

SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM **EMBEDDING INCLUSION IN CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN**



Discussing disability and inclusion with children in our care is an important way of building respect for diversity and creating an environment where children can be their authentic selves and develop a strong sense of belonging.

Inclusion involves more than one conversation, more than the reading of one book and more than one inquiry or project. Inclusion is something we can be embedding and discussing every day in open and honest conversations with the children we teach.

When children ask us questions, they do so with a genuine curiosity to understand. While, through an adult lens, conversations about disability and difference may feel awkward, we need to provide honest and age-appropriate responses to their questions. As we respond, we need to consciously maintain confidentiality and respect for the people with disability or developmental differences in their lives.

Talking About Differences and Similarities

Children have keen observational skills which help them make sense of their world, while their brains and bodies are developing. They naturally notice difference and as educators we can encourage and help children to feel good about this natural curiosity. We are all different and that is something worth acknowledging and celebrating. If we shut down conversations about difference, the unintentional rhetoric may be that difference is wrong or bad. When we are open and honest as educators, it creates an environment where difference can be acknowledged and understood, diversity embraced, and the strengths of each child are recognised.

Equally important, is creating space for conversations about similarities. We all have things in common that bring us joy and/or make us feel seen and heard. Talking about our similarities can build relational understandings of community and identity whilst increasing empathy, kindness, and care for others.

Embracing Diversity

As educators, we can use many teachable moments throughout our days to support children's understanding of difference and disability. As part of ongoing inclusive practice, positive values around diversity can be embedded by:

- ▶ Focussing on each child's strengths and what they can do.
- ▶ Providing opportunities to respectfully explore children's inquiries.
- ▶ Having books on our bookshelves that depict human diversity in all its rich and varied ways (see *Book List*).
- ▶ Displaying images in our preschools that reflect the local community and its members.
- ▶ Providing resources that represent and enable participation in relation to disability and developmental differences, especially those of enrolled children. For example, to support the inclusion and sense of belonging for a child with a visual impairment, educators could add more textural elements to the environment and discuss how different people experience the world around them. This could be interesting and beneficial for all children.
- ▶ Supporting children to develop empathy and understanding in their interactions with others to minimise exclusion and teasing.

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- ▶ Being open and honest in responding when children ask questions.
- ▶ Collaborating with families of children with a disability – encouraging them to offer some insights into their child as a whole person.
- ▶ Using respectful and inclusive language (see table over) and critically reflecting on the language we use often, as a team.
- ▶ Not engaging in ableist conversations where people with a disability are seen as “inspirational.” While children with disabilities experience barriers, they do not exist to provide inspiration to others. These conversations can become “othering” conversations where a child who is perceived as different to others is stigmatised as ‘less’ or ‘inferior.’
- ▶ Acting as role models for children in the way we talk about disability, moving beyond awareness and acceptance to true inclusion.
- ▶ Reframing our beliefs in relation to challenging behaviour. We can reframe the narrative to view the behaviour as a form of communication. As educators we can see our role as seeking to understand the underlying purpose of any behaviour, intentionally teaching the replacement skills the child needs and addressing barriers to participation.

Language Matters

The way we use language shapes the way we view the world. The ways in which we discuss difference and disability can support children to be happy, healthy individuals with a strong sense of identity. A huge part of our sense of self is developed by how we think other people see us and what others tell us about who we are in the world. As educators we have a powerful role in influencing the views of the colleagues, children, and families we work with. By modelling use of inclusive language, we are supporting children to use language that is respectful and inclusive.

The following table provides some language options that are often used and suggestions for language that is more inclusive that you might like to use in your practice.

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Inclusive Language Table

| Child's Comment | Common Response | More Inclusive Response |
|--|--|---|
| He can't talk. He talks like a baby. | I know it's sad. He is still learning. | He's so clever that he's learnt to use his hands and visual picture cards to talk with us. We all communicate in different ways. |
| He's fat! | That's not nice to say things like that. Say you're sorry! | Our bodies come in all different shapes and sizes. |
| She's a naughty girl. | She is still learning the rules at preschool. | We all show our feelings in different ways. Maybe she is showing us that she is frustrated/upset/angry/tired ... What do you do when you are feeling frustrated/upset/angry/tired? |
| He always throws sand at me. | He's learning to play with sand properly. Tell him to keep the sand down. Say, "Stop I don't like it." | He loves the feeling of the sand so much. We can help him by showing him how to play with the sand in different ways. |
| No! You can't play this game with us because you're in a wheelchair. | Don't say that. Just because he's in a wheelchair doesn't mean he can't play the game. | How can we play the game so that he can join in? |
| Why does she have those hearing aids? | She's deaf. | Hearing aids help her to hear sounds better. |
| She's a baby because she wears a nappy. | She's not a baby, she's still learning how to go to the toilet. | We all learn things at different times. She is learning how to go to the toilet, but she is really good at washing and drying her hands. What are you learning to do? What are you good at? |
| We don't like her, do we? | That's not kind. Don't say that. We are all friends at preschool. | Sometimes the words we use can hurt someone's feelings. Do you think those words are filling her bucket? |
| He always breaks our building! | Tell him to say sorry. It's not ok to break other people's things. | I can see that that might make you feel upset. Maybe he wants to join your play but doesn't know how to ask you. |
| He wears glasses and he looks silly. | That's not a nice thing to say. | He does wear glasses. You are right. Lots of people wear glasses to help them see clearly. |