



How to Explain Differences About People to Your Child



You walk into the park, church, grocery store, or wherever and your child says (in a loud voice), “Look at that girl. Why does she look like that?” You clamp your hand over their mouth as you turn red in the face. How can you respond in situations like that? How can you explain differences to your child?

Courtney Westlake, mom to Brenna who has a rare and severe skin disorder, shares some thoughts on what she wishes people would do when they see her daughter’s red face. She says, “I wish you would close that small gap by relating to us as you would to any other family on the playground, instead of making the gap bigger by treating us as unapproachable. When your child points and tells you to look, I wish you would respond clearly, “Yes, look at that pretty little girl. It looks like she’s having so much fun playing, just like you are!” When your child asks you “why is that baby so red?” or “why does she look like that?” I wish you would answer honestly: “I’m not sure, but the way someone looks isn’t important. We all look different from each other, don’t we?” I wish you would encourage your child to say hi and to ask my kids’ names. I wish you would apologize without feeling ashamed if your child is offensive right in front of us: “I’m so sorry; we’re still learning how to ask questions respectfully.”

Prepare your children to interact with others. Role play meeting different types of people (different culture or ethnicity, people with physical or mental limitations, etc.) What can you say? Do? Teach them to respect everyone. **What are some ways to respect others?** Look at others when they speak. Use kind words. Say please and thank you. Treat others like they want to be treated. You get the idea. (All those things your parents probably taught you growing up.)

Use an object lesson about physical differences. Put a bowl of M&M’s on the table and ask them to pick their favorite color and eat it. Then ask them to pick another one and eat it. Did it taste differently? No, even though the outer shells look different, they are the same inside. Outward colors, features, limitations, etc. are part of the outside shell. The true person inside is like us, wanting love and acceptance from others.



Read stories about individual differences and then talk about it. Some suggestions are included at Courtney's website, <http://www.courtneywestlake.com/10-great-childrens-books-that-celebrate/>.

There is no one right way to respond, but we want to model love and respect to all people. Children take our cues from us and they will learn to respect others as we show respect. Share God's big love for all people. God so loved the world! (John 3:16) This is the heart of what we believe, but our lives don't always show it. Step out of your comfort zone and spend time with other people who look differently from you and show them God's love.

