

Responding to difficult questions about Racial Identity and Cultural Diversity



Children are keen observers of the world around them. As they become more aware of their own physical traits and characteristics, they will become more aware of their differences to others. Curiosity about these differences can provide positive opportunities to discuss cultural diversity and racial identity within your early childhood education setting.

However, talking about difference and diversity is often a sensitive subject. It can be challenging to know how to respond to complicated questions or prejudiced behaviours and attitudes. In these situations, it is important not to avoid addressing confronting questions or prejudiced behaviours. Instead, this can be seen as a chance to model attitudes of empathy and respect and assist children to understand and appreciate the ways in which we are all alike and different.

While there is no ready-made script for answering difficult questions, below are examples of questions/ comments and suggested responses that could be used to start a constructive conversation.

Why are there black people?

All people are different, and there are many different skin colours. Skin colour can depend on where your mummy and daddy were born, and your grandparents. All around the world people have different skin colours. People from very hot places sometimes have darker skin because it helps to protect them from the sun.

Is Indian my colour?

Indian isn't a colour. You (or your parents) were born in a country called India, so you are called Indian. People born in the same country may have a similar skin colour. What colour would you say your skin was?



Why am I called 'white' if my skin isn't white like the clouds?

White people come in all different shades of skin colour, and none of them are really white. It is just a word to describe a large group of people. We might say a person is 'white' or 'black' but is anyone really white or black? We all have different skin colours, and most of them are more like different shades of brown, yellow or pink. How would you describe your skin colour?

My mummy is German and my daddy is Vietnamese. So, which parts of me are which?

German and Vietnamese are both part of who you are, but they aren't separate parts. Do you think you look more like your mummy or your daddy?

Why does Parima have brown skin?

Everybody has different coloured skin. Sometimes it looks yellow, sometimes it looks pink and sometimes it looks brown or black. There are lots of different lighter and darker shades of skin too. Look at my skin, and your skin. Are they the same colour? What colour would you call them?

Why does William speak funny? He doesn't sound like me.

William has recently moved here from China so he speaks a different language. He speaks Mandarin, but is learning to also speak English. Can you remember how hard it was to learn to speak? There are still some words that you are learning now. William is learning and sometimes says things a bit differently to you. Do you think you could help him learn English? If you play with him and talk to him, he will learn more quickly. You could be his teacher.

Mummy told me not to play with children with dark skin so does that mean I can't be friends with Maddie?

Would you like to play with Maddie? Do you think having dark skin means that Maddie is very different to you? Do you think that there might be some things that you have in common? Why don't we go talk to Maddie and find out?

Why does that girl have black skin and fuzzy hair?

Leilani is Aboriginal. Lots of Aboriginal people have dark skin and curly hair, but not all of them. Do you think Leilani's skin is black or dark brown? Do you like her hair? Can you tell me some things that are the same about both of you... do you both have brown eyes / are you both the same height / do you both like the same fruit?



Why does Bilal wear a dress when he's a boy?

Bilal is Muslim, and some Muslim boys wear prayer dresses as part of their religion. People from all around the world wear different clothes for lots of different reasons. Sometimes people wear things as part of their culture or religion. For example, they might have an outfit for a special celebration. Can you think of any special occasions that your family celebrates where you get to wear a special outfit or piece of clothing?

If Maya is brown, and I'm brown, why is she darker than me?

Skin comes in lots of different colours. Very, very light all the way through to very, very dark. Not all people with brown skin have the same shade of brown. Can you think of somebody who has the same shade of brown as you, and as Maya? How do you feel about your skin colour?

Why does Ezra wear that little hat?

Ezra wears a Kippah because he is Jewish. Some Jewish people wear a Kippah every day, and some Jewish people only wear them when they pray. Have you asked Ezra why he wears it? I'm sure he would be happy to tell you about it.



Charlotte won't play with me because I have ginger hair. Can I change my hair colour?

Do you want to change your hair colour? Do you like it? Do you think it is fair for Charlotte to say she doesn't like you because of your hair colour? How did it make you feel when she said that? What could you say to Charlotte to make her understand how her comment made you feel? Why don't we go and tell Charlotte how you feel and explain that it's not fair to say you won't play with someone just because of how they look.

I don't want to play with the new boy because he is smelly and his skin looks dirty.

How would you feel if somebody said those things about you? Do you think those are fair things to say about somebody? You don't have to play with Oliver but you need to think about people's feelings before you say things that might hurt them.

Why does Zakia's mum wear a scarf over her face?

Zakia's mum is Muslim, and many Muslim women wear scarves that cover their head and their face. Have you ever asked Zakia about it? Let's ask her together, I'm sure she will be glad to talk to us about it, and we might both learn something new.

Why did Ned call me an Abo?

He might have called you that because he heard someone else use that word and he doesn't know that it is a hurtful thing to say. Did it upset you when he called you that? Let's go and tell Ned how it made you feel and that it's not okay to call people hurtful names.

I don't like brown people.

Why don't you like brown people? You sound as if you know every person in the world who has brown skin and that you don't like any of them.

How would you feel if somebody said they didn't like you because of your skin colour, or hair colour? Do you think that would be fair when they didn't know you? All skin colours are good. We all have different colours of skin, but we're all the same on the inside. Let's look at some famous brown people and how they have made our world better.

Why does Minami have slanted eyes?

Minami has eyes to see, just like you and me. Because her parents are from a country called Japan which is in a different part of the world, her eyes look slightly different.



Why are we having curry for lunch today? Dad says that it's foreign food and we don't eat it.

We like to give you a variety of different foods so that you can try new and interesting flavours. Curry is one of the most popular foods around the world!

You are welcome to try it and see if you like it, you might be surprised by how yummy it is.

Sometimes challenging questions or comments can come from parents. Here are some suggested ways of responding.

I would prefer it if Jason was encouraged not to play with Akhil. I think it's better for him to play with other Australian kids like himself.

Our centre's philosophy and policies support cultural diversity and so we encourage all of the children to play together, regardless of race.

I don't see why my daughter has to learn about Aboriginal culture and stories, it has nothing to do with our family.

I'm sorry to hear that that's your view, but if you look at our centre's philosophy and policies, we strongly encourage children to learn about lots of different cultures so they have a wide knowledge of their world.

Why has Lucy been eating Chinese food today? What's wrong with good old Aussie meat and two veg?

We serve a variety of dishes to the children to give them lots of variation and they are always nutritionally balanced. Part of the children's learning experience here is to try new things and explore their likes and dislikes. If a child didn't like one type of food we would always provide an alternative, but Lucy really enjoyed her stir fry lunch today.

Joe came home yesterday and said he didn't like the new boy because he was black. We have never exposed him to racist attitudes at home, he must have heard it here. What are you going to do about it?

That's surprising for me to hear, as you and I both know what a friendly boy Joe is. If we ever hear any children discussing race, positively or negatively, we take the opportunity to talk with them about difference and diversity. I haven't personally heard anything from Joe or his friends, but I will be sure to chat to them today and introduce them to our new boy so they can see what they have in common, and I'll let you know what happened when I see you at the end of the day. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.

I'm not racist, but how can someone from another country teach my child and we cannot understand what they are saying?

As you know, we are a multicultural society in Australia and our staff reflect that. You would be surprised at how well children can understand different accents and intonations – adults have a much harder time! The way that children's brains develop means they are much better at hearing differences in the spoken word and that's why they're also better at picking up new languages. By the time we're adults our brains are more hard-wired so we've lost that skill to some degree. I can speak to the staff member and ask her to speak a bit slower if you'd like? I find the more I speak to somebody, the better I am at understanding their accent.