

Growing a Rainbow by Claudia Quigg 1-25-07

My preschool-aged granddaughter was visiting with a family friend who was obviously pregnant. Bella asked the pretty blonde woman about her expected baby. “Is it a girl?” “What will his name be?” And then—the shocker—“Will he be black or white?”

After a good laugh, we reflected on Bella’s question. Lucky Bella has playmates from several ethnic groups. She loves them all, and it hasn’t occurred to her to limit any of them based on the color of their skin. Bella sees color as one characteristic you learn about people as they become your friends.

Young children are amazingly open to ethnic differences when they have an opportunity to learn about them in a nonthreatening way. Children are mildly interested in people whose skin color is different from their own, just as they are interested in kids who have different shoes or kids who sound different when they talk.

Interested, not repelled. Interested enough to look and listen and learn. Interested enough to open their minds to the possibility that this person who looks different may reveal something new about this fascinating world.

Increasingly, children who attend public schools are exposed to a highly diverse student body. They read and sing and subtract with kids who look different, who sound different, and who bring a different set of stories from home. From kindergarten on, most children get a good dose of diversity training.

But significant attitudes about people are already well in place before a child enters school. Preschoolers learn ways of responding to different people based on their experiences (or lack thereof).

Very young children who have the chance to socialize with children from a different ethnic group, for example, are likely to engage others from that ethnic group more readily. They identify differences in skin color or language with other positive experiences they’ve already had.

These differences lose their power to intimidate or separate when children have explored them naturally in play. Kids may want to touch hair that looks different, or to rub skin. This exploration humanizes differences for children. A new white friend encountered by a black child is not just WHITE, but she is funny and good at skipping and has skin like Allison.

Parents may have to intentionally provide their children with diverse social experiences, seeking out ethnically different families at programs offered publicly at libraries or other community sites. These play dates reveal family similarities and differences in a natural way.

The effort has a big pay-off: Children gain the diverse background they need to be open to possibilities in all kinds of people.

It has been said that children are color blind. I take exception to that. Instead, I think young children see all the colors, and they think every single one is beautiful.