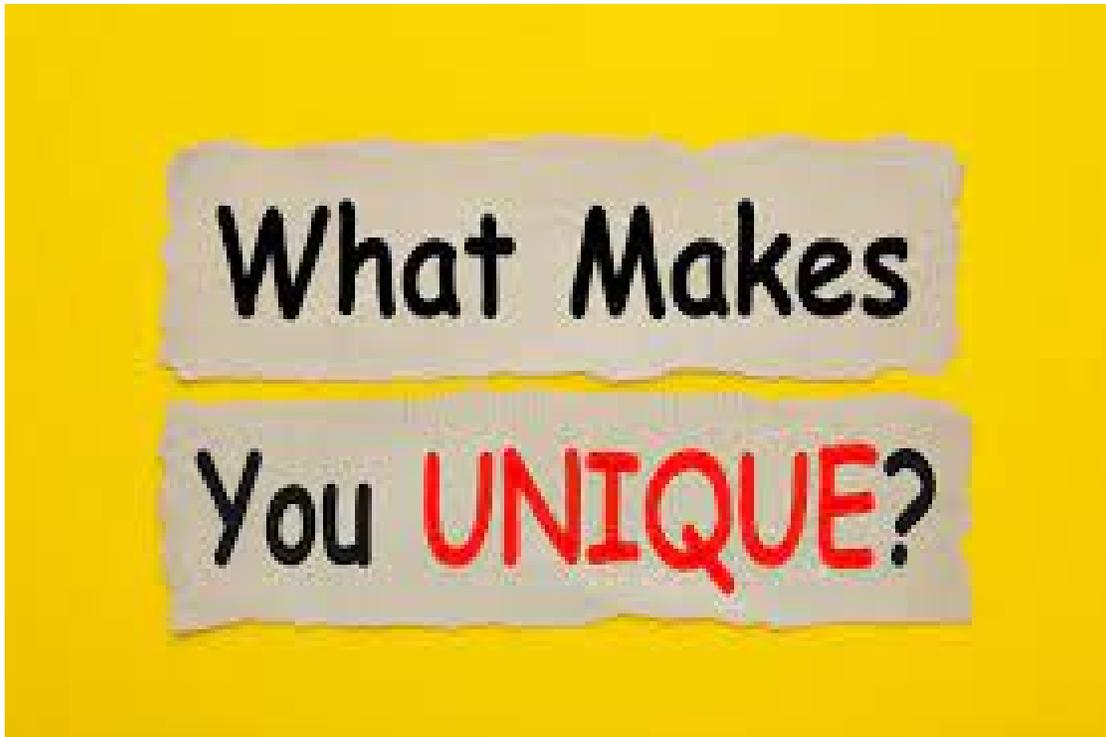


# Can Our Children Unite Around Their Differences? 12 Principles To Live By



America is a melting pot of 330 million people, consisting of many with diverse backgrounds. At times, what makes one different becomes a bullseye for one hate group or another. We have a choice – criticize, fight with, and mistreat others, simply for looking different than us – or we could find a way to value what makes everyone unique and unite our nation around those very differences.

So many things can serve as excuses to divide adults, such as race, age, ethnicity, religion, regionalism, or politics. Children, if exposed to things in a negative environment, will likely grow up to mirror their parents' level prejudice. However, if children are exposed to positive, empowering messages at a young age, they can embrace some terrific values for life – inclusivity, empathy, and self-love.

While seeing the nation torn apart over what makes us different, from our political views to how we treat each other simply based on tribalistic factors such as race or gender, I wanted to help the next generation come away with healthier ideas about the world. That is why I wrote *Ack! The Nantucket Duckling*, an award-winning, critically-acclaimed, best-selling children's book. Now, young minds can be shaped by a positive message.

In my book, a little duck with a different kind of beak goes from being bullied to becoming a hero. What makes him different can lead to ridicule and ostracization – but it can also be used to help others. We each must embrace our Ack – whatever it is that makes us different.

Short people. Tall people. Heavy people. Skinny people.

Kids with glasses, acne, braces, scars, wheelchairs, or bald heads.

Children with a physical disability, learning disorder, or mental health challenge.

Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous People, and immigrants.

Kids of all religions or none at all.

The orphans and the adopted. Those with one parent. Some have two mommies.

Red hair. Missing teeth. Walking with a limp. Talking with a lisp.

There are so many things that make us different.

Instead of looking at each of these people negatively or critically – or isolating them and treating them differently, embrace these differences. See everyone as beautiful, with the potential to bring a different perspective on life. Rather than mock one as if they have shortcomings merely for being different, see them as a whole human being. Do not minimize their existence to one body part, trait, or characteristic.

What we don't know or understand should not frighten us. What is different is not necessarily bad. Where one lacks one trait or ability, he or she may have a wonderful, additional one that you just didn't realize existed.

The world has always been divided and prejudiced. Can we break that ugly cycle? It starts with each of us – and what we teach our children. Let's start with helping children to embrace these 12 value propositions:

1. **Encourage children to read books, watch films and television, and consume content that presents the world in a way we'd like it to be.** To envision a better world will help us create that exact world.
2. **Teach your kids about their heritage – and to be proud of it.** But don't teach them to undervalue or dislike the heritage of others. It's not a competition. Everyone should value their roots, but not use it as an excuse to hate, mistreat, or segregate others.
3. **Stop harshly judging another.** It's okay to acknowledge a difference; it's another to judge a whole person by it or to treat them differently because of it.
4. **We should not be looking for perfection – not in others or from ourselves.** We all will fall short of any ideal, no matter who sets the standard. We don't all have to look, sound, or think the same. We are not meant to be clones of one another.
5. **We should accept ourselves for whom we are.** Love yourself. Accept others for whom they are. Love them unconditionally.

6. **Try not to label a child as bad or evil.** Just say you expect better behavior if you see your child teasing someone for being different. Let's reduce the use of extreme labels and just intervene. Focus on what your child could do more or less of and be sure to have them and validate their feelings.
7. **We need to co-exist harmoniously.** Once you realize we are all human and that no one is to be valued any more than another – or any less than another – you can look past differences or limitations and see weaknesses as strengths to be valued.
8. **Don't shun a child who reveals he or she sees someone who looks different.** Sure, you don't want them pointing fingers or ridiculing someone, but let them ask you questions or share how they feel. Don't admonish them for acknowledging what is obvious. Instead, help them understand what they see, put things in perspective, and encourage them to accept others as they are. Remove stigmas, add encouragement.
9. **Teach forgiveness.** Just because someone acts mean towards another makes bad jokes, or bullies another, doesn't mean you can't forgive them, teach them, or embrace them. Often, people act up out of ignorance, jealousy, or a lack of skills to cope. Help them understand how they make you feel. Show them you are willing to give them a second chance. Someone has to change for all of us to change.
10. **Invite family and friends in to share about their unique hobbies, interests, music, or culture.** Expose your children to seeing how so many different things influence and shape others – all different, all equal.
11. **Don't ignore differences; teach kids to explore and celebrate them.** Let them draw images of people who are very different. Encourage them to be detailed. Who is tall or short? What are their eye colors? How are their clothes different? What activities are they participating in? Does someone wear glasses? Are they missing teeth?
12. **Have your child explore groups of things: dogs, flowers, foods, shoes.** Have them describe what is different about them – and what is similar. Explore how each difference makes it unique and how such differences make each one desirable in their own way.

In my book, Ack, upon feeling sad over his unusual beak, says: "If I was just like everyone else, I'd be so much happier." He learns that is really not the case. I implore you to help your child unite around our differences, and to teach your child to embrace whatever makes them stand out.

A.K. Spurway, certified in Positive Parenting, is a mom of three young children. She is the founder and CEO of [www.Nanducket.com](http://www.Nanducket.com), an empowering children's lifestyle company, and the best-selling author of *Ack! The Nantucket Duckling*. Her mission is to help the newest generation to embrace tolerance, see differences as advantages, feel happy with who they are, and to adopt a mindset of self-love as they are.