

Educating Children about Disabilities

Children are naturally curious when they meet others who may have differences from their perception of “typical.” With increased inclusive opportunities for children with disabilities, more children are interacting with those who have differences and naturally questions will need to be addressed. With inclusion come questions from children *without* disabilities. “What’s wrong with that boy?” or “why does she talk that way?” are some usual questions that children ask, and parents may be unprepared for.

How do you explain to a child why his classmate or neighbor is different?

When children with disabilities are educated alongside their typical peers from an early age, familiarity and natural relationships will develop. However, when children begin to notice differences the following tips may help:

Never ignore someone’s disability.

A common reaction is to pretend the disability isn’t there. The best approach is to “be straight with your kids when they ask about differences,” advises Deidre Hayden, Executive Director of the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center in Alexandria, VA. “Kids are often far more comfortable with the concept than adults are.”



Explain that everyone is different.

Just as people have different interests, they also have different abilities. “What’s most important is seeing the disability as just *one* quality of the person rather than the *only* defining quality,” says Doug Biklen, Ph.D., author of Schooling Without Labels (Temple University Press, 1992).

Excerpts reprinted with permission from the handout, “Mom what’s wrong with that boy?” by Lynn Prowitt.

celebrating extraordinary lives

Help them focus on similarities.

Whether it is baseball cards, music or a favorite television show, all kids share some common interests. People with disabilities are different in a few ways, but they are the same in a hundred ways. Point out the similarities.



Reassure that disabilities aren't contagious.

"Younger kids may worry , 'If I touch him, will I become blind'" says Virginia Roach, Director of The Center on Teaching and Learning at the National Association of State Boards of Education, in Alexandria. Assure children that holding hands, hugging, and sharing toys are all okay. You cannot catch Down syndrome from someone who has it. It is something you are born with. Focus on the child's ability rather than his/her disability.

Practice what you preach.

Without realizing it, we've all been insensitive to individuals with disabilities at some time. By either averting our eyes when a person with a disability walked by or staring at the person, or parking in handicapped spot "just for a minute." Remember: what you do and don't do sends stronger messages to your children than anything you say.



Show respect.

It is crucial that children learn that people with disabilities have feelings and rude comments are very hurtful. Using the words "retard" or "retarded" should be prohibited as they are considered to be degrading and insulting. These words only reinforce painful stereotypes of people with intellectual disabilities being less valued members of humanity.

Visit our Lending Library

The DSAGC Lending Library has several book in our Children's section that can help you begin the discussion about disabilities with your children. We can also offer a coloring book, "*My Brother Ben has Down Syndrome.*" Contact our office for more information.



The mission of the DSAGC is to empower individuals, educate families, enhance communities and together, celebrate the extraordinary lives of people with Down syndrome.

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