



by Karen Stephens

Help Kids by Role Modeling Respect for Diversity

Families around the globe have some amazing similarities. We love our children, and put their health, safety, and well being above our own. We spend enormous time, energy, and resources making sure they're properly clothed, fed, and schooled. We bend over backwards to raise our kids with worthwhile values to help them enjoy a fulfilling, peaceful life in community with others. We encourage traits that will help them make a positive contribution to society — traits like self-respect, compassion, gratitude, dedication, self-reliance, altruism, responsibility, and accountability.

Every day parents the world over applaud children's successes and hug fears away. We celebrate first words, first steps, birthdays, and marriages. And yes, we all mourn when illness or tragedy claims our own. Before we know it, we're in the throws of grandparenting. Time flies; never faster than when raising a family.

Over the eons people have created traditions and rituals to forge lasting bonds between family members and their surrounding communities. Strong bonds support survival. They promote stability and continuity. Cultural bonds satisfy the most basic of human desires — the need to belong, to feel accepted, and to be included.

Families' cultural attitudes are affected by many factors, such as region of birth, nationality, religion, race, and ethnic heritage. Creativity is revealed as each culture applies its unique imagination and problem solving abilities to the daily routines of family life.

But culture isn't the only predictor of human behavior. Within cultures, there's also difference; it's a fact of life. In the context of culture we each develop an individual identity and personality. Over time we each leave a singular fingerprint for posterity.

From birth, children begin forming attitudes of culture. Associated with that, they come to feel either social acceptance or social alienation. Because they're raised within the folds of a family, children in-part "inherit" attitudes from parents and grandparents. We're children's first and most influential teachers. We're their primary models as they learn to respond to humankind's diversity in all its forms.

In the majority of cases, that's a good thing. Most parents I know are raising children with solid expectations to respect the rights of all. And most go a step further by encouraging children to appreciate and enjoy diversity. They travel together and read about other countries. They encourage kids to try new foods when strolling international fairs. Cultural arts are woven into family life by attending varied music and dance programs.

But in some families, parents habitually put down or exclude members of cultures, races, or nationalities. They teach prejudice, not respect and understanding. Perpetuating stereotypes is a terribly destructive behavior.

Cultural differences, as well as similarities, contribute to the quality of everyone's life.

There's absolutely no doubt that today's children will live a long life in a diverse world and a global economy. In school, at work, and in marriages, cultural and racial blending will continue, and most likely increase.

If parents teach children bias — even hatred, children will be handicapped. Their ability to competently engage in diverse social interactions will be stunted. They'll be shortchanged, both personally and economically. Cultural differences, as well as similarities, contribute to the quality of everyone's life. To prepare children with the social skills they'll need, parents must model responding to diversity with grace, respect, acceptance, and appreciation. We must do far more than teach mere tolerance.

Parents' behavior and the tone of social interactions — public as well as private — set the standard for children's behavior. Our children are depending on us to teach them how to live comfortably and productively within diversity.

So, dear parents, how comfortable are you with diversity? Have you faced the realities of difference and come to terms with them? Do your children interact well with diverse people? Whether they do or don't, they are most likely mirroring a reflection of your own behavior.

To determine how you stack up as a good role model in the midst of diversity, contemplate the questions below. Start with a self-assessment. If you don't like your answers, adjust your attitudes and behavior. After all, where you lead, your children will follow.

Questions for Reflection

- Have you confronted prejudice or stereotypes you learned in childhood? Have you analyzed how you learned them? Have you adjusted your beliefs in light of first-hand experience with diversity? Have you resisted passing bias on to children?
- Do you use language that's respectful and tolerant of difference? Do you refrain from using slurs related to race, gender, ability, religion, or sexual preference? (Even not-so-subtle stereotypes that are "supposed" to be flattering?)
- Are you fair? Do you show either favoritism or disdain for people based on cultural or racial assumption? Do you respond to an individual's specific behavior, rather than their ethnic or economic status? Do you evaluate people on the merit of their actions rather than your preconceived ideas (or those of your parents)?
- Do your children have books that reflect diverse characters in terms of race, gender, age, culture, and abilities? Do their records, tapes, or CDs include examples of different styles of music? Do they have multicultural dolls, puppets, markers, and paints? Do they have instruments used worldwide, such as drums, rhythm sticks, rain sticks, and maracas?
- Does your home honor diversity? Do you actively affirm your own cultural roots? Do you serve traditional foods of your own culture as well as other's? Do you have art work or coffee table books that reflect art from around the world? Do you avoid movies that model intolerance and bias toward specific groups? Do you invite diverse people into your home? Do you visit their homes? Do you have a wide circle of friends in terms of age, gender, culture, race, or abilities?
- Do you volunteer in your child's child care, school, or clubs so your family's unique talents and traditions can be shared with classmates? Do you encourage others to do the same? Do you support and thank school officials when they provide children with multicultural experiences?
- Do you worship with people of another culture or race? Do you include them in community service projects? Do you accept invitations to serve when they try to include you?

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.