

How do you talk to your children about diversity?

At St Mary's College we have chosen to embrace, in particular, the Presentation Value of Hospitality. In doing so we intend to foster and highlight the spirit of welcome, acceptance, service, kindness and friendliness among our students.

It is easy to be welcoming, accepting and kind when we are among friends and those we know, love and trust. As parents we are right to teach our children to be cautious around strangers and people and places that are unfamiliar to them, but how do we prevent healthy caution from developing into suspicion, prejudice and fear? How do you talk about diversity (the things that make people different) when talking to your children?

Children tend to notice the physical aspects of identity first, and from quite an early age. They may notice skin and hair colour, and many of us have been caught by surprise when a pre-schooler has made an innocent but loud observation about another person's appearance whilst in a public place. Awareness of disabilities usually comes later but something more obvious like a wheelchair, might prompt questions earlier.

They certainly make observations about gender before they start schooling, albeit very simplistic. Girls play with dolls, boys play with cars, and will role-play within those stereotypes. When they attend school, children may observe that others may eat different foods, or speak with a different accent or language.

How we respond to our children when they make observations and ask questions about the things they notice as different are very important? Simple, innocent questions can come thick and fast. "Why is the sky blue?" "Why are rocks hard?" "Where do birds sleep?" "Why does Grace have brown skin?" "Why is that man in a wheelchair?" "Why hasn't that lady got any hair?" "Will I turn brown?" You never quite know what's going to come out next.

Embrace your child's natural curiosity. A dismissive response can imply that difference is a negative thing. Answer their questions as honestly and respectfully as you are able, and teach them the importance of embracing differences and treating others with respect. Even more importantly, remember that it is from your own actions and reactions that your children will take their lead.

Once your children reach school age, they are usually able to understand simple scientific explanations about obvious physical differences. One of the best things you can do is to provide them with an environment that is rich with diversity and possibilities for exploring cultural diversity, exposing them to and normalising as many cultural differences as possible. Children are by nature very accepting, and will seek to know where they themselves fit in.

Acknowledge and embrace diversity in your home. Introduce them to foods (and eating utensils) from other cultures, teach them songs in other languages. Even find some games to play games from around the world. Art projects and story-telling are also great ways to introduce children to other cultures. Taking the time to include these things in your children's lives teaches them that you value them; that they are

important things to know and learn. Seize teachable moments and emphasise the positive, for example when you see things when you are out and about or watching TV together.

Teach your children about their own cultural heritage, fostering a sense of pride, self-knowledge and positive self-concept. Visit museums. Avoid language or conversations that reinforce stereotypes.

Conversations about diversity extend beyond country of origin. For example, include in your conversations positive and inclusive language around single parent families, two parent families and extended families; different socio economic backgrounds; different faith backgrounds; disability.

Children seek a sense of belonging and acceptance from their peers. It is very important to them. Children become very tuned in to people's attitudes towards them and about others. It is these attitudes which have the power to make someone feel included or excluded. The embracing of differences, or suspicion and discrimination are learned at home, and the best way to teach inclusivity is to model it. Don't be afraid to talk about times, historical and in the present, when people have been mistreated because of their differences.

Challenge intolerance when you hear you child speak disrespectfully or with prejudice, even if they say it is in jest: perhaps especially if it is in jest. Silence indicates acceptance. Ask your child to explain. "What made you say that?" Seek to understand where the intolerance has come from, then explain why it is not acceptable. Similarly, notice and praise respectful behaviour or language.

Learning to develop diverse relationships and to get along with others is important for later in life. Teaching your child about diversity with acceptance and inclusivity helps them develop their own self-concept and to initiate conversations about differences without judgement prejudice or fear.

If you would like to read more, we found the following websites useful in the preparation of this article.

<https://www.thechildrenstrust.org/index.php/parents/news/newsletters/916>

<http://archive.adl.org/> (anti discrimination league)

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