

Is Your Child Different? 7 Ways To Celebrate & Support Them!



We know that children, at some point in their lives, will be treated differently by others -- simply for being different. It could be over their race, religion, gender, or nationality. It could be based on their height and weight, or new features such as braces, a haircut, glasses, or acne. Or perhaps someone walks with a limp, has facial scars, stutters, or just doesn't quite sound or look like everyone else. Kids get teased for being smart or slow learners. Many get unwanted attention -- or are completely ignored. They get bullied for any and all reasons -- some verbally and psychologically, others physically. They get ostracized from the group and are seen as outcasts.

What if we can teach children to treat one another better and for all children to build up a confidence and sense of self-love that can help insulate them against people treating them badly? Studies show that if we reach children at a young age, as early as two, we can teach kids not to hate or discriminate, not to dismiss what they are not familiar with, not to ignore those who are merely different -- and no worse or better than them.

As a certified teacher in Positive Parenting, and having taught classes to parents on how to raise healthy, loving, and productive kids, I put into practice those teachings as a parent of twin nine-year-old boys and a four-year-old girl. But I realize we need to do more, as parents, and as a society, to help the newest generation see its peers as equals or at least as human beings who don't deserve to be shunned or bullied.

As a child, I was bullied at times. Having ADD, and later, being afflicted with Bell's Palsy, makes me feel different, especially when people treat me differently. But I have learned to ignore the haters and to appreciate my own differences or perceived shortcomings as true assets.

When I wrote my debut children's book, *Ack! The Nantucket Duckling*, it was intended to be entertaining and inspiring. I was pleasantly surprised to see that parents, educators, therapists, and all of those who work with children have really embraced teaching its message of respecting others for who they are and to see a difference as a strength.

In the story, a duck who feels his beak doesn't quite look and sound right, is not treated nicely by the other ducks. But an opportunity occurs where what made him feel like a damaged duck turned him into a hero. The book jumped to No. 4 on Amazon's best-seller list for classic children's literature, alongside some very popular children's books.

Here are seven ways parents can help children feel special – and loved for the very things others will ridicule or judge them for:

1. First and foremost, always tell your children that you love them. You can never say it often enough. Say it with words – or actions such as hugs, kisses, smiles, and high-fives, or other playful gestures that makes them feel secure and like they belong. Children who are loved will have a healthier attitude about themselves and in how they view or treat others.
2. Model good behavior. Kids always watch us, even when you think they aren't. They make plenty of observations and draw conclusions as they navigate the world that unfolds in front of them. You are their most trusted and respected source of information. Make sure they see you doing the right things and don't see you engaging in poor behavior. By demonstrating what is the proper way to treat others will inspire them to do the same.
3. Don't say aloud something that could be perceived as negative by your child, when you comment on how other people look. For instance, don't say to your spouse: "Go pay the fat man at the counter for the toy." Don't describe people by attributes such as skin color or something noticeable that is described in the negative, such as "Watch out for that suspicious-looking Black guy over there" or "Ask the dumb-looking store manager where the bathroom is." Just leave out your descriptive observations that have no relevancy. You don't want kids to see you as a biased, harshly critical or unfair person.
4. Don't avoid what makes them different. Embrace your child's Ack!. Support them. Tell them to be proud of all that makes them who they are. Help them see the positive side or advantages to what makes them stand out.
5. Show your kids positive role models – showcase people who are just like them, who succeeded in life.
6. Encourage your kids to talk to you about how they feel about what makes them feel different. Support them by listening.
7. Get help if your kids are being bullied. You can't ignore or dismiss it. Talk to teachers, parents, and other authority figures to squelch the bullying.

Perhaps the best thought that I can convey is that all parents should give the same advice Ack's mom gave him in the book. She said: "Always remember, you are loved just as you are."

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