

Communicating with Our Children about Their Classmates in an Inclusive Community

Our kids can have lots of questions and feelings about their classmates with special needs. *That's great!* When they ask questions and talk about their feelings, it gives us a chance to fill in that void with information that is respectful. It also gives all of us - parents and kids - a chance to use our empathic skills. With thoughtful answers, our kids will learn early on that being fair means giving people what they need to be able to learn.

How do I talk to my child about his/her classmates with special needs?

Consider each classmate with special needs as an individual rather than a group. Ask your child what they observe about their classmate, and see if there is a question your child has about a specific behavior. Addressing individual behaviors rather than naming a diagnosis is both sensitive to the privacy of that classmate and his/her family and more meaningful to your child. Give your child a way to think about how to empathize and/or engage with that classmate.

Maybe your child says, "Jenny always starts to cry when we have to take out our math work, and it freaks me out." You answering, "Jenny may have dyscalculia" will mean little to most grade school kids.

You might say:

Math seems to be a real challenge for Jenny, just like reading aloud can be hard for you. And you've said that you feel really scared to read aloud. How do you think Jenny may feel about her math challenges?

My child tells me that his/her classmate who has special needs doesn't receive the same consequences as everyone else. He/she asks, "Why does Danny get to do that and not me?"

Let him/her know that sometimes the curriculum or expectations for students with special needs may be different than that of their peers.

You might say:

At our school, everyone gets what he/she needs. Maybe right now Danny needs to do that. We'll make sure you get what you need too.

-or-

Some people need to wear glasses to see, so we let them. But other people don't need glasses to see. And it would be silly if we made everyone wear them!

Inclusive Environments Use People First Language

A person's disability is only one part of what makes that person who he/she is. Put the person before the disability. Instead of saying "the wheelchair kid", try saying "Joe who uses a wheelchair."



What if my child asks things like "Why does Robbie yell out all of a sudden?" or "Why does Sara keep repeating herself" or "Why does Johnny wear a heavy vest all day?" I don't know any of these answers!

It's okay to not know and to say that you don't know. Our schools have counselors, educators and resources to help you answer questions about behaviors. Encourage your child to ask their teacher or, if you feel that your child is mature enough to ask in a sensitive, nonjudgmental way, encourage him/her to ask that classmate. For example, "Johnny, why do you wear that vest in school?" You can also tell your child you don't know exactly why, but then try to point out ways in which we are all alike.

You might say:

I don't know why Robbie yells out at school. Maybe it's like us yelling when we ride the rollercoaster? It feels good to scream to let go of the butterfly feelings so we can enjoy the ride. Maybe school is really stressful for Robbie, and that's how he lets go of those feelings? But it's unexpected in a classroom, so not yelling at school is probably something he's working on.

-or-

I'm not sure why Sarah keeps repeating herself. But you know how sometimes seeing movies we've seen a million times can make us feel comfortable because we already know what's going to happen? Maybe repeating the same thing over and over again makes Sarah feel comfortable. It's okay to politely tell her that you've already heard it.

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Released October 2014

Piedmonters for Resources, Advocacy, and Information in Special Education