Training Calendar** https://www.the-registry.org
- **WI Early Care Association (WECA) Training Calendar** http://wisconsinearlychildhood.org/
- **MECA Special Needs Support Program (SNSP)** http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/meca/snsp/default.htm

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