



## CULTIVATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT DIFFERENCES

---

**LEVEL:** Educators

**LENGTH OF TIME:** 30-60 minutes

### INTRODUCTION

This activity will help colleagues practice ways of meeting students where they are and talking about differences — not in reaction to harassment or name-calling — but in reaction to honest questions and possible misconceptions.

In schools, conversations about differences based on family diversity, race, gender or class often center on what *not* to say and how to make sure people are not offended by comments made by students or adults. While these conversations can be necessary, they don't increase students' understanding about cultural, family or individual differences.

This is like the following classic example that takes place while in line at a grocery store:

A child sees a person in a wheelchair and asks loudly, "Why is that man in that chair?"

The child's mother responds, "Shush, don't be rude."

While the mother may be genuinely concerned that her child not be impolite, the child may be learning that it's not OK to ask questions about people who are different and that differences cannot be spoken about.

In fact, children notice physical differences at a very young age and often have a lot of questions about these differences. By the time children are in elementary school they may have already developed some negative attitudes about differences. They are beginning to notice social and cultural expectations, and they may have their first overt encounters with bigotry, whether directed at themselves or at others. Students who belong to cultural minorities or who have same-sex parents may have more language to talk about their culture and their families than other students.

Research shows that even infants notice differences in skin color. When 6 month old babies were shown pictures of people with skin colors that were markedly different than their own family, the babies looked at these pictures longer than when they were shown pictures of people whose skin color were more reflective of their own families.<sup>1</sup>

Without guidance, young children will categorize and make their own sense of differences, with a tendency to favor groups to which they belong. Researcher Rebecca Bigler did an experiment in a pre-school; 3-5 year olds were randomly given either a red or blue shirt – with no explanation. They were told to wear this color shirt for 3 weeks. In some classrooms, teachers used the colors to organize and label the children. In others, the teachers ignored the shirt colors. Even in those classrooms where teachers never referred to the red or the blue groups, the students said the group wearing the same color shirt they were wearing was the smarter group. Of course, in the classrooms where teachers did label and highlight the groups, students in-group preference became even stronger.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Katz, P. A. (2003) Racists or tolerant multiculturalists? How do they begin? *American Psychologist*, 58(11), 897–909.

<sup>2</sup> Patterson, M.M. and R.S. Bigler (2006) Preschool Children's Attention to Environmental Messages About Groups: Social Categorization and the Origins of Intergroup Bias, *Child Development*, 77(4)847–860. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00906.x.

---

## INTRODUCE THE ACTIVITY AND PROVIDE A FRAMEWORK

- Introduce the activity as a chance to practice responding to students' questions about differences based on such things as gender, sexual orientation, race and religion.
- You may want to share some of the research mentioned in the introduction to this activity.
- Explain that you won't be focusing on name-calling and harassment but on generating conversation in response to questions and misconceptions that students might have. These are not situations where a student is targeting a specific student directly, but going to an adult with a question or concern.
- Give the group some examples of these kinds of situations:
  - Why does Carolina sound so funny when she talks?
  - Derek plays with dolls. That's weird.
  - Ming eats seaweed. That's not food.
  - A group of kids was saying that Ms. Johnson is a lesbian. They were being mean, but what if she is?
- Introduce the following five strategies as ways to have respond to statements like these:
  - **Acknowledge Difference**
  - **Ask Questions (to get more information, to understand the context, to elicit empathy)**
  - **Explain Facts (use concrete examples if possible)**
  - **Remove Negative Judgment/Affirm the Positive**
  - **Problem-Solve**
  - **Transition/Normalize the Conversation**
- Stress that this is not an exhaustive list but a jumping-off point — they may have other strategies that work well. Choose one or two scripts that are at the end of the activity as a way to illustrate each of the above strategies.

## ROLE-PLAY ACTIVITY

- Explain to the group that you are going to do some role-plays. You can come up with your own examples, solicit examples from the group or using the following examples:
  - Early Elementary*
    - How can Alex have two fathers? I don't get it.
    - How come Alissa's skin is so dark?
  - Upper Elementary*
    - If someone is Muslim does that mean that they hate the United States?
    - How come Morgan dresses like that and is always playing with boys? I heard someone say she wants to be a boy. I think she looks and acts like one.
- Have the possible strategies displayed so everyone can see them or have them on a handout for everyone.
- Read one example aloud to the whole group. Ask them to brainstorm what their goals might be in responding to the student's statement or question. Acknowledge that the goals may be different in each situation. Goals might include:
  - To educate;
  - To avoid hurt feelings;
  - To change behavior;
  - To let students know that you respect all kinds of differences; or
  - To make all students feel welcome.

- 
- Ask participants to get together in pairs and role-play responses to the situation you read aloud to the group. Stress that they do not need to use all of the strategies that you gave them. Encourage them to have a conversation that meets their goals and gives a message that it's OK to have respectful conversations about differences. Give them a few minutes where one plays the student and the other is in their role at the school. Then ask them to switch roles.
  - Ask for some volunteers to share with the full group the responses that they decided to use. Ask them to reflect upon how it felt to hear the responses when they were in the role of the student. What did the adult do in those role-plays that was particularly helpful? Ask how responses would be different if someone was having a one-on-one conversation or was in a group.
  - Role-play a few other scenarios to provide further opportunity for practice and to ensure that multiple issues are addressed.

### ALTERNATE ACTIVITY

- Have the case studies listed so everyone can see or on a handout. Have participants form small groups and ask each group to choose one of the case studies to discuss and develop possible responses. Ask groups to share their responses with the full group.

### CLOSING

- Ask participants to think about and share some thoughts, such as:
- Which scenarios were easier or harder to respond to?
- What stood out from these role-plays/conversations?
- Do you have strategies or approaches to add to the original list?

### EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EXAMPLES

1. Derek plays with dolls. That's weird.
  - **Acknowledge Difference:** It's true that in our class most of the boys don't play with dolls.
  - **Ask Questions:** Why do you think it's weird?
  - **Explain Differences, Use Concrete Examples:** Not all boys play with the same things. You and your friend Jake like to do different things.
  - **Remove Negative Judgment/Affirm the Positive:** I want all children in this class to play with the toys they like. Derek is really creative.
  - **Transition:** What's your favorite thing to play with?
2. Why does Carolina sound so funny when she talks?
  - **Acknowledge Difference:** I am sure the way she speaks sounds different to you.
  - **Explain Facts:** She was born in a country called Brazil. You know how you learned English when you were little? Well she learned a different language called Portuguese when she was little because that's the language most people speak in Brazil. She just started learning English last year. People who learn another language before speaking English often say words differently than those who learn English first.
  - **Remove Negative Judgment/Affirm the Positive:** I think it's great that she knows more than one language. If you have a hard time understanding her you can ask her to repeat what she said. I wouldn't say she speaks funny. She just does not speak in the same way that you do.
  - **Transition:** Do you want to learn how to say some words in a different language?

---

## UPPER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EXAMPLES

1. Ming eats seaweed. That's not food.

- **Acknowledge Difference:** You've never eaten seaweed have you?
- **Explain Differences:** In some families and some countries seaweed is a really common food. I've eaten it and really like it. (Or I tried it once and didn't like it but I know lots of people who really do like it.)
- **Use Questions to Elicit Empathy:** How would you feel if someone said your food was gross? How do you think Ming feels if other people say that her food is gross?
- **Problem-Solve:** What can you and other kids do to make sure that Ming doesn't feel bad about what she brings for lunch?
- **Transition:** What's your favorite thing to have for lunch?

2. A group of kids was saying that Ms. Johnson is a lesbian. They were being mean but what if what they're saying is true?

- **Acknowledge Feelings:** Sounds like you were pretty uncomfortable in this situation.
- **Elicit More Information:** Why do you think they were saying what they were saying? What would it mean if she were a lesbian?
- **If Necessary, Clarify and/or Define Words and Concepts:** A lesbian is a woman who loves other women in a romantic way. So when a woman who is a lesbian falls in love it is with another woman.
- **Ask More Questions:** You've told me that Ms. Johnson is one of your favorite teachers. If she were a lesbian would that change how you feel about her?
- **Problem-Solve:** If you were around this group and they started talking this way again, what would you want to do? Do you want to talk about it? Let's think of some things you could say this time or next time.
- **Transition:** Didn't Ms. Johnson just teach you a new song? What was it?

