

## *Learning from Differences*

**T**ALK ABOUT WELL-BEHAVED CHILDREN! Years ago, my son went to a well-known Berkeley preschool (before White Pony existed) where all students turned out to have similar mild temperaments. Before starting, he was required (at age three) to spend a morning in the classroom having his behavior observed by the school's director. His sweet, cautious manner gained him instant acceptance. As a parent, I loved leaving him off in that halcyon environment. However, my mom, who worked in an Oakland daycare center, saw my son's highly respected school from another perspective. After picking him up many times, she made the observation that the children were too much alike.

In second grade, my son was able to attend The Meher Schools. The atmosphere was also peaceful, but there were as many personality types as there were students. My son didn't need to pre-qualify as the school wasn't looking for a particular kind of child. The staff was eager to love any student and believe in the unique gifts he or she brought to the world. They had the vision to bring out the best in each child—and some of those same teachers are still working their magic at the school today.

Over the years, I've seen that exposing children to a wide variety of personalities is essential to their social development. Being able to negotiate conflicts with classmates builds resiliency. The goal is to build children's confidence in handling others' reactions and to begin to identify positive qualities in those who initially appear irritating, intimidating, or bossy.

**Listen to your child's feelings with neutrality.** Your child isn't going to feel comfortable with everyone right away. "Jason was mean" is often code for "Jason wouldn't do what I wanted." Encourage him to express his feelings and problem-solve solutions. Listening to a child is better than trying to alter her perspective or fix her problems for him. Comment on her resourcefulness and tolerance. "You know how to be patient with people who are different than you."

**Read books about handling conflict.** *King of the Playground* is a picture book that provides a wonderful example of a father encouraging his son to find his own solutions to being at the playground with a more dominant peer.

**Role-play different ways to respond.** Act out play scenarios. Pretend you are a child trying to take a toy from your daughter or saying, "No, you can't play." Ask your child to come up with things she can say. Encourage her to try different voices for effectiveness. It takes time to learn to set boundaries effectively. Suggest going to a teacher for backup.

**Talk about uncomfortable situations from your experience.** You might say, "When I was little, I was afraid if someone talked in a loud voice. After a while, I got used to it." You can talk about various options you've tried when you felt hurt, left out, or angry.

Learning not to let others who think or feel differently than we do throw us off balance is one of the most important skills in life. It's easy to be tolerant of those who react the same way we do, but developing useful social skills means discovering our capacity for accepting those who aren't like us.

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