

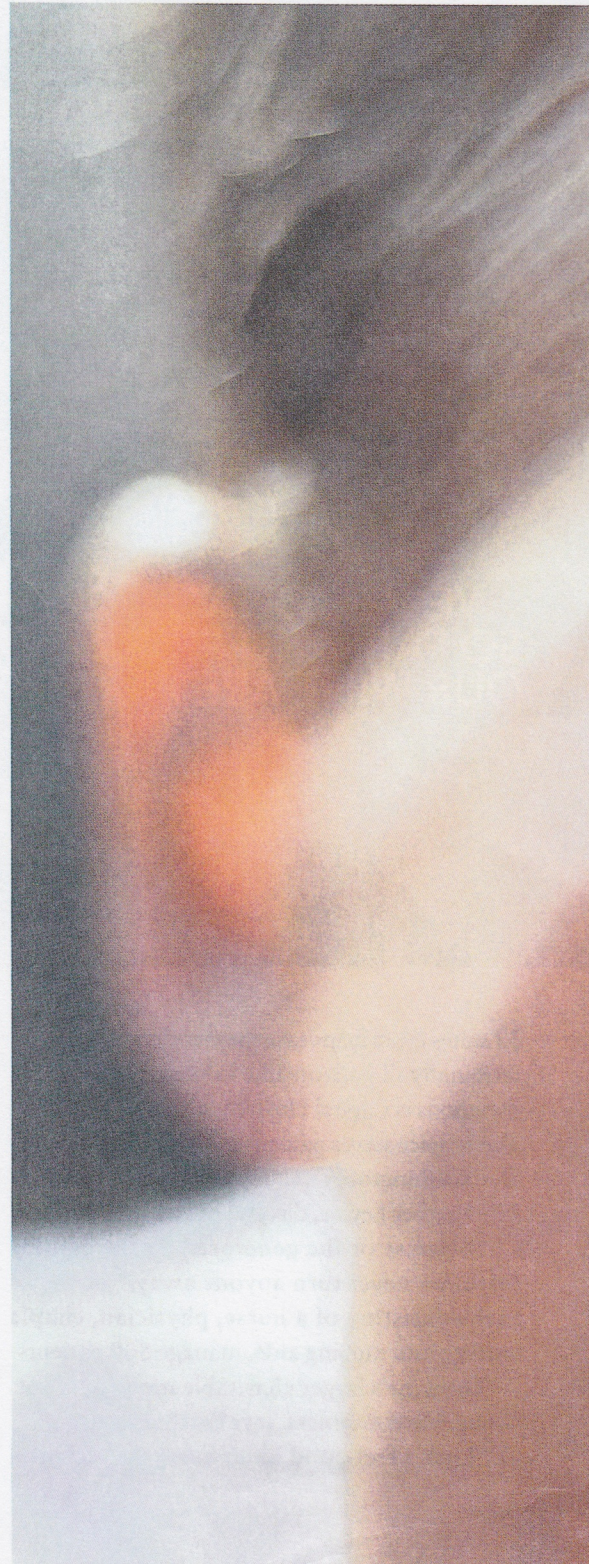
looking

Raising kids to
embrace—and
celebrate—
difference

BY MARGARET WINCHELL MILLER

Without thinking too hard, read these short sentences and fill in the blanks: Men are _____. Mentally ill people are _____. Teenagers are _____. Women are _____.

No matter how you answered, you've just confirmed that you're prejudiced. But don't be alarmed. While typically used in a pejorative sense, the word "prejudice" simply means "prejudgment." Over time, we all tend to generalize or stereotype individuals or groups based on our own experiences and prevailing social attitudes. According to Dr. David Schneider, a professor of psychology at Rice University who specializes in the study of prejudice and stereotyping, this response to the world is part of the human process. It's just the way we're wired.



Much can be said about the problem of discrimination, its long history in our country, and what might be done to reduce it. But most people would agree that one way to encourage the next generation to be less discriminatory and more respectful of differences is for parents to begin exposing children at a very young age to diversity and to help them understand and respect people who are different from them.

“Parents can do only so much to communicate what they think and believe,” Schneider says. “You want experience to shape your kids. The main thing is to be sure that children are exposed to a range of experiences. Instead of telling your children what to think and how to think, allow them to live in a situation.”

Several years ago, Carol MacKinnon and her husband, Jeff, who live in a small New Hampshire town, decided to adopt a baby girl born in China. They believed it was important that their young daughter, Emily, take part in welcoming Yin Yin to the family.

“Emily was 3 when we started the procedure to adopt Yin,” MacKinnon recalls. “We were in the process of

building our house, and one of the rooms was for her sister. She participated in planning for the trip, choosing clothes and toys to bring for Yin. She went with us to China and experienced both the culture and being the one who is different.”

As MacKinnon reflected on the experience, she doesn’t recall sitting down and explaining the situation to Emily. She primarily talked about how having another child in the family would change things—emotional issues such as Emily’s need to share Mommy’s attention, and practical ones such as the danger of small toys that might cause her new sister to choke. They also read children’s books about adoption and books from and about China.

“She had her own experience,” says MacKinnon. “If Emily had questions, Jeff and I answered them as they came up, but didn’t elaborate. My observation is that children don’t attach judgment to differences. That seems to be an adult contamination of their experience. I’ve never heard Emily attach any racial significance to Yin’s looks or behavior. She’s her little sister, who happens to also be Chinese.”

This organic acceptance of difference has held true in the girls’ relationship with MacKinnon’s brother, Gordon, who has been mentally challenged since birth.

“I’ve thought over the years about how I might respond when our girls asked about Gordon’s challenges,” MacKinnon says. “And I was sure they would. But they really haven’t, except to ask about his injections and medication. I recently overheard Yin Yin asking Gordon to read a book to her. He told her he couldn’t read very well, so Yin asked Emily to come read to them both, and she did. Neither of them noticed that a 40-year-old couldn’t read.”

Young children can be introduced to differences in race and culture in several simple, fun ways. Eating dinner at a Thai or Indian restaurant presents the opportunity to taste and talk about foods from countries around the world and the people who live there. Encourage children to choose library books about children from different cultures. Because people aren’t “black” and “white” but shades of mahogany, tan, bronze, and beige, be sure that your art supplies and those at your child’s school include crayons and markers in a rainbow of colors.

Every parent knows that young children have questions and make observations about people who are different. We’ve all been embarrassed by statements our children have blurted out in public. Maybe it’s in the grocery store when your daughter says, “Mom, that lady is so fat!” or “Why does that man only have one leg?”

Because of the stigma against overweight and people with physical disabilities, adults may interpret children’s frank observations as finger-pointing rather than simple questions or statements of fact. Instead of silencing children and their comments, parents can normalize them

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by saying, “People come in all shapes and sizes,” or “He might have been in an accident. Let’s talk about it later.”

Studies show that children pick up norms pretty quickly—what we adults consider appropriate to talk about and what is taboo. Much of children’s learning doesn’t take place within the family system, but at school, with peers, and elsewhere. Teachers, ministers, babysitters, and neighbors all contribute to children’s social education. Schneider says this is why parents need to explain to their children what they believe is, and isn’t, important. To do that well, you have to know what you’re going to say.

“Most parents don’t think much about these issues,” Schneider says. “On one hand, they don’t want their kids to be discriminatory or racist. On the other hand, they’re not very actively involved in trying to keep that from happening. Parents are often more comfortable avoiding controversial topics.”

The need to fit in and feel “the same” as everyone else is never stronger than when children reach middle school. Girls who are taller than boys, boys who are smaller than their peers, and children with learning differences or physical impairments are often singled out or excluded from social groups. Parents of preteens (ages 9–12) can be sure that their children are either participating in those exclusions or experiencing the rejection caused by them. While parents can’t manage their child’s social life, they can help shape the experiences children learn from by encouraging them to take part in activities that widen their social circle.

For some children, playing on a school sports team is

an instant immersion into a group that may be less homogeneous than their peer group. Activities such as scouting, choral groups, band, school clubs, and other organizations that recruit students based on interests may also draw from a variety of populations. These experiences can dramatically and beneficially impact the way kids mature. Children who never mingle with people from other groups don’t know how to act when faced with someone different. Visiting a neighborhood ethnic market or simply riding a city bus provides kids with a window into the larger world. Travel is the ultimate eye-opening experience. If you live in a homogeneous area of the country, plan a vacation with your children to a city with a more diverse population.

As a country, we’re still far from being culturally and racially tolerant. But social scientists believe we’re making progress.

“Generation Y is being brought up differently,” Schneider says. “I think every generation gets better in their parenting skills.”

It’s true that children born between 1981 and 1995 are being raised by parents who understand that the world has changed dramatically. Laura Winchell, a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania, credits her parents for her

TIPS from “The Cultural Coach”

“Peace among people isn’t just going to arrive one day and knock at our door,” says Linda Wallace, whose syndicated column, “The Cultural Coach,” addresses issues related to prejudice and discrimination. “It appears only after enough of us decide to engage in daily activities that resolve conflicts, foster understanding, and promote tolerance.” Here are her suggestions for some simple steps that families can take to embrace difference in ways that promote respect and understanding:

- Contact a college or university in your town and offer to be a host family to an international student. Often these students have their own housing, but enjoy occasionally pairing up with a local family for excursions to local attractions or to enjoy a home-cooked meal.
- Invite one or two neighbors of a different faith to attend your house of worship with you. Ask if you can attend their religious services as well. Afterward, examine where and how your faiths intersect. Look for ways to promote your shared values and beliefs.
- Plan learning activities with your family. Read the newspaper together and discuss editorials and current events. Watch a movie or television show and talk about what you see and hear.
- Treat everyone the way you would want them to treat the person you love most in the world.



inquisitive, fair-minded perspective when it comes to people who look, think, and believe differently than she does.

“My mom and dad always encouraged me to be respectful of all other belief systems while also questioning and reasoning on my own,” she says. “I was never spoon-fed but was encouraged to reach my own conclusions. Growing up, I was encouraged, but never required, to believe the same things my parents do. They always wanted me to approach people and situations as an opportunity to expand my knowledge and learn to appreciate different cultures. I’m an adventurous person by nature, and it was helpful to me that they allowed me to explore by traveling with my chorus in the summer and by forming many different kinds of friendships.”

“Every generation grows up in a different world,” Schneider says. This November, a new generation will help shape that world as they cast their votes in the presidential election—and it appears that these young people are engaged in the political process and aware of the differences that have excluded individuals from leadership in the past. The months preceding the election will be charged with debates about gender, race, religion, and social values. The candidates and their platforms provide ideal opportunities to discuss equality and difference with our children and to listen—perhaps in a new way—to the messages we’re sending them about our own attitudes and values.

When it comes to helping children learn to embrace difference, lead by example. Open the door to new experiences that will widen their social horizons. Answer their questions honestly and understand that the next generation may or may not share our views, values, and beliefs. And—if history is any indication—that’s not always such a bad thing.

Margaret Winchell Miller, a freelance writer specializing in corporate communications, has been contributing to Creative Living since 1977.

DIVERSITY RESOURCES

FOR YOUNG CHILDREN (AGES 4-8):

THE SNEETCHES AND OTHER STORIES

by *Dr. Seuss*

A classic tale about whimsical animals who learn through experience that what you wear and how you look doesn't determine who you are. Every family should own this book.

THE FAMILY BOOK

by *Todd Parr*

A story describing the many ways families are different (some children are adopted or have step-parents; others have two moms or two dads or only one parent) as well as the ways they are alike and can help each other to be strong.

IF THE WORLD WERE BLIND

by *Karen Gedig Burnett*

A narrative about how we judge people based on their skin color, nationality, clothes, body shape, and looks.

FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS:

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

by *Harper Lee (book and film)*

Told through the eyes of a child, this inspired story explores the difficult issues of race and class in a small town during the 1930s.

NUMBER THE STARS

by *Lois Lowry*

The family of a 10-year-old girl in Denmark harbors her best friend during World War II and helps smuggle her Jewish family out of the country.

THE DON'T-GIVE-UP KID AND LEARNING DIFFERENCES

by *Jeanne Gehret*

This book explains learning differences in language that children can comprehend and helps them understand what they can do about it.

FOR TEENS:

FREEDOM WRITERS (film)

While reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, inner-city high school students keep journals and learn life-changing lessons about prejudice.

RADIO (film)

An illiterate, developmentally disabled man nicknamed “Radio,” who has always been teased, is befriended by a compassionate football coach.

THE MIRACLE WORKER (film)

The moving true story of Helen Keller, a blind, deaf, and mute girl, whose experience with teacher Annie Sullivan gives her a new kind of “vision” and transforms the way blind people see and are seen in the world.