polite to notice or ask about differences. By failing to provide accurate information, adults leave children vulnerable to absorbing the biases of society. Here are examples of ways to respond to children's question:

"Why is that girl in a wheelchair?"

Inappropriate

"Shh, it's not nice to ask."(Admonishing)
"I'll tell you another time." (Sidestepping)

Appropriate

"She is using a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her move around."

"Why is Jamal's skin so dark?"

Inappropriate

"His skin color doesn't matter. We are all the same underneath." This response denies the child's question, changing the subject to one of similarity when the child is asking about a difference.

Appropriate

"Jamal's skin is dark brown because his mom and dad have dark brown skin." This is enough for 2- and 3-year-olds. For older children, you can add an explanation of melanin: "Everyone has a special chemical called melanin. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is darker. If you only have a little, your skin is lighter. How much melanin you have in your skin depends on how much your parents have in theirs."

"Why does Tran speak funny?"

Inappropriate

"Tran can't help how she speaks. Let's not say anything about it." This response implies agreement with the child's comment that Tran's speech is unacceptable, while also telling the child to "not notice," and be polite.

Appropriate

"Tran doesn't speak funny, she speaks *differently* from you. She speaks Vietnamese because that is what her mom and dad speak. You speak English like your mom and dad. It is okay to ask questions about what Tran is saying, but it is not okay to say that her speech sounds funny because that can hurt her feelings."[1]

[1] "Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do." National Association for the Education of Young Children.

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Respecting Diversity

A Parent's Guide To Approaching the Issue of Differences

National Crime Prevention Council

Hate- or bias-motivated crime is not a new phenomenon. It is a problem that many communities have tried to deal with throughout history. There has been a disturbing increase in the number of these crimes committed in America over the past decade. Graffiti, vandalism, and criminal threats are the most common forms of hate crimes. On a child's level, lesser forms include teasing, name calling, and racial slurs. Although adults often ignore these actions, they can have a profound and lasting impact on children.

Where Do Children Learn These Things?

What if parents never said a word to children about *differences?* Children of all colors, religions, nationalities, and abilities wouldn't see the differences and would play together in harmony . . . Right?

Not really. Children are bombarded with messages—some subtle, some not so subtle—from adults, peers, the media, and society in general. By the time children reach elementary school, they are aware of differences between people. Unfortunately, they receive a lot of false information about race, religion, culture, gender, and physical and mental challenges. Some have already developed prejudices against people who are different from them. These stereotypes will persist unless and until adults attempt to correct them.

By addressing the topic of respect for differences and providing accurate unbiased information, you can lay a foundation of tolerance and "unteach" negative messages.

What You Can Do

- Bring into your home books, toys, tapes, records, or other things that reflect diverse cultures. Provide images of nontraditional gender roles, diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, and a range of family lifestyles.
- Show that you value diversity through your friendships and business relationships. What you do is as important as what you say.
- Make and enforce a firm rule that someone's differences are never an acceptable reason for teasing or rejecting.
- Provide opportunities for your child to interact with others who are racially or culturally different and with people who are physically or mentally challenged. Look for opportunities at school, in the community, places of worship, or camps.
- Respectfully listen to and answer your child's questions about others. If you ignore questions, change the subject, sidestep, or scold your child for asking, your child will get the message that the subject is bad or inappropriate.
- Avoid gender stereotyping. Encourage your child's interests in all sorts of activities, whether they are traditionally male- or female-oriented.
- If you hear your child use a racial, ethnic, or religious slur, make it clear that those kind of comments are not acceptable.

All in the Family?

Many times extended family members may not share your views on diversity. These family members may show their prejudices through inappropriate jokes or slang. If an incident occurs where a child is present, ask the offender to refrain from that kind of talk around the children. If a child asks why a family member can say those things and the child can not, tell them that it is not acceptable to make fun of people because of their differences.

Responding to Common Questions Children Ask

Young children not only recognize differences, they also absorb values about which differences are positive and which are not. Your reaction to ideas that young children express will greatly affect their feelings and beliefs. Often, children's curiosity-based questions about differences go unanswered because adults react by teaching that it is im-