

We are different, we are the same: Teaching young children about diversity

Diversity activities teach young children to respect and celebrate the differences in all people. Learning about different cultural aspects offers new experiences for children. It also helps them realize that we're all humans, despite differences in how we look or dress, or what we eat or celebrate. Games and activities offer a fun way for young children to learn about differences and similarities among people and to introduce the concept of diversity. All types of differences such as race,

religion, language, traditions, and gender can be introduced this way.

When do children notice differences between people? At about age 2 years, children begin to notice gender and racial differences. At 2 ½ or so, children learn gender labels (boy/girl) and the name of colors – which they begin to apply to skin color. Around 3 years of age, children notice physical disabilities. At about 4-5 years, they start to display gender appropriate behavior and become fearful of differences.

Activities that can help children learn about and appreciate differences:

Skin color match-ups

helps children learn about different skin tones and ethnic backgrounds.

What you need:

nylon knee high stockings in various shades such as tan, black, white, pink, yellow, and red

What you do:

Encourage children to try the nylons on their hands, arms, or feet. Ask questions to help children increase their awareness of skin color: "Can you find a stocking that is the same color as your skin?" Have children try another color and ask them, "Is this lighter or darker than your own skin color?"

Hair, hair everywhere

helps children learn about different hair types related to ethnic groups.

What you need:

photographs of different hairstyles, types, and hair care products

What you do:

Ask children to identify the different types of hair by talking about hair texture and curl. For example, some people have fine, thin hair while others have thick, coarse hair. Some people have straight hair and some people have curly hair. Talk about how people have different hair colors, lengths, and styles. Discuss how to care for different types of hair and which types of hair care products children use. Take photos of each child's hair and make a collage of different hairstyles.

Diversity bingo

helps children learn about other cultures from around the world.

What you need:

bingo cards with images that relate to a specific culture and a large set of picture cards with the same images as those on the bingo cards. Some ideas might be an Indian sari, chopsticks, or a sombrero.

What you do:

In each square of the bingo card, place an image of something from a specific culture. To play, hold up one of the large set of pictures; tell the children (or ask them) what the picture is and what culture it comes from. Students who get five across, down, or diagonally win.

Diversity dress up

incorporates diversity into dramatic play to help children learn about different cultures.

What you need:

clothing for various cultures (examples: yarmulke, a Jewish head cover; Burka, a garment worn by Muslim women). Start with clothing that is reflective of the various cultures in your program, then expand to other cultures that the children may be aware of through the media or travel.

What you do:

Have children try on the various items of clothing and discuss the culture that wears each one and why/how that style of clothing was created. Place the items in the dramatic play area so that children can wear the clothing as part of their play scenarios.

Music for everyone

demonstrates the importance of music to many different cultures.

What you need:

audio recordings of music including those from a variety of cultures and featuring different types of instruments, and pictures of various musical instruments

What you do:

Ask each student to bring in a CD of music from their family of origin. Explain about each culture and how music plays a role in their cultures and celebrating traditions. Talk about what instruments are used. Add similar CDs to your music library and use them in daily music activities.

Resources and References:

Public Broadcasting System. "Diversity in the Classroom." Precious Children. www.pbs.org/kcts/preciouschildren/diversity/

Biles, Barbara. "Activities that promote racial and cultural awareness." In "Family Child Care Connections" edited by C. M. Todd 4(3): 4. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, 1994. Retrieved September 2012. http://www.pbs.org/kcts/preciouschildren/diversity/read_activities.html

Reading Spot Light

The Sneeches by Dr. Seuss.

In this story the star-belly and plain-belly Sneeches learn that neither type is superior and that they are able to get along and become friends.

The Color of Us by Karen Katz.

This story explores how everyone in the neighborhood is a different shade of brown – from peanut butter to chocolate – and does a great job of subtly explaining that people are all different shades of the same color.

Why Am I Different by Norma Simon.

This book outlines the variety of ways people can be different from each other including hair color, size, language, and family.

It's OK to be Different by Todd Parr.

The author explores sensitive issues such as adoption and unusual things such as eating macaroni in the bathtub, but manages to explore diversity in all forms.