Teaching your kids about diversity and tolerance

Even as our streets, neighbourhoods, cities, and our country grow more diverse, discrimination and bias continue to proliferate. The world we are raising our children in is one where people continue to be discriminated against based on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, religion, and physical or mental ability. It can be hard to know how to teach our children to be accepting and tolerant of difference, when it seems like attitudes are so rapidly shifting. Here are some ways to make diversity education a priority, and tips to integrate it into your day-to-day life.

Educate yourself

It can be daunting to teach children about diversity when you feel that you are not up to speed on what is acceptable and what is not. Recognize that all of us hold biases inherited from our parents, our peers, and the media; noticing these biases, which so often fly under our radar, is what counts. Be honest with yourself and challenge any biases that you discover before talking to your kids.

Change your language

Much of what we learn is passed on through the words we use. Calling something "gay" or "retarded" used to be common, but these words are now understood to be offensive and oppressive. When you hear your child using racist, sexist or homophobic language, point it out and try to find alternative words. For example, instead of calling a party "lame", which is offensive to people with physical impairments, you could refer to the party as "boring", or "dull". Another way to challenge discriminatory language is to ban generalities: don't allow yourself or your children to refer to any group of people as a whole, as in *"all Canadians are polite"*, but encourage them to be specific, *"Samantha is polite"*.

Diversify your life

Broadening your child's range of experiences and narratives will work to increase tolerance. This TED talk explains "the danger of a single story", so lead by example and expose your child to a multiplicity of stories, practices, and voices. Read books that come from cultures and countries different from your own, learn a different language, taste and cook ethnically diverse foods, or visit a family who practices another religion when they are celebrating a traditional holiday.

Learning is unlearning

People aren't born with prejudice or discriminatory beliefs – they learn them. Children are naturally curious about difference, and may ask questions that sound insensitive, but they are also very tolerant of difference. Teaching children about diversity is less about *teaching* new information, and more about undoing the information children receive from the media and some of their peers. If your child says something that is offensive towards a group of people, remember that they probably learned it from somewhere or someone, and it can likewise be unlearned.

Play "what if" games

A great way to get your child thinking about diversity is to invite them to play "what if" games. Ask questions like "what if you were teased for the way you look?", "what if you were the only one in the room who didn't speak English?" These games will illuminate how your child may handle specific situations, and is a great way to start a meaningful conversation about difference, tolerance, and empathy.

These are just some ideas to bring increased tolerance and diversity into your children's lives. Teaching these skills is about encouraging critical thinking, and challenging assumptions and dominant representations. If your children express prejudiced views or language, ask them why they think that way, and likewise encourage them to ask questions when they receive general information about a whole group of people. Make diversity-education a part of your everyday life – because it's really an ongoing process and long-term project!