

Helping Children Embrace Diversity

A mom who adopted a baby from China tells this story. Her three-year-old was at day care when a toddler walked up to her and said, “Your eyes are different than mine.”

It was a simple statement of fact. There’s a huge diversity in God’s family. Even little ones notice differences. This awareness of diversity in gender, race, ethnicity and abilities begins between ages two and five. By the time children come to Sunday school, they’ve already absorbed attitudes and biases from their family and society. Sooner or later in your classroom you will encounter statements that are not as innocent as the toddler’s remark about differences. Some child will make a remark, and that remark will hurt another child.

When teachers and parents are silent, the biased attitudes will grow stronger. On the other hand, speaking up about the problem and teaching about diversity can break down the wall of prejudice. Here are some suggestions for helping you make your Sunday school a place where children experience the unbiased, unreserved love of Jesus and each other:

1. Model acceptable behaviors and attitudes. When you warmly welcome all children and show no favoritism when you ask questions, assign tasks, or hand out rewards, you are showing children that Jesus’ love does not exclude anyone. Speak positively about other cultures and ways of living.
2. Create an environment in your classroom that celebrates diversity. For instance:
 - Create a mural of Jesus surrounded by a multiethnic group of people. Include children with obvious disabilities.
 - Display pictures of Jesus created by artists from different races.
 - Stock your room with books, toys, and music that reflect cultural diversity and disability awareness.
 - Celebrate Christian holidays with customs of different cultures.
 - Adapt activities so that children who have a disability can participate.
 - Provide paper, crayons, and paints that enable children to create a variety of skin tones, hair colors, and costumes in their artwork.
 - Speak up. Take action when you hear racial slurs or put-downs that reflect stereotyped attitudes. Discuss what’s being said or implied, and point out the pain this can cause others.
 - Answer questions honestly. Children will want to know why some people have different skin colors, or use adaptive aids, or speak with an accent. Silence or embarrassment speaks louder than words. If you don’t know the answer, say so and promise to investigate.
3. Teach about diversity. Use activities and discussion to build positive images so children value differences. Point out stereotypes in movies and media. Give kids opportunities to role-play how they would handle instances of discrimination or prejudice. Invite them to sign petitions or write letters to address wrongs.
4. Facilitate opportunities for children to interact with others in different cultural situations. Visit other churches, invite visitors to you class, or attend a cultural event as a group. People often fear what they do not know, especially if they’ve had little exposure to people who come from different backgrounds. At Pentecost, thousands of people of different cultures became one because of the Holy Spirit of God. Your group may be small, but you, too can experience beautiful Pentecost unity, which is a great foretaste of what’s in store for us in heaven!

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