



YCS Effective Practice Briefing: Supporting Conversations About Difference

YCS Effective Practice Briefings are produced by the YCS Quality Development Team and are based on up to date evidence and engagement with children, staff and key stakeholders. They provide concise and easily accessible advice and guidance for front-line staff and will be reviewed as further information becomes available.

1. Why Conversations About Difference are Important

Conversations on difference between children and young people in our care, colleagues we work with and even friends can be difficult for fear of causing upset or drawing attention to the difference. This means what makes us different is ignored which can cause more harm than a conversation acknowledging, exploring and learning about these differences, which will in turn connect similarities. Improving our understanding of those around us allows:

- a more inclusive environment, where individuals feel a sense of belonging and value through their difference.
- a more diversely rich environment that has the ability to adapt to the needs of the community within it
- a greater knowledgebase to enable everyone to better understand each other and address marginalization, exclusion and microaggressions

In the case of children and young people, their individual identity and how they view and value themselves and that identity is closely linked to their behaviour and social performance. The better they feel about themselves the more likely they are to engage positively and succeed. When children and young people talk about difference they learn more about different perspectives and are more likely to develop empathy and tactics for getting along. Psychologist [Carol Dweck](#) notes, adopting the mindset that people and things can grow and change will likely motivate you to do your best.

2. Do:

- **Think about timing** – when is best for the child or young person? Is there enough time to talk and offer support if the talk triggers any concerns or issues? As an example, avoid just before bedtime when they will be left alone with just themselves and their thoughts until the next day.
- **Consider the format of the conversation.** As adults we love the ‘sit down, no distractions face-to-face approach’ when things are important, this doesn’t work so well with children and young people who quite like distractions whilst having conversations e.g. whilst playing a game or eating. This
- **Model inclusive language and behaviour**, remember children learn more from watching than listening.
- **Acknowledge it is a potentially uncomfortable conversation** with the child or young person: ‘hey, I need to have a conversation with you that might be a bit awkward, it will last about 6 minutes but I’d really appreciate it if you gave me the time’. This pre-warns the child or young person, it also lets them know it isn’t going to be a long conversation whilst also expressing your desire to have it.
- **Plant the seed for the next conversation**, ‘I really appreciated you giving me the time for this talk today. I’d like to do it again sometime. If you need to talk about it some more I am available to you, just ask.’. This lets them know you are invested in them.

3. Don’t:

- **Let your anxiety** around the subject matter **stop you having the conversations** or stifling the child or young person’s comments if they make you anxiety increase.
- **Be quick to explain, attempt to justify or quash comments made where children and young people highlight inequality or marginalisation** e.g. ‘you were being racist when you gave me that behaviour warning’ – ‘That’s interesting, can we explore why do you feel that way?’.
- **Assume that the view through your eyes and experience of the world is the same as everyone else’s**, give time, space and merit to different views and experiences.
- **Label children and young people**, allow them to self-identify with the groups they feel they belong to and identify with.
- **Discourage questions** - Talking about differences and answering questions teaches children that it’s okay to notice differences and that it’s good to talk about them.
- **Be judgemental**, remember most children and young people are repeating language they have seen or heard in the community or on TV.
- **Let bias go unchecked** - we **all** have bias, it forms the narrative used to fill in information about those around us but it often goes unnoticed. Consider assumptions and the surprise we feel when those assumptions are not correct, that highlights a bias in our own thought processes. By having an awareness of what surprises us we can start to address our own internal bias as they arise.

4. Some Helpful Tips to Having Good Conversations

- **Embrace what makes you different:** being different is special, your difference is what makes you special and unique, and in embracing what makes you special it enables you to appreciate what makes other special, unique and different. You need to model acceptance of yourself to support the child or young person to also do so.
- **Do not mentally multi-task:** we talk at 250 words per minute but can listen to up to 500 words per minute, the brain tries to fill the void. Be present and focus, if something pops in just let it flow out e.g. what shall I have for dinner tonight?
- **Don't express opinions or judgements as if they are undeniably true:** [M. Scott Peck](#), an American psychiatrist and best-selling author, said "true listening requires a setting aside of one's self...sensing this acceptance the speaker will become less and less vulnerable and more and more likely to open up the inner recess of their mind". In conversations where we want to be open, learn and include keep things brief, listen and don't try to demonstrate how much you know – try not to view the conversation as a competition of who knows the most but one of who can learn the most.
- **Be honest:** if you don't know something admit it, you don't have to have all the answers, and by extension neither does the person you are talking with. You will be more credible by being honest than scrambling in your mind for something you think might fit.
- **Ask open question:** e.g. "How did that make you feel" or "What are the similarities between you and your friends". Don't ask questions such as "did that make you angry", the person will focus on the most traumatic word and respond with yes or no, this doesn't open up dialogue and prevents people from expressing themselves as words have been given to them to respond to.
- **Listen:** Stephen Covey ("[7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#)".1989) notes that 'Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.'. You may think your question is a really good one and want to ask it but have you kept up with the conversation? is it still relevant? and in waiting to ask it have you switched off from the conversation?
- **Be brief and avoid detail:** these conversations are about human connection and feelings; detail, statistics and elongated explanations do not draw people together so keep the conversations brief and leave detail out.
- In the words of [Bill Nye the Science Guy](#) "Everyone you'll ever meet knows something you don't", if we keep this in mind in conversation we have, this keeps us open to what is being said and will give us a greater understanding of the person we are talking to.

5. Having the Conversations

A good place to start the conversation are with similarities between you and the child or young person, as this draws people together and reduces conflict. Just remember that everyone has intersecting identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, ability, etc.) and that we also don't always know how another person identifies from their physical appearance. Try and pick easy similarities or conversations that start the a 'what is the same between us' discussion:

- We all like to belong to a group and don't like feeling left out, can you remember the 1st time you felt left out of a group and what it felt like? For me it was...
- Did you watch that super hero movie on TV over the weekend? I really enjoyed it and really liked character 'x', what about you? What made you like them in particular?

Starting conversations here does not mean avoiding discussions of difference. A good practice is using the shared values to bridge to difference. If we take the super hero movie again you move from favourite characters to:

- Did you see anyone that you identify with? Why is that?
- How do you feel their character came across – were they strong, weak, poor, rich – do you think that is a fair representation of your identity? Why?
- Is it a representation of the issues faced by this group in the real world? If yes, how would you change this if you could?

Here are some suggestions for some non-abrupt ways to open discussions on difference, just listen to their responses and ask more questions:

- Do you feel that you have ever been 'singled out' or treated differently from other people? (If yes, in what ways? Why do you think this is? Can you tell me how this has affected you? What difference has this experience made to you?)
- What support have you had to help you with this? If you haven't had support - what would have helped?
- 'You have identified yourself as.....could I ask you some questions regarding your experiences?'
- 'What was life like growing up....at school....in your community.'
- 'Who were/are the positive role models in your life?' 'Why did you pick these as your role models?'

These discussions may open up emotions for the child or young person and staff member engaged with them. It is important that the child or young person feels supported after sharing and staff will be able to get advice and support around actions to take and managing the emotional content through reflective supervision where it is available or other appropriate support processes.

Remember to embrace our own differences and support children and young people to feel proud about their identity and what makes them different, whilst encouraging the continued recognition of similarities to keep drawing children, young people and staff together as a community.

6. Useful Resources

[How-to-Talk-with-Children-About-Racial-Differences-and-Racism \(InfoAboutKids.Org\)](#)

[RESilience: Uplifting Youth Through Healthy Communication About Race.](#)

[How to Talk to Your Child About Learning and Thinking Differences \(A, Morin.Understood\)](#)

[How-to-Talk-to-Your-Kids- About Sex and Sexuality \(Dr.P. Drexler. July2014. Huff Post\)](#)

[6 Tips to Talk to Your Kids About Disabilities \(Lindsay, Hutton. Family Education\)](#)

7. TedTalk Resources

[The Power of Difficult Conversations](#)

[How to Have a Voice and Lean into Conversations Around Race](#)

[10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation](#)

[What Makes You Special?](#)

[Talking to Children About Race and Ethnicity](#)

[We Need to Talk with Children About Difference](#)

[Every Kid Needs a Champion](#)