

Advice for Parents: Helping Children to Tell Peers About Their Difference

By Alice Pope, Ph.D.

1. **Help your child to decide on a simple, straightforward, unapologetic explanation of what her difference is, and how it came to be.** Often, simply stating, “I was born this way,” is enough of an explanation. Children may want to add that it was nobody’s fault, and that they have special doctors to help them.
2. **Prepare your child to answer questions from others.** Other children often have concerns: Does it hurt? Can I catch it? Did you fall? Will it go away? Again, simple answers allaying these worries are in order.
3. **Help your child to understand that he can choose how much to tell, depending on how he feels.** Although it’s helpful to address the issue of the difference, especially with children your child will see often, your child should feel no obligation to go into the entire song and dance every time somebody at the playground expresses curiosity. Simply saying, “I was born with this. It’s no big deal,” and going about his business is enough.
4. **Talk with your child about how it makes her feel to talk to others about her difference, and discuss ways she can keep her cool when she does this.** If your child feels anxious or angry at these times, help her to adjust her thinking about others’ attitudes. Most children are curious but uncritical. They just want to understand, and then they are happy to resume playing. It is really important for your child’s social development to adopt an attitude that most children are kind and friendly most of the time. If she can keep the assumption that most children have no intent to be hurtful, then she can avoid feeling upset when she gives her explanation.
5. **If your child is teased, respond with constructive problem-solving, but keep your upset feelings to yourself.** Remember that all children are teased at one time or another, and that teasing is not devastating if a child keeps a reasonable perspective. Help your child to think of positive ways to respond the next time. The best responses are calm but firm, such as, “I don’t like that, and I want you to stop. I’m going to play soccer with the others now.” The crucial pieces are to make a clear, unemotional statement that teasing is not acceptable, and then to confidently leave to be in the company of more accepting children. Alternatively, some children find a way to use humor to defuse the situation, so that everyone ends up laughing it off – and the teaser learns that he doesn’t get anywhere. It is important for parents to model a matter-of-fact response and to explain that teasing happens to everyone; the more upset you are, the more upset your child will be.
6. **If your child is chronically taunted by one or more other children, step in.** Most everyday teasing resolves itself, especially if your child can handle it well. But if your child is being bullied or humiliated week in and week out, you need to take action. If this is occurring at school, you need to inform the principal and the classroom teacher. Solutions to bullying problems need to be classroom-wide, and possibly school-wide, as all children – victims, bullies, and bystanders alike – are negatively affected by bullying. Important steps to take involve creating an environment where it is clear to everyone at school that intimidation and hurtful behavior are not tolerated, and that children who are victimized must be encouraged to speak out so the bully can be stopped by adults. If the bullying is being done outside of school, try to resolve the situation through calm discussion with the other child’s parents. As a last resort, help your child to avoid the bully, and remind her that no one is deserving of such treatment.
7. **Role-play with your child.** Children naturally find play-acting appealing, and it is an easy and concrete way for them to learn new things. Even adolescents can benefit from trying out new skills in this way. Take turns; sometimes you could be your child, other times you could be a peer. Practice until your child feels ready to go solo. If you see your child using strategies for discussing her difference that you think are counterproductive, stop and help her think through what might result – and then

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think again about ways of talking that would be more likely to lead to the desired outcome. Remind her that the goal should be for both herself and the other child to feel more comfortable about the difference after talking.

8. **Try to resist overprotective impulses.** It is natural to want to protect your child from distressing situations, particularly when your child has had to deal with many stressors already in his life. While it is appropriate to make good judgments about which social situations your child is

exposed to, at the same time it is important to let him take some risks. Only by trying new things can your child gain the confidence to develop the independence he needs. Helping your child to find comfortable ways of handling discussions about his difference is a positive step that lets him know you have faith in his ability to handle himself with peers. Remember, sometimes your most important work is behind the scenes, providing your child with the necessary skills to go out and be successful on his own.