
FEATURE

We're all the same—and different: Learning about similarities and differences in people

*M*argie's class was on a field trip to the local farmers' market. Nina excitedly pointed to baskets of tomatoes, corn, and squash and then asked, in her biggest outside voice, "Why does that man have only one leg? Did someone cut the other one off?"



Even the youngest children are aware of the similarities and differences among people. Skin color, language, gender, and physical differences stir questions in children. Responding to children's questions and observations—even those that make us uncomfortable—is an important function of early care and education.

Children's questions reflect curiosity and eagerness to make sense of their world. Adults' responses too often reflect discomfort and embarrassment; we tend to avoid conversations about differences. If we are most comfortable with what we know, it is logical

that we are least comfortable with—and tend to fear—what we don't know. We do, however, have a responsibility to learn about individual differences, respond to children's questions, and model behaviors that communicate comfort with others.

Many individual differences are governed by a person's genetics—traits that are inherited. These traits can include characteristics like hair color, skin color, eye color, and height. Other differences, like religion or language are governed by environmental factors and are not inherited. Differences can also be the result of accident or illness as well as personal preference (like gardening, eating asparagus, reading novels, or wearing hats).

Because children learn through hands-on experiences with materials, try to anticipate interests, respond to questions and observations promptly, correct misperceptions and assumptions, and provide resources and materials that encourage investigation and problem-solving.

In her groundbreaking 1989 book, *Anti-Bias Curriculum*, Louise Derman-Sparks identified five areas of diversity that children noticed, questioned, and commented on:

- People with disabilities
- Gender differences
- Physical differences
- Cultural differences
- Family lifestyles

Naturally, developmental stages and language skills impact how, when, and why children attend to differences. An infant recognizes familiar people and may be wary of strangers. Toddlers mimic adult behaviors and ask, "Why?" and "What?" Preschoolers are increasingly adept at sorting, classifying, and categorizing, and often overgeneralize cultural or racial attributes; they often mask fear of differences with avoidance or jokes.

PHOTOS BY SUSAN GAETZ



Through the primary school years children build understanding of identity, group membership, and individual strengths. Teachers, therefore, must be prepared to challenge stereotypes, clarify distorted information, and help children build and use accurate information about differences.

Examining physical characteristics

Some physical characteristics contribute to our uniqueness as individuals. Encourage children's questions as they participate in these sample activities.

Fingerprints

Each of the 7.7 billion people in the world has a unique pattern of *ridges, whorls, arches, loops, and valleys* on the tip of each finger and toe. The fingerprints and toeprints are visible at birth, never change, and are different even in identical twins.

Help children recognize and celebrate this simple uniqueness. You'll need white paper, a non-toxic ink pad, and magnifiers. Help the children press each finger onto the ink pad and transfer the ink to the paper without smearing. Encourage children to examine their own and their classmates' prints with the magnifier.

Eye color

Eye color is a heritable characteristic and one of the first individual traits explored in genetics. Among peoples of the world, brown eyes are the most

common, green and hazel eyes next, and blue eyes least common. Eye color is determined by the pigment found in the eye's *iris*.

Use color photos (from old magazines or the Internet) to talk with children about eye colors and share small mirrors so children can examine their own eyes and identify the color.

Invite children to work in pairs to draw pictures of each other's eyes, coloring in the approximate color of their partners' eyes. Group the pictures by eye color, and count and then graph the numbers. Does the ratio of brown to green/hazel to blue correspond to the global population overall?

Eye color, lashes, size, shape, and ocular muscles contribute to our uniqueness. Take pictures of children's eyes, print the photos in color, laminate, and trim the pictures so all are the same size. Build a game encouraging children to identify classmates by the eyes alone.

Skin tone

Skin color depends on several factors, but the most significant is the pigment *melanin* that is produced in skin cells. The level of melanin is primarily determined by genetics: People born to fair-skinned parents will usually inherit fair skin; people born to dark-skinned parents will generally inherit dark skin.

The environment too has impact on skin tone. Exposure to the ultraviolet radiation from the sun activates melanin to protect the skin. A person who works outdoors every day will develop more darkly pigmented (tanned) skin over time. Occasional sun exposure does not stimulate enough protective melanin and the skin can burn. Freckles result from scattered spots of melanin; these can darken with sun exposure.

Melanin is expressed in shades of brown—everything from beige to ochre, tan, rust, and chocolate; a person's skin color depends on the combination of pigments inherited from parents as well as environmental factors.

Collect paint chips that reflect all the shades of brown, from lightest to darkest. Explore these with children to reinforce the array of individual differences.

Explore skin tone with play dough. Mix several batches of cooked dough. Make five balls and use tempera paint or a paste-type food coloring to color the balls black, brown, red, and yellow. Leave one ball uncolored. Show the children how to mix two or three colors together to make a new color—black and brown,

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for example, mix to make dark brown. Offer small pinches of the five colors of dough and challenge children to mix colors to match their own skin tones.

Share the rhythmic read-aloud book *The Skin You Live In*.

Tickles

The skin is the primary receptor of tactile stimulation. Some children enjoy (and are more sensitive to) tickling—the soft touch to a sensitive part of the body like the hands, feet, tummy, or underarms.

Help children explore tickling sensitivity working with a partner. Invite the children to remove shoes and socks and give each couple a feather. Each child presents hands (palm up) and feet to the partner. The partner lightly brushes the foot and hand with a light touch of the feather. Note that most people cannot tickle themselves and some are too sensitive to any touch: Respect individual differences.

Chart the results and expand the exploration by tickling the ears, under the nose, the arm, and behind the knee.

Noses and the sense of smell

The sense of smell is the least understood of the senses, but research suggests it may be thousands of times more sensitive than the sense of taste. The sense of smell is unique in that sensory nerves wear out and are replaced regularly (every 30 to 45 days). Also, our sense of smell weakens as we age. Smells seem to be culturally specific and research suggests

every person has an odor print that is as unique as a fingerprint. Odor preferences and our responses to particular smells mark us as individuals.

Noses come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors—and reflect our similarities and differences. Can you and the children in your group know the nose? Take close-up snapshots of children's faces. Make color prints and mount 2 to 4 photos (depending on size) on the inside of a file folder. Use a craft knife to cut small doors on the front of the folder to allow only the nose on each photo to be revealed. Invite children to guess whose nose is whose.

Tongue rolling

Tongue rolling is another inherited trait. Some people can roll (lift the two sides up to the center) their tongues, others cannot. Similar observable traits include earlobe attachment, dimples, freckles, handedness, and curly hair.

Demonstrate tongue rolling and invite children to do the same with a partner or using a mirror. Make a graph showing each child's ability. As you explore individual differences with children, be prepared to chart other observable heritable traits.

Build common bonds

Individual differences make the early care and education classroom a vibrant, exciting, and enriching environment. While acknowledging differences as positive attributes that individual children bring to the learning community, never forget to reinforce commonalities. Examples:

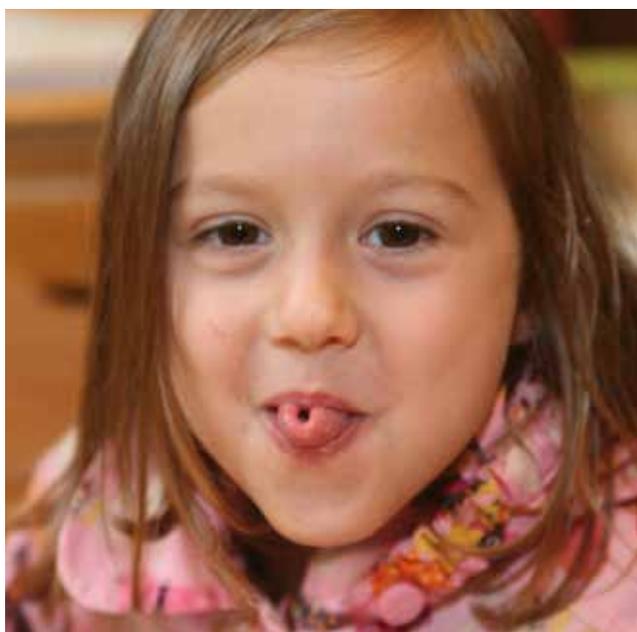
- We all live in families (in different structures, with unique roles, speaking different languages).
- We like to play (with others, with toys, and sometimes pretending).
- We want to have friends (who accept and appreciate us).
- We want to succeed (discovering that some tasks are easier than others).

Actively help children strengthen the skills that will contribute to becoming a global citizen—one who can acknowledge, appreciate, and reflect similarities and also can acknowledge, appreciate, and respect differences.

Children's books to share

Adoff, A. (2004). *Black is brown is tan*. New York, NY: Harper Collins/Amistad.

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- Ewald, W. (2002). *The best part of me: Children talk about their bodies in pictures and words*. New York, NY: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers.
- Katz, K. (2002). *The colors of us*. New York, NY: Square Fish Books.
- Lossomger, K. (2014). *All the colors we are/Todos los colores de nuestra piel*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Rotner, S. and Kelly, S.A. (2010). *Shades of people*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Tyler, M. (2005). *The skin you live in*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Children's Museum.

Resources for teachers

- Derman-Sparks, L. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Derman-Sparks, L. and Olsen Edwards, J. (2010). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Derman-Sparks, L. and Ramsey, P.G. (2006). *What if all the kids are white? Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- National Institute of Health. (June 2018). "What is heritability?" <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/primer/inheritance/heritability>
- York, Stacey. (2016). *Roots and wings: Affirming culture and preventing bias in early childhood*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press. ■