

TRISH ALLISON

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How to Respond to Disability Curiosity from Kids

DEI for Parents

Trish Allison

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HOW TO RESPOND TO DISABILITY CURIOSITY FROM KIDS

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Written by Trish Allison.

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1: Discover What Your Child Already Knows About Disability Equality.](#)

[Chapter 2: Teach Your Child About Physical Disability Basics](#)

[Chapter 3: Teach Your Child Mental Disability Basics](#)

[Chapter 4: Learn the Correct Answers to Common Disability Questions from Kids](#)

[Chapter 5: Foster a Disability-Inclusive Mindset at Home](#)

[Reference Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

“The only true disability is the inability to accept and respect differences.”

- Tanya Masse

Introduction

Whether it's a family member or a new friend, at some point your child will need to be taught values for engaging properly with someone who has a disability. As a parent, you have a golden opportunity to teach your child the words and actions needed to treat that family member or friend with kindness and respect.

The purpose of this guidebook is to provide step-by-step suggestions for helping you guide your child in the right direction. You'll find tips for explaining disability basics, responding appropriately to common questions, and cultivating a disability-inclusive environment at home.

*"Disability awareness starts from home. A place where the positive attitudes, values and customs are reinforced on a regular basis. Teaching your children about disability will help in breaking social barriers and allow a better, wholesome approach to inclusion of people with disabilities."*¹

Most important, your child needs to understand that disability equality, like racial equality and gender equality, is about treating *everyone* with kindness and respect.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you're reading:

- None of the steps are intended to be completed on a single, dictatorial occasion. The intent is to communicate the values described here on a casual basis over a period of time.
- Tips assume that neither you nor your child have a mental or physical disability. There are many wonderful resources for helping disabled parents and children adjust to their own disability. However, this guidebook's content focuses on helping parents guide children toward understanding disability-equality values as they relate to *other* people.

- Mental and physical disability is intentionally discussed in separate chapters to help you quickly locate pertinent suggestions for discussing a friend or family member. Other than that, physical and mental disability should really be viewed using the same lens because they can be equally devastating and deserve the same amount of respect.
- Tips are written for parents of elementary-school children but there's a wide spectrum of maturity at every age. Some 6-year-olds are mature way beyond their years and some 10-year-olds are learning at a different pace than their peers. That said, you know your child best and what is and isn't appropriate for them.
- The chapters are organized linearly; that is, it's best to read chapter 1 first and chapter 5 last. However, if you have an immediate concern, feel free to read whichever chapter is most pertinent at the time.
- Many of the tips assume that you and your child already share a fairly solid foundation of communication. The tips are doable without this foundation, but they'll be much harder to implement successfully without it.
- The most efficient method for teaching children (and adults too) is to guide, not lecture. Help your child reach their own conclusions by providing '*breadcrumbs*' that lead them to discover concepts using their own reasoning skills. Kids learn much more efficiently when they feel like they've arrived at a concept on their own instead of believing something because that's what they've been told to believe.
- It's so important to praise kids when they do something that's aligned with whatever you taught them. Be specific with your praise and look them in the eyes when you say it. Your approval means more to them than you think.
- While there's no one-size-fits-all solution for raising equality-minded kids, this guidebook provides

suggestions for scenarios that you can tailor to fit your own situation. The ultimate goal is to help you raise compassionate, non-biased, successful humans.

Finally, this guidebook provides practical parenting tips for helping your child understand that it's crucial to treat *all* people with disabilities as people first.

Chapter 1: Discover What Your Child Already Knows About Disability Equality

This chapter appears first because it's important for you to find out what your child already knows about disability equality before you start guiding them.

Maybe s/he already well-versed in all aspects of current and past issues. Or maybe they know hardly anything about it and you're starting with a blank slate.

Either way, you'll never know until you get them talking and really listen to their opinion.

Because kids tend to shy away from face-to-face, formal discussions, the best way to learn their opinion is to listen and learn sporadically. There's no need for a formal, one-time, sit-down, eye-to-eye conversation. Keep it simple and casual.

Step 1. Help your child share their thoughts

The best way to get most children to open up is to say the minimum. If you use short phrases that reassure and prompt, you're more likely to get a response. The goal here is to get your child feeling comfortable enough to express how they feel.

The other crucial element is timing. Trying to start a conversation when your child is playing a game, reading, or watching TV almost never works. They'll probably find it intrusive before you even start talking. Plus, you won't have their full attention.

If it's not the right time, wait.

Also, keep it casual. Kids are much more likely to respond honestly when they feel comfortable. As you go about your lives together, gather clues here and there.

Casual places for a conversation could be in the car, at the store, eating a meal, or watching TV together. Try to initiate informal conversations anywhere that seems appropriate to you—you know them best.

“Conversation helps children express their thoughts, get what they need, resolve conflicts, ask for help, and learn from adults and from one another.”²

Your job is to encourage your child to express their thoughts so you can discover what they really think and feel despite any ‘politically-correct jargon’ they might have heard elsewhere.

You want to help them feel like they’re an important part of the disability-equality discussion (which their generation absolutely is!)

Try to remember though that while you’re asking probing questions, it’s important to keep your discovery tactics and opinions to yourself. Otherwise, you run the risk of making them feel like you’re making moral judgements about what they’re telling you.

The very last thing you want to do is create a barrier for any future meaningful back and forth discussions.

If your child doesn’t respond to anything, save it for later. It might be that s/he’s never even thought about disability equality before. Give them time to think about it. Keep trying until they’re ready to share.

The whole point of this step is to get your child to talk so you can get an accurate understanding of how they truly consider disability equality.

Step 2. Listen carefully

Once your child starts talking, listen attentively and silently. The only words you need to utter, if any, are to let them know you’re eager to learn more. Be ready to listen without judgement.

Never interrupt. Even if what they’re saying is completely against everything you believe about disability equality, try to

remind yourself that this is their time to talk and your time to listen and learn.

Kids can tell if you're paying attention to them.

*"When you're really connected, your body is leaning in, and your phone is down. You'll find that if you do a really good job in those moments, they will come to you for the hard stuff."*²

When they start talking, it's important to read between the lines of what they're telling you or asking you.

For example, suppose your child tells you that one of their peers, Gabe, has a learning disability. Your child says s/he feels frustrated sometimes because Gabe delays the pace of learning in the classroom.

You can infer from this that your child isn't 100% on-board with disability equality. Even if s/he specifically said in a different conversation that they're all for it, their true opinion is likely somewhat different.

Keep the conversation going. Ask what the teacher does when Gabe disrupts the learning pace. Does your child think it's fair? Unfair? What are their peers saying? If they could, how would they fix the problem?

Praise your child for sharing with you.

While they're talking, if you feel like you're going to burst if you don't say something, feel free to nod your head and say "hmmm."

Otherwise, here are some phrases you could use to let them know you're interested in what they're saying, and you want to learn more:

- *"Tell me more."*
- *"Wow, you have quite a story to share."*
- *"Please keep talking. I'm really interested."*
- *"It sounds like you have a lot on your mind, so I'm glad you're talking."*

- *“I love that you’re so open and honest with your feelings.”*
- *“It means a lot to me that you feel comfortable talking to me.”*
- *“You’re doing a great job of describing what happened.”*
- *“Could you repeat that? I want to be sure I understand what you’re going through.”*

Listen carefully—not just to the words, but also to the feelings (and body language) behind them. Look for messages even in silence or outbursts.

Silence makes most of us uncomfortable. But if you can stay quiet during moments of silence while s/he’s gathering their thoughts, you might be surprised by what s/he says next and what you learn.

Also, because we usually think three to four times faster than we talk, we often get impatient with a speaker’s slow progress, especially with children, and our minds wander.

Try using the extra time by silently considering your child’s point. Then, when they’re finished, you can restate the points and ask if you’ve correctly understood the message.

Questions like *“Is this what you mean?”* or *“Do I understand you correctly?”* are not only supportive because they show you were listening, but also reduce the chance of a misunderstanding later on.

When they’re finished, you’ll know. The pace of the conversation might slow, and body language might soften.

Listening with the intent to understand is not easy, but it can be done. Most of us are half listening or listening with the intent to respond instead of listening to understand where the other person is coming from. It’s really common.

Give your full attention. Listen, and model active listening by putting down your phone, and making eye contact. Knowing what is *not* said is sometimes as important as what *is* said.

Good listening is ‘an act of love’—it really is. The Center for Parenting Education tells us:

“By listening to them, you are communicating that they are worthy of your attention.”⁴

One day your child will hopefully follow your lead and really listen to whomever s/he’s with and respect their opinion.

Finally, achieving ongoing disability equality is an ever-evolving subject with lots of twists and turns. It won’t be possible to successfully guide your child through the maze without listening to their position and considering the best way to proceed.

More Resources

- [Foolproof strategies for getting kids to talk](#)
- [Age-by-age guide to getting your kid to talk to you](#)
- [Center for Parenting Education - The Skill of Listening](#)

Chapter 2: Teach Your Child About Physical Disability Basics

One of the main points you want to teach your child about people who are disabled is that disability is a natural part of life. And that just like *all* people who are different, people with disabilities should be treated with kindness and respect.

This chapter focuses specifically on *physical* disabilities. You'll find suggestions for explaining physical disability basics, then discussing equality as it relates to disability, and finally, providing specific words and actions that illustrate disability equality.

Note: The next chapter deals exclusively with *mental* disability equality, but for now, we'll focus on disabilities that are visible.

Step 1. Offer a simple definition

Here's a simple definition of physical disabilities that you could use.

'A physical disability is any condition that makes it more difficult for a person to do certain activities or interact with the world around them.'

By providing a simple explanation, you're not only giving your child an easy-to-process definition you're also giving them confidence in their ability to understand a complicated subject.

Confidence is key here. You want to get them involved in the conversation and trustworthy of your guidance.

Do acknowledge that people who are disabled are a little different. If you try to convince your child that people with disabilities are just like everyone else, you're giving them a reason to distrust anything else you say about the subject.

Your child is likely quite aware that people with disabilities are different. Trying to convince them that they're not, is a

losing battle. But do make it clear that just because someone is a little different doesn't make that person bad.

Continue by offering a matter-of-fact definition that relates to someone you both know. For example, you could say something like:

"The muscles in your aunt's legs don't work like yours. That's why she uses a wheelchair."

"Be matter-of-fact. Susan Linn, a psychologist at the Judge Baker Children's Center at Harvard Medical School, suggests that you avoid emotion or going into detail. She offers this response to a question about a person in a wheelchair: "I imagine he may be having problems with his legs. He can't walk.""⁵

Keep it simple.

Step 2. Discuss disability equality

People with disabilities are human beings worthy of the same kindness and respect as everyone else.

One of the best ways to get this message across is, instead of focusing on the disability, point out the *similarities* that people with disabilities have with other humans.

"It's important that your child learns that someone with a disability is still the same in a lot of ways—s/he still has feelings, likes to have fun, loves his or her family, and has a favorite sport. Take care to separate the person from his or her disability by talking to your child about how s/he and the person with the disability are similar.

For example, maybe your child and his neighbor who is in a wheelchair both love to watch football. Perhaps they are the same age, or maybe they both have a pet fish.

"Talking about similarities will show your child that having a disability does not define a person, much like your child's physical characteristics don't define him.""⁶

Another way to get the 'equality' message across is to teach your child the words and actions needed (etiquette) to treat disabled people with kindness.

Step 3. Teach disability etiquette

There are some specific etiquette guidelines to consider when teaching children how to engage with people with disabilities. Here are some things to keep in mind.

- **It's okay to notice.** People with disabilities sometimes feel insulted by those who avoid them, and your own child might get the impression that it's not okay to ask questions. Instead, if your child stares and says, *"What's wrong with that lady?"* simply explain that the person walks or communicates in a different way than other people. After you've explained the disability, help your child focus on the person, and not their disability. You could talk about what they're wearing or what they're eating. Anything that focuses on them as a person and *not* on their disability.
- **Keep it simple.** Kids, especially young ones, are naturally curious, so when they see someone with a disability, their first instinct is to ask about it. If you see your child staring at someone with a disability, take the lead and start a conversation, but avoid a detailed explanation or a lot of emotion when explaining it. A short and matter-of-fact description will answer your child's questions while communicating that the person has nothing to be ashamed of. For example: *"If you see a child in a wheelchair, you can say to your own child, 'I see you looking at that little girl in the wheelchair, and you might be wondering why she needs it. Some people's muscles work a little differently, and her wheelchair helps her move around, just like your legs help you.'"*²
- **Don't show pity.** Try to keep your emotions out of the conversation. If you say someone's disability is 'sad,' your child might feel sorry for that person. Part of teaching children about disability equality is to prevent them from feeling pity for people who are disabled. Mentioning your own feelings of sadness isn't helpful.

- **Stay positive.** It's important to give your child the specific positive words they need to talk respectfully about someone who has a disability. Try to keep your explanations positive. For example, explain that hearing aids help others hear and wheelchairs help others move around, instead of using negative statements like 'he can't hear,' or 'she can't walk.'
- **Use current terminology.** Avoid outdated, derogatory terms like 'crippled,' 'retarded,' and 'handicapped.' Instead, use current terms and phrases. *"Let me gently suggest avoiding the words 'sick' and 'wrong'—as in, 'That boy has a sickness that makes it harder for him to talk to people,' or 'Something is wrong with her brain, so she can't talk as well as you.'"*⁸
- **Social skills.** Teaching your child how to play with children with a disability can be tricky. Here are some ideas for easing the process: *"If your child wants to have a play date with a child with a disability or invite him or her to a birthday party, encourage it. Call the other parent and say simply, 'How can we make this work?' Even if a child doesn't talk, there are still activities the children can do together, such as play board games or arts and crafts. Share any concerns with the other parent. Parents of children with disabilities will often be happy to facilitate a successful play date or outing. Extra effort goes a long way. For instance, learning simple signs so that you can better communicate with a child who is deaf (and uses sign language) will be much appreciated."*²
- **Ask first.** Always ask the person using a wheelchair if he or she would like assistance *before* you help. It may not be needed or wanted. They might not always need help. *"Wheelchairs give the person a sense of mobility and allow them to take part in activities that they otherwise wouldn't be able to. This gives the person a sense of individualism. Sometimes they might not need help."*¹⁰

- **Be kind.** Remember to keep a respectful demeanor. Here are some ways to do that: *“When meeting someone who uses mobility equipment for the first time, do offer to shake their hand, even if it seems they may have reduced limb movement. This is to keep social norms and also serves to acknowledge them as a person, not as their disability. If you’re unsure of something, just ask the person. This includes offers of assistance with any task, from moving to eating or drinking. It will save both you and them an awkward moment, if you clarify any help they may need, before rushing in guns blazing to assist them. Give them the option to refuse your assistance and don’t take offense.”¹¹*
- **Treat their medical device(s) with respect.** *“Teach your child to treat medical devices, such as canes, wheelchairs, and service dogs, with respect. Make sure s/he understands that the devices are there to help the person who needs them, and that they are not toys. It can be tricky when your child sees a service dog in a public place and wants to pet it. In this situation, give them a matter-of-fact explanation for why they can’t. For example, you can simply say ‘That dog isn’t a pet—his job is to help that person see. He’s working right now, so let’s not distract him.’”¹²*

Step 4. Physical disability vs. mental disability

As always when teaching children, it’s best to keep it simple. Here’s a simple way to explain the difference between physical and mental disabilities:

“Physical disabilities affect the body while mental disabilities affect the brain.”

Mental disability equality will be fully discussed in the next chapter. For now, all your child needs to know are the following two concepts:

1. Mental disabilities can be just as debilitating as physical disabilities and deserve the same respect.

2. When someone has a physical disability, it does *not* automatically mean they also have a mental disability.

Technically, mental disabilities are further categorized into intellectual disabilities (IQ, etc.) and mental illnesses (mood, etc.). For, the purpose of this guidebook however (guiding your child toward disability *equality*), the only two concepts your child needs to know are the two that are numbered above.

More resources:

- [Katie's Disability Awareness Video](#) (a video for kids about disability etiquette)
- [Disability Awareness: 10 Things Parents Should Teach Their Kids About Disabilities](#)
- [25+ Resources: How to Teach Empathy and Kindness](#)
- [Disability doesn't mean NO ability - Dispelling myths](#)

Chapter 3: Teach Your Child

Mental Disability Basics

Mental disability can be an abstract notion and often hard to understand (especially for children). But it's worth understanding the subject and spending time to help your child recognize mental disability's role in society's movement toward equality.

“When parents talk with a child about mental illness, it helps if they are knowledgeable and reasonably comfortable with the subject. Parents should have a basic understanding and answers to questions such as what mental disabilities are, who can get them, what causes them if that is known, how diagnoses are made, and what treatments are available. Some parents may have to do a little homework to be better informed.”¹³

This chapter is intentionally structured to help you first define mental disability with your child, then explain that mental disabilities can be hard to detect, and finally tie everything together by reiterating that *all* people with disabilities, regardless of mental vs. physical or visible vs. invisible, deserve kindness and respect.

Step 1. Offer a simple definition of mental disability

First, it's crucial that your child feels confident that you're knowledgeable about disabilities. This guidebook should give you the information you need to build that trust.

Start by offering a simple definition:

“Mental disabilities affect a person's brain which determines how they think and act.”

Wait to see how your child reacts. They're likely busy applying your words to scenarios from their own world.

If s/he has a question about a friend or family member with a mental disability, it's usually because they're worried about safety.

Take the time to answer their question honestly and thoroughly. Assure them that you take your job as a parent very seriously. And one of your most important jobs as a parent is to make sure they're safe at all times.

Tell them that they can come to you *anytime* with a question or concern. Look them in the eyes when you say this. When it's clear they feel reassured, praise them for grasping such a complicated subject.

If your child looks like s/he isn't understanding your definition of mental disabilities, consider comparing it to physical disabilities. You could say something like:

"Just like people who use a wheelchair often have trouble walking, people who have a mental disability often have trouble thinking like others."

Limit your definition to *intellectual* disabilities at this point. Mental illness subjects like depression and/or bipolar disorder are likely too complicated.

If s/he looks satisfied with your definition and understands it, move on to the next step.

Step 2. Explain that mental disabilities can be hard to detect

Children need to learn that just because someone isn't using a *visible* ability aid (e.g., wheelchairs, etc.) doesn't mean they don't have a disability. It's an abstract concept but one that's worth spending time explaining, especially as mental disabilities are becoming increasingly recognized.

Remind your child that millions of people, including leaders and authority figures, have a mental disability. To find examples that your child can recognize google the phrase 'celebrities with disabilities.'

Explain that we can never tell what someone is experiencing or has experienced just by looking at them. So, the smart choice is to treat *everyone* with kindness and respect. Let that sink in and say it again if you feel like it needs repeating.

Watch your child's reaction during this conversation and make adjustment(s) if necessary.

- Do they look confused? Offer to (calmly) repeat what you just said.
- Do they look anxious? Consider toning down your rhetoric or shelving the conversation. Depending on your child's age, they might be feeling unsafe. Reassure them that mental disabilities aren't contagious.
- Do they look bored? Try asking them if they know someone with a mental disability that's hard to detect. Try to engage them in the conversation as much as possible.

Whatever they're feeling, validate their emotions. Your child needs to know that their thoughts and feelings are safe to share with you.

Step 3. Discuss mental disability equality

Just like you did while explaining physical disabilities, emphasize the similarities between people who are mentally disabled and non-disabled people. Make sure the comparison is logical to your child.

Keep it simple and try to use examples from your child's world to.

For example, suppose your child has a classmate, Kevin, with a learning disability. Talk about how Kevin has the same physical characteristics as everyone else (e.g., legs, arms, feet, heart, lungs, etc.). Let your child chime in here. It's important for him/her to feel confident enough to contribute to the conversation.

Now you can say that the only difference between Kevin and the rest of the kids in the classroom is that a certain part of his brain doesn't work the same way as other kids' brains. The fact that Kevin's brain is a little different, doesn't make it okay to be mean to him.

Again, this is a good time to let your child contribute to the conversation. The idea of disability equality will sink in much

more effectively if your child takes part in verbalizing the concept. Encourage them to participate.

More Resources

- [What moms of kids with invisible disabilities want you to know](#)
- [Invisible Disabilities: List and Information](#)
- [8 ways to teach empathy to your child](#)
- [How to Explain Autism to Children](#)

Chapter 4: Learn the Correct Answers to Common Disability Questions from Kids

It's so important to let children explore their curiosity. Being curious and asking questions is how kids learn. And kids who haven't been exposed to someone with a disability are naturally curious and need to ask questions. When they're shushed or ignored, their instinct to learn is squashed.

The good news is that by learning how to answer your child compassionately and accurately, you'll be contributing to the progress of becoming a truly inclusive society. The suggestions in this chapter are meant to help you answer the hard questions and guide your child toward embracing disability equality.

Step 1. Give simple and direct answers

Generally, people with disabilities want to be accepted as equal human beings and do *not* want to be viewed as objects of pity. They admire parents who take the time to educate their children about disability awareness and equality.

The best way to teach your child is to keep your answers simple and direct. Really listen to what your child is asking so they know their question is something you want to answer. If you don't know the answer, be honest and suggest you look it up together.

If you dodge questions about disability, your child will get the impression that there's something inherently evil about the subject and it shouldn't be talked about. One of the risks here is that your child will fill in the blanks of missing information with a myth or stereotype. Instead, offer a simple, straightforward answer.

Just as important as 'not dodging questions' is providing answers that are simple. Kids learn by processing the information we give them. The simpler the answer to their

question, the easier it is for them to process the information. They don't need any information beyond what they're specifically asking.

So, if your child asks, *"Can people in wheelchairs drive cars?"* The only response you need to provide is *"Yes cars can be modified to allow people who can't use their legs to use hand controls."* You don't need to offer any explanation beyond that.

The goal is to provide simple responses that both answer the question directly and also promote equality.

Step 2. Prepare yourself by learning answers to common questions

If your child hasn't already met someone with a disability, it's more than likely s/he will at some point in school, where children with special needs are often in the same classroom.

Prepare yourself. Your curious grade-schooler will no doubt have a lot of questions.

*"How you respond is likely to affect the way your child thinks about disabilities and treats others as s/he grows up. It's also an opportunity for you to foster an attitude of inclusion and acceptance."*¹⁴

Also, be prepared to field questions at potentially embarrassing moments. As we all know, kids are unpredictable and often ask embarrassing questions in public.

Here are some sample responses to common questions. The goal is to provide simple, direct answers and also eliminate any fear your child might be feeling.

Are disabilities contagious?

"No disabilities are not contagious. They're not like the flu or a cold that you can catch from someone else."

Why does s/he act like that?

"S/he does that because part of his/her brain isn't the same as ours. That part of their brain is sending signals that makes them act differently."

Why doesn't he go to our school?

"Some kids do better in a special school that can give them extra help with reading, writing, walking, talking, and playing with other kids."

Why doesn't she talk like me?

"She has trouble with the muscles that make it possible to talk like other people."

Is s/he retarded or something?

"First, 'retarded' isn't a nice word. Please say mentally disabled instead. To answer your question, his/her brain functions differently, so s/he has a harder time talking and learning than most people. But other than that, s/he's just like you and me. Being a little different is actually pretty cool."

Why did that happen to him?

"Some people are born with disabilities, and others get hurt or sick and become disabled later in life. S/he didn't do anything to deserve the disability. It's just a part of life."

Is s/he going to live to be a grown up?

"No one knows the answer to that. But doctors and scientists are working hard to find a cure so s/he can grow into an adult."

Will s/he ever be able to walk?

"I don't know for sure, but I suspect s/he's working hard along with his/her doctors and parents to do the best s/he can."

Is he/she a daddy/mommy?

"Yes s/he could possibly be a mommy/daddy. S/he might have a little girl or boy at home that's just like you!"

Why is that person in a wheelchair?

"Their body is different from ours and they need to use a wheelchair to get around. There isn't anything wrong with being different."

Why can't s/he walk like we do?

“You’re right. S/he walks differently than we do. There lots of different medical reasons that control how someone walks.”

How do people take care of themselves and get around if they are blind?

“People who can’t see find lots of different ways to do the everyday activities just like you and me.”

Step 3. Follow up!

Many questions and concerns can and should come up as your child encounters people with disabilities. Let them know, repeatedly, that they can come to you *anytime*.

If it’s important to them, it’s important to you. Look them in the eyes when you say this.

Keep the conversation going as the weeks unfold after your child asks a question or comes to you with a concern.

Discussing disability equality is not a formal, once-and-done conversation. Encourage your child to keep asking questions.

Integrate as many ongoing, casual conversations about disability equality as you can into your daily life.

More resources

- [Kids and Embarrassing Questions](#)
- [Tips for Parents: Teachable Moments](#)
- [Family Conversations in Informal Learning Environments](#)

Chapter 5: Foster a Disability-Inclusive Mindset at Home

In addition to the strategies already discussed in this guidebook, another suggestion, perhaps the most important one for effectively guiding your child toward disability-equality values, is to create an inclusive environment at home.

Children are influenced by teachers and peers—that's true. But the most lasting values are taught at home.

To create a welcoming attitude and an ableist home, emphasize, repeatedly, that disability is simply a part of being human.

Step 1. Set the example

The best way for you to illustrate disability equality at home is to model the attitudes, behavior, and values that you wish to see in your child.

As you probably already know, children rarely buy the 'Do as I say, not as I do' approach. If you say something is important, but your child doesn't see you behaving in a way that matches your words, they know it's not actually that important to you, so why should it be important to them?

On the flip side, if they see you doing something that's aligned with what you've been telling them, your words will be much more effective. Here are some ideas for setting an example so your child can fully embrace your guidance.

- **Be aware of your own biases.** If you behave in ways that demonstrate you are fearful of people with disabilities, even though you say you're all for equality, your child will notice and emulate your behavior. *"Studies show people can be consciously committed to egalitarianism, and deliberately work to behave without prejudice, yet still possess hidden negative prejudices or stereotypes. Implicit Association Tests (IATs) can tap those hidden, or automatic, stereotypes and prejudices"*

that circumvent conscious control. [Project Implicit](#)—a collaborative research effort between researchers at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and University of Washington—offers dozens of such tests.”¹⁵

- **Be proactive.** Take a stand when you witness a disabled person being bullied. Silence and inaction in the face of injustice sends the message that it’s okay to ‘look the other way.’ Instead of ignoring the issue, hold a petition drive, write an editorial in the school paper, organize a boycott, talk to a manager, anything—just do something to make a stand. And make sure your child knows about it.
- **Call out discrimination.** If someone says or does something that denigrates people with disabilities in your home and you don’t intervene, that will signal to your child that you’re okay with that type of language or behavior.
- **Speak kind words.** Whenever someone with a disability shares something about themselves with you, you could say things like, “*Wow, that is so interesting!*” or “*I didn’t know that. I’m really glad you shared with me.*” The goal is to teach your child how to treat people with disabilities with kindness.
- **Respect accommodations.** From convenient parking spots to specially equipped city buses, there are thankfully lots of accommodations to help people with disabilities navigate everyday life. You can show respect for those accommodations by praising them instead of acting annoyed. “*A simple way to teach your children respect for accommodations is not to express resentment for them yourself. When the handicapped parking spots are taken or an elevator is full, it can seem harmless to complain, but this contributes to the idea that disability accommodations pose a social burden. Instead, if your child has to wait in line or can’t take a particular seat, try taking a moment to explain the reason.*”¹⁶

- **Offer to help.** If you're with your child and you pass a person with a disability on the street who is struggling, ask that person if they need help. If they say no, you'll be glad you asked. If they say yes, make sure your child is watching and take the time to set aside your own agenda to provide help. Encouraging your child to provide help *with* you is even better.

Step 2. Promote disability acceptance at home

Here are some ideas for how you could shape your home environment to illustrate the disability equality values you've been discussing:

- **Media.** Talking about acceptance is a good first step, but it's not enough. Make it a family rule that apps, movies, games, and TV shows should be chosen based on 'acceptance' of different ways of life. Your media selection doesn't have to consistently include characters with a disability, but it's important that it never includes uncontested discrimination. This might sound like an impossible task at first, but if you can start getting your family in the habit of choosing media based on the way it depicts fairness and acceptance and not based on a world where it's okay to discriminate, you'll be doing them an enormous favor. Try it.
- **Books.** In addition to keeping an open dialogue about disability acceptance, another key to raising open-minded children is by making sure your home library has books with people with disabilities fully integrated into the storyline (and not just stories that focus on someone's disability). Books about supporting people who are disabled are fine, but books that depict someone with a disability as a mainstream character in the story is much better.
- **Language.** Children mimic the language they hear at home. Unfortunately, "*language can help to form, perpetuate and reinforce prejudice and discrimination.*"^{L7} To prevent this, we must equip our

children with words and phrases to guide them toward disability *equality*. Even repeating a simple statement like *“I believe all people with a disability should be able to participate in everyday activities”* might make a big impact. Keep saying it. You never know what’s going to sink in and when.

- **Use positive “first person” phrases.** For example, say ‘a person in a wheelchair’ instead of ‘wheelchair user.’
- **Learn which words to use.** *“Obviously, disability-related slurs are important to avoid, even in casual conversation or when not directly referencing a disability. Modeling this for your child is important, as they will look to you to learn not only what words to use, but how to think about disability and what it implies about a person’s worth. When in doubt, ask the person in question (if you know them well enough, of course) how they prefer to refer to their disability, or listen to the terms they use to describe themselves. It’s always best to take their lead in describing their identity.”¹⁸*
- **Discourage using slurs.** Unfortunately, there’s a good chance your child will overhear some unkind words used to describe someone’s disability, and there’s a chance your child will repeat those names. *“Address unkind words right away. Explain to your child that such words are hurtful and it’s not OK to say them. If your child continues to use those words after you’ve explained to him that they’re inappropriate, give a negative consequence. Make it clear that putting people down and speaking disrespectfully about others won’t be tolerated.”¹⁹*
- **Don’t show pity.** *“While descriptions of disabled individuals as ‘inspirational,’ ‘innocent’ or ‘angelic’ might be well-intentioned, they work to make myths of disabled lives rather than treating them as what they are: human lives, with both struggles and triumphs. Disabled people have difficult relationships, character flaws, and*

failings (part of what make us human) like anyone else. Through both expressions of pity and the label of “inspirational,” disabled individuals are often infantilized and even dehumanized. The solution to these dual problems is simple: encourage your children to treat disabled people as individual human beings with individual needs and personalities, rather than as automatic superheroes or as victims requiring pity. ²⁰

- **Family mission statement.** Things you say to your kids all the time can have an enormous impact on how their opinions form as they grow. Even if it sounds hokey to you, keep saying things like “*we think that being different is good*” or “*we believe in kindness*” or “*everybody’s different*” — anything that denotes fairness and acceptance. It will sink in eventually. Honest.

Step 3. Make disability equality an ongoing conversation

Teaching disability equality to your child is not a once-and-done conversation. Issues will come up all the time that your child (hopefully) feels comfortable sharing with you.

As any parent knows, getting a concept to sink in with kids needs to be repeated over and over again. Keep guiding them toward fairness and acceptance.

Children are a work in progress and need help understanding why each situation is either fair or unfair.

Teaching disability-equality values needs to be a work in progress too. Talking about fairness and acceptance repeatedly might feel cumbersome to you, but it doesn’t to your child. They’re progressively applying what you tell them to scenarios in their own life and deciding if it makes sense or not.

Depending on their attention span, who knows when you will say or model the right words at the right time. Keep trying. Plan for a marathon, not a sprint.

Moreover, there will be times when s/he wants to talk to you that aren't convenient - like when you're working, reading, or talking with someone else. Either make the time then or ask your child to remember their thoughts so they can share with you later.

Look for unexpected opportunities to chat about how the progress toward disability equality is affecting your child's life. The stronger their understanding of the issues, the more likely they'll carry principles of equality and fairness with them into adulthood.

The good news is that the decisions s/he makes as s/he grows through adolescence and into early adulthood will be informed by your ongoing guidance about disability equality.

More resources

- [Guidelines for writing and referring to people with disabilities](#)
- [How to Uncover Your Own Biases](#)
- [Movies for kids with Characters Who Have *Physical* Disabilities](#)
- [Movies for kids with Characters Who Have Learning and Attention Issues and Developmental Disabilities](#)
- [Books for kids with Characters Who Have *Physical* Disabilities](#)

If you found this guidebook helpful, PLEASE consider sharing it or writing a brief review (your review can be super short if needed). Reviews are a huge boost for writers to get the word out about their books. Thank you so much! - Trish

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Also by Trish Allison

DEI for Parents

[How to Support the Siblings of ASD Children](#)

[How to Respond to Disability Curiosity from Kids](#)

[How to Explain Immigration to Kids](#)

[How to Explain Transgenderism to Kids Using Simple Words](#)

[How to Talk to Kids About Poverty and Homelessness](#)

[How to Teach Boys to be Fair to Girls](#)

[How to Teach Girls They're Just as Worthy as Boys](#)

[How to Teach Kids Manners for ANY Religion](#)

[How to Teach Kids to be Kind to Gay People](#)

[How to Tell Kids the True Story of Native Americans](#)

Watch for more at [Trish Allison's site](#).



About the Author

Raising two children in a 1990s same-sex family (way before modern acceptance), gave Trish a unique perspective on the importance of teaching kids that *everyone* deserves kindness and respect.

She combined her experience as a parent, her career as a technical/procedural writer, countless hours of child psychology research, a degree in English from U.C. Berkeley, and a long-ignored passion to write something meaningful — into a collection of social-justice parenting books.

The timing couldn't be better. As the world finally (slowly) awakens to the dire need to reduce cultural unfairness, helping parents raise a generation of open-minded kids is critical.

Read more at [Trish Allison's site](#).