



5 WAYS TO TEACH ABOUT DIFFERENCES

There is a question that catches my attention often, from the little girl in the cart behind ours in the grocery checkout lane to the boy observing our family from the end of the aisle where his mother peruses baby food.

“Why does that kid look like that?”

Our daughter Brenna was born with a severe genetic skin disorder called Harlequin ichthyosis in December 2011, a precious addition to our family that also includes our 8-year-old son Connor. Brenna’s skin condition gives her the appearance of a red, peeling sunburn covering her entire body, and what it means is that her skin doesn’t do the jobs for her body like our skin does...jobs like keeping her hydrated, protecting her from bacteria and regulating her body temperature. She doesn’t even have the ability to sweat.

And what it also means is that she gets a lot of stares from kids, teens and even adults who wonder why she looks the way she does.

Visual difference can be found everywhere, from race to disabilities, and teaching our children about differences is essential to help them to become accepting, kind and respectful individuals who live out God’s command to love others.

Understanding difference begins at home, and there are many ways to foster a better understanding of physical differences so that your children can learn and fully appreciate that everyone was uniquely made by a wonderful Creator...

1. READ TO THEM ABOUT DIFFERENCE

This is the perfect starting point! There are so many wonderful children’s books that celebrate looking different or being yourself, and reading with your child can open up opportunities to discuss different feelings, interests and uniqueness in general.

Some of our family’s very favorite children’s books about being different include:

The Colors of Us by Karen Katz

Different is Awesome by Ryan Haack

Whoever You Are by Mem Fox

Extraordinary Friends by Fred Rogers

Not Your Typical Dragon by Dan Bar-el

If you’re looking for a more comprehensive list, my book *Celebrating Our Stories* is available for Kindle on Amazon and offers more than 100 recommendations based on themes of celebrating ourselves, different appearances, differently abled, cultural differences, kindness and respect, and empathy!

2. BE UPFRONT ABOUT DIFFERENCES

Kids learn by asking and seeing and experiencing. Children are inevitably going to ask questions about something they see that is different than what they are used to, and it's important that difference not be a taboo subject; be open to discussions with your child and teach them how to ask questions about other people in a respectful manner with kind words. While it may feel uncomfortable, frantically removing yourself from situation where a child asks a question about how someone looks or speaks could give your children the impression that people who look different are frightening and should be avoided, instead of simply people.

If you're worried about them blurting out something offensive that may hurt someone's feelings, teach them how to whisper a discreet and polite question in your ear. If it's an extremely sensitive subject, then you can tell them you'll discuss it later.

3. LIVE IT

Take your children to parks, activities and events where those around them aren't necessarily mirrors of themselves. If they are frequently around other people of various ages, colors, and abilities, they will be much less intimidated by visual differences. In fact, seeing others who look different than themselves on a regular basis means they probably won't even notice the differences!

4. MODEL IT

If your children see you socializing with people only like yourself and hear you making comments about someone else's physical appearance, they will imitate that. However, the reverse is also usually true: if you are genuinely friendly and respectful to all those you come across, your children will naturally tend to model that behavior.

5. HELP THEM RELATE TO IT

It can be very easy for children to forget that behind the "different" is someone just like them – someone who has loving parents and siblings, someone who may enjoy the same movies or like the same kinds of food or laugh at the same jokes.

Try to help your child relate to those who look different in any way you can - "she was born with that birthmark just like you were born with blue eyes!"- so that they better understand that physical differences are a part of everyone's life. And don't stop there – maybe they both like pizza or Disney movies! Being able to relate to someone helps a child feel more comfortable with that person, regardless of what they look like.

Seeing the humanity in difference is one of the most important things you can do for your child as a parent and will give them the empathy they need to grow into respectful and understanding adults who treat others the way they want to be treated.