

Cover Story: Helping Children Live & Learn in a Diverse World

Encouraging Acceptance and Compassion Through Play

Helping children learn to interact successfully in a diverse world

by Thomas Moore, Ph.D.

Johnny and Katya were playing in the preschool's play yard. Katya picked up a toy dump truck and started filling it with sand. Johnny grabbed it from her, shouting, "Hey, that's mine. And it's just for boys!" When Katya burst into tears, the teacher approached them, put one arm around Katya, and took Johnny's hand. Patiently, she listened while the children each told their side of the story. She helped them resolve the conflict by talking about their feelings, and gained new insights in the process.

Developing kindness and compassion for others is a critical part of young children's development. The ability to accept others—even if they are different—and feel compassion for them is an essential component of social competency. This is just as important as any academic training. Socially competent children are more successful in life. The ability to relate to and accept people who are different is not just a desired trait—it's a necessity for living in today's diverse society.

Teaching acceptance and compassion through play can be great fun. You'll have the opportunity to explore a wide range of children's interests, traditions, and cultures. Once children begin to understand the basic principle of compassion, which is kindness, and once they are introduced to the joy of differences, they can begin to teach themselves through experience and relationships.

Looking at Play

The formation of reciprocal relationships and the discovery of uniqueness in others begin with play. As children grow, they advance beyond the solitary play of infants to the parallel play of toddlers, in which a child and a friend may play in the same area, sharing materials and physical proximity, without attempting to coordinate play.

In preschool, children engage in associative play, sharing and coordinating materials, but not always truly cooperating. For example, children might direct classmates in what should happen next. By kindergarten, children are engaging in collaborative play, which includes planning, negotiation, and cooperation. As children's play progresses and becomes more sophisticated, opportunities for kind and compassionate interactions increase.

Watch how children play. Appreciate their creativity as they use their imaginations and try on different roles. Listen carefully to children as they engage one another. When they take on the role of adults in their community, or even when they talk about others, children give insights into their culture and expectations of others.

Developing Social Skills

As children's social skills ripen, they develop "people skills" that will aid them in shaping positive encounters, working in groups, and inspiring others. Kindness, tolerance, and empathy are qualities that children develop over time through observation and practice. The loving relationship a parent shares with a newborn starts the process. By age 2, a toddler might not understand why her friend is crying, but she may try to comfort her by offering her own blankie or teddy. By age 3, children are more aware of others as individuals, but they still have trouble relating to how others actually feel. Older children can begin to understand that other people have feelings separate from their own and often realize when they've hurt someone else. By the time a child is 5 or 6, they can discuss kindness and recognize its value in their relationships with others.

Because children learn by watching what you do and say when you interact with others, the warmth and understanding you show toward children is key. To teach kindness, you must first help children understand that they are capable of being kind and tolerant, and that how they treat other people matters greatly.

Box: How Children Perceive Differences at Each Age and Stage

2 to 3 years old

Child may ...

- notice and ask about other adults' physical characteristics, although they are still more interested in their own.
- notice other children's specific cultural acts. For example: *Elena speaks differently from me; Mei eats with chopsticks.*
- exhibit fears about skin color differences and physical disabilities.

4 years old

Child may ...

- show more interest in how he is alike and different from other children; construct theories about what causes physical and cultural differences.
- begin to classify people into groups by physical characteristics (same gender, same color, same eye shape).
- be confused about the meaning of adult categories for what "goes together." For example, how can a light-skinned child have a dark-skinned parent? Why are children called *black* when their skin isn't black?
- show influence of societal norms in their interactions with others (*Girls can't do this; boys can*).

5 years old

Child may ...

- show an awareness of additional characteristics, such as socioeconomic class, age, and aging.
- demonstrate heightened awareness of herself and others as members of a family and curiosity about how families of other children and teachers live: *How can Sara have two mommies?*
- continue to construct theories to classify or explain differences among classmates.
- continue to absorb and use stereotypes to define others, and to tease or reject other children.

6 years old

Child may ...

- have absorbed much of his family's classification systems for people, but still get confused about why specific people are put into one or another category by adults.
- use prevailing biases, based on aspects of identity, against other children.
- begin to understand that others also have an ethnic identity and lifestyles, as they come to understand their own emerging group identity.

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Expanding Children's Awareness

There are many ways you can expand children's knowledge of others. You might begin by introducing different cultures into your dramatic-play area. Supply creative and unique props. See if you can find distinctive clothing to include in the center. Look for interesting hats and vests. Contact cultural groups in your community for donations of clothing that are representative of other countries and cultures.

If possible, stop by Spanish, African, Indian, or Chinese grocery stores for small product boxes for your dramatic-play center. The people and the print on them may be different from what your children are accustomed to seeing. This can provide an opportunity for more conversation about people from different places. Decorate play areas with photographs and pictures of many lands.

Take advantage of outdoor play opportunities to help children learn to accept our differences. Some children are more outdoor-oriented or sports-oriented than others. For the first months of the year, stay close to children so you can see how each one fares outside. Position yourself where you can hear their conversations. If needed, introduce new outdoor activities that are better suited to each child's abilities. Consider discussing outdoor play in circle time. What kinds of games and activities can everyone enjoy outside? Encourage children to give during play (as in the case of sharing a prized ball) and also to receive. Being able to receive a kind thought or deed is important for children learning about compassion.

Listening and Learning Accepting what children say is also an obvious but often overlooked way to teach acceptance. When a child announces that her favorite food is olives and a friend proclaims, "Yuck!" a teacher's interested questions will show acceptance of and appreciation for the child's choices. Yet accepting what children say is not always easy. Children often have thorny questions about gender roles, differences, and identity. You might hear some surprising debates. Is it OK for boys to wear bathing suits with flowers on them? For the girl to be the doctor and the boy to be the nurse? For the daddy to set the rules in the family, and for the mommy and children to listen?

In addition, we may be uncomfortable with certain differences we hear about, whether it's a girl with two mommies or a boy from a household where spanking is frequent. It is not our job to impose our entire set of values and beliefs on the children we teach. At the same time, we cannot ignore such universal virtues as concern for others. If certain issues come up repeatedly, such as one child bullying another, address the incident as it happens, and later, during circle or story time, reiterate appropriate ways to treat others.

Intervening in Play

During disputes, it may be tempting to step into the children's imaginary play to inject a moral lesson. I encourage you to resist the impulse to intervene in every dispute. You are apt to find out more about what children think or feel if they are left to their own negotiating skills. However, there are times when it is important to step in and become more actively involved. Here are some of those situations:

- If one child is consistently ostracized, you might say during circle time, "Let's talk about being kind to each other." Use books, music, or even puppets to talk about and demonstrate kind behavior and including others.
- Given our situation in Iraq, children are likely to experiment with war play. If you feel the pretend violence is getting excessive, suggest other ways of playing war. We send food and letters to our soldiers and community helpers in Iraq. We help people who get hurt. Ask the children, "What can you say when someone gets hurt? What can we do for them? What songs can you sing to help them feel better?"
- Children may act out serious scenarios, such as homelessness or an apartment fire. You might ask gentle questions during or after playtime to determine if the family

needs help.

- Some children might introduce racial stereotypes in their play. If, for example, a Hispanic child announces, “I won’t play with you. You’re black!” to an African-American child, it may be necessary to respond immediately. But it might not. The African-American child might simply go off and find another playmate. In that case, you might wait to address it later, when the children can better absorb what you have to say. The additional time might also allow you to give a more measured and appropriate response. By knowing children well, you will have a sense of what works best.

The ability to accept others—and to feel compassion for them—is an essential element of social competency. Developing these emotional skills is just as important as any academic training. Socially competent children are more successful in life. By teaching children such basics now, you will help build a more caring world.

Sidebar: Connecting With Families-Here are some suggestions for activities families can enjoy at home together:

- Create a box of materials from different cultures to encourage dramatic play. You can include anything from shiny or furry pieces of fabric to geometric blocks to cardboard boxes. Offer articles of clothing from Mom, Dad, Grandma, or Auntie that show who your family is. Mix in items from other traditions.
- Read storybooks about caring adults and children. In *My Best Friend*, by Pat Hutchins, two ebullient African-American girls discover what being a friend means. In *How My Parents Learned to Eat*, by Ina R. Friedman, a biracial child tells the story of how her Japanese mother and American father met, fell in love, struggled to understand each other’s ways, and finally married. Ask your child to create a new ending. What else might these characters do?
- Leaf through magazines that show photos of people caring for other people, animals, and plants. Invite your child to tell you what he or she sees.
- Share your favorite recordings that tell stories with an underlying message about compassion and acceptance. The song could be as simple as “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” When Mary brought the lamb to school and all the children laughed and played when they saw it, were they laughing at Mary, or were they playing with the lamb?
- Along with your child, create original songs about loving and caring for each other. One easy way to do this is to invent your own lyrics to familiar melodies. “Mary Had a Little Lamb” can turn into “David had a little dog, little dog, little dog. David had a little dog he loved all day long.”
- Make a home video of a celebration such as a picnic or birthday party. If you don’t

have a video recorder, use a camera to take photos and place them into folders or albums. View them later and talk about how caring made that day wonderful.

- Have a discussion about favorite people and what you like about them. How do they show caring and compassion? Consider people at school, your house of worship, after-school activities such as ballet or t-shirt, or even the friendly cashier at the grocery store.
- Make gifts for relatives and friends. It may be for a birthday, a holiday—or create a special day.
- Invite your child's friend over for a meal. Involve your child in the excitement of the preparations. Include him in letter writing, phone calls, choosing the menu, simple cooking, and setting the table.

Sidebar: Learning All Around the Classroom

Try these activities to develop cooperation, acceptance, and compassion in children, as well as a curiosity and respect for other cultures.

Dramatic-Play Area

- Label objects with their names in English, Spanish, or other languages.
- Offer coins from different countries and quarters from different states. Point out the designs to children.
- Be aware of skin tones in dolls, puppets, and other materials you choose.
- Provide old passports, drivers' licenses, empty food cans and boxes with labels, plastic dishes, bags from different stores, menus from ethnic restaurants, photos of families.

Block Area

- Take a full-length photo or a headshot of each child in the class. Tape each picture onto a wooden unit block. Children can use their block friends as they role-play in the block area.
- Lay several hula hoops on the floor in the block area. Ask children to choose a partner and to build a structure within a hula hoop with their partner. This activity helps children learn to work with someone else in a small space and reinforces problem-solving skills.
- Enliven your block center with figures of people and animals, photos of international buildings, blueprints of house plans, or maps.

Library Area

- Try reading the same book aloud in both English and Spanish. Talk with children about how the different words sound.
- Share fairy tales from different countries. How are they similar to the fairy tales we know? How are they different?
- Include pillows with different patterns to soften the environment. You might choose fabrics associated with different cultures.

Writing Area

- Create a pen-pal program with a class in another part of the country. Exchange photos and care packages or artwork.
- Help children send cards to a classmate who is out sick.
- Ask families to write stories about how their children got their names. Display each story with a picture of the family so everyone can see. You may also want to compile them in a book and keep the book in the library area.

Art and Music Areas

- Listen carefully to a short selection of music. Ask the children, “How does it make you feel? Happy? Sad? Afraid? Excited?”
- Bring in magazines that depict people of various cultures and backgrounds. Newspapers can work, as well. Ask the children to cut out the images to make collages.
- Trace each child’s body on a large sheet of paper. Invite the children to fill in the appropriate skin, hair, and eye color for themselves. Offer markers, fabric, yarn, buttons, and other materials to help them personalize their poster. Help them write their stories:
My name is _____. I have _____ eyes and _____ hair.

Science Area

- Sample different foods from around the world.
- Compare live plants and where they grow. (Be sure to check a guide to poisonous plants before introducing plants to your class.)
- Measure each child’s foot and chart the sizes on a large sheet of poster board.
- Make fingerprints and examine them with magnifying glasses.

Sidebar: Children’s Books to Share

The Learning to Get Along series, by Cheri Meiners and Meredith Johnson, has many engaging stories that explore empathy and caring. Titles include “Share and Take Turns,” “Listen and Learn,” “Understand and Care,” “When I Feel Afraid,” “Join In and Play,” and “Be Polite and Kind.” In “Listen and Learn,” an African-American boy discovers that listening means being quiet, watching the person who talks, thinking about what is being said, and asking questions if he doesn’t understand.

Best Friends, by Miriam Cohen. Jim and Paul go from being best friends to almost enemies in a single day. Then an emergency comes up in the classroom, and they band together like the friends they truly are.

A Friend Is Someone Who Likes You, by Joan Walsh Anglund. A classic for children—and adults, too.

Purple Hair? I Don’t Care, by Diane Young and Barbara Hartmann. There’s something unusual about this baby. And Mom loves baby all the more.

William’s Doll, by Charlotte Zolotow. William wants a doll. His dad and brother say no. Find out who wins.

My Friend John, by Charlotte Zolotow. Two young boys experience all the special times that friends share.

Stone Soup, by Jon J. Muth. This traditional folktale, set in this version in China, reminds us about the happiness that comes from sharing.

Mama, Do You Love Me? by Barbara M. Joosse. A daughter finds out that love is limitless.

Everybody Cooks Rice, by Norah Dooley. What’s cooking for dinner? Carrie canvasses the neighborhood and discovers lots of new foods.

Box: Teacher Resource Books

The Optimistic Classroom: Creative Ways to Give Children Hope, by Deborah Hewitt and Sandra Heidemann. How to teach hope to children from backgrounds of poverty, drug abuse, family discord, violence, and racism.

Kids Can Share: Creative Lessons for Teaching Compassion, Respect, and Responsibility, by Rhoda Orszag Vestuto and Doris Larsen. Stories, Mother Goose rhymes, crafts, role-play, projects, and more to teach positive values.

The Kindness Curriculum: Introducing Young Children to Loving Values, by Judith Ann Rice. Ideas for giving children opportunities to practice kindness, empathy, respect, and

conflict resolution.

The Peaceful Classroom: 162 Easy Activities to Teach Preschoolers Compassion and Cooperation, by Charles A. Smith. Engaging activities help children discover how to find friends, cooperate with others, and respect one another's feelings and differences.

Box: Music to Share

Ella Jenkins - *ellajenkins.com* Look for "Hello," from *Multicultural Songs for Children*.

Try "I Like You, I Like Me" from *I Am Special*, by Dr. Thomas Moore.

"If I Had Wings" from *Turn On the Music*, by Hap Palmer, will set your children's imaginations soaring. *happalmer.com*.

Discover "The World Is a Rainbow" from *We All Live Together, Vol. 2.*, Greg & Steve - *gregandsteve.com*.

Explore "Friends" from the CD of the same name. Nelson Gill - *nelsongill.com*.

Box: Web Resources

A to Z Teacher Stuff, *atozteacherstuff.com*. Includes lesson plans, thematic units, teacher tips, teacher discussion forums, downloadable teaching materials, printable pages, themes, and more.

Playful Parenting, *playfulparenting.com*. Web site of Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., author of the book by the same name. Includes articles, a chat board, and newsletters designed to help parents handle children's strong emotions, deal more effectively with sibling rivalry and other tricky family problems, and rethink some ideas about discipline and punishment.

Compassion Books, *compassionbooks.com*. More than 400 resources to help children and adults through serious illness, death, loss, grief, and bereavement. Reviewed and selected by knowledgeable professionals.

Teachers Net, *teachers.net*. Several chat boards, plus lesson plans pertaining to friendship and sharing. I liked the Lesson Exchange Bank (under the Lessons tab), where teachers could submit a particular lesson that worked well for them.

PBS Teacher Source, *pbs.org/teachersource/social_studies/k-2_community.shtm*. Free lesson plans for various subjects and ages, plus newsletters. Plans integrate with some of the programs children may watch at home.

The Institute for Play, *instituteforplay.com*. Offers a mix of information and resources to give a deeper understanding of the nature and importance of play, as well as connections to helpful people and organizations. Also addresses the role of play in various arenas of human endeavor, such as education, violence prevention, community building, and our favorite—play for its own sake.

Thomas Moore, Ph.D., is an early childhood consultant, keynote speaker, workshop leader, and children's recording artist.