



Purple Playas Puffy's Pointers

Ages: All

Being Comfortable with the Uncomfortable

How to Guide Interactions between Kids with and without Disabilities

Ever wonder what to say to a child who has a visible disability or health conditions? Do your children blurt out questions or comments that make you feel uncomfortable or you try to hush them? You are certainly not alone.

It is human nature to be curious and often curiosity is an opportunity to learn, make connections and communicate. While many disabilities and chronic illnesses are invisible, there are those that have visible characteristics or the child might require adaptive devices, accommodations, or equipment that visually cues young children that something might be different or interesting. Hushing or pretending your child(ren) didn't say what they just said may imply that they did something wrong. Sure, they might say something that could be perceived as hurtful, but as with any other behavior, this is your opportunity to help your child communicate with respect and kindness.

If you are a parent of a child with a disability or chronic health condition, you have probably heard or seen actions that make you uncomfortable. In addition, you have also likely witnessed sweet and beautiful interactions between diverse children. We are hopeful that our world can become more comfortable with the uncomfortable with these few simple tips.

-  **Use a Friendly Greeting, Comment or Compliment.** Say whatever you would say to a child without a disability or adaptive/assistive devices. Use a friendly greeting like, "Hi." paired with a smile. Maybe find something you like about the child and comment, "I love your super hero shirt. Who is your favorite super hero?" It is ok to comment about the equipment/devices. (i.e., "I like the colors of your wheelchair. Are they your favorite colors?") Asking a simple question may spark a conversation. Modeling appropriate communication will also guide your own child how to interact.
-  **Teach your child we are more alike than different.** Children have all kinds of different social, physical, and cognitive abilities but we are all people and more alike than different. If you struggle with helping your child understand, there are many videos, TV shows, and children's books that could help guide understanding. Disability is part of life and so it is important to teach your child good manners and acceptance.
-  **Teach your child what to do or say.** When inappropriate language or behavior are used, it is always an opportunity to teach your child what to do or say instead. Think about what your child is trying to "get" or "get out of" through their action. Everything we do "communicates." Is your child trying to gain understanding, is he or she feeling uncomfortable and wants out of the situation; is he or she bullying to gain attention; or is your child just trying to be friendly?



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*Special thanks to our focus group
for their valuable insight.*

DON'T DO THIS...

Don't just point and whisper.

Don't hush your child when he/she points out the device/equipment.

Don't scold your child if they ask you: ***"What is wrong with him/her?"***

If your child starts laughing at someone, don't yell or harshly reprimand.

If your child says something mean or inappropriate, don't cover his/her mouth or yell and hit him/her.

Don't assume the child with a disability or medical condition can't talk, unless he/she is a baby.

If your child asks, ***"Why are you here?"*** don't scold. They are not breaking any confidentiality rules. They are curious.

Don't say, ***"Don't stare; you're being rude."***

DO THIS Instead...

Model and guide your child to wave, smile, or say hello.

Say something to your child like, ***"You can say hi and ask, 'What is that?'"***

- Most will welcome the opportunity to explain. If you know what the equipment is for, you could say something like, ***"That box helps him talk. Why don't you say hi and tell him your name."***

Say, ***"Nothing is wrong with him, he just does things his own unique way."***

- Simple, matter-of-fact answers that promote acceptance are usually the best. If your child is asking because of a visible adaptive device, like a wheelchair, you could say, ***"He uses the wheelchair to help him get around."***

You could say, ***"Why are you laughing?"***

- Laughter could be a sign of immaturity, learned behavior, or an expression of feeling uncomfortable/nervous. Your guidance should try to match the reason. For instance,
 - with immaturity/learned behavior, you could say, ***"Laughing at someone is mean. How would you feel if someone laughed at you?"*** If your child says "sad" or "mad," then you should validate that he probably made the child feel sad/mad and guide an apology.
 - if nervous/uncomfortable, you could say, ***"You can be friendly and wave."*** Another option is you could talk to the child with a disability to model kind interactions.
 - If the laughter is to be mean and bully, see next tip.

Firmly state, ***"Your words are hurtful. You need to say you're sorry."*** If you child will not apologize, turn and validate the child's feelings, ***"I know that hurt your feelings. I am sorry he/she said that."***

Furthermore, consider modeling appropriate interactions by asking a question, saying hello, or giving them a compliment.

Model and guide directly talking to the child. If the child doesn't respond, you could then guide your child to talk to the caregiver. Caregivers know how their child communicates and will most often welcome a friendly conversation.

Say, ***"They are here just like we are here...(to see the doctor, to get a blood poke, to get medicine, to get better)."***

- If the child or parent is comfortable sharing, they likely will answer the question.
- It is also ok to say, ***"I don't know."***

Say, ***"You can say hi or wave."***

- If it is obvious to you that your child has a question or concern, you could guide him/her to ask the child.

DON'T DO THIS...

Don't pretend that the child with a disability or health condition is 'invisible'.

Don't allow your child to touch another child's adaptive devices, service dog, prosthetics, etc.

Don't just tell your child "no," "don't," or "stop."

Don't use unkind labels or outdated terminology (i.e., weird-o, retard, cripple, not normal, midget).

DO THIS Instead...

A simple "hello" or smile will be enough. Teach acceptance and belonging.

- No one likes to be ignored or avoided, especially when you are in the same physical space.

Explain that the dog is working and helping the child or that the items belong to the child and you wouldn't want someone to just come up and touch you or your things.

- If the caregiver or child with the disability gives permission for your child to pet the service dog or touch, then it is ok.

Tell your child what to do instead.

- Young children need clear, concise expectations and directions. Instead of **"stop touching the dog"** say, **"Please keep your hands to yourself, the dog is working."** Instead of **"don't stare;"** say, **"You can smile and wave hi."** Instead of **"no bullying;"** say, **"You need to be kind. Say your are sorry for ____."**

Respect-Ability is Key! Use "people first language." Instead of saying **"the disabled;"** you would say, **"the child with a disability."** Words do matter. (i.e., child with dwarfism, person with intellectual disability). When in doubt, ask what terminology is preferred.

- For more guidance on "people first language," please see our PPF Power Pointer tip sheet dedicated to this topic.

If you are a caregiver of a child with a disability or a medical condition who is confronted by these situations and the other adult does not guide their own child in this way, you can model these same interactions.

Children are curious and while we may feel uncomfortable sometimes, they are most likely trying to express their feelings, understand, and learn. If you simply teach your children to treat all people with respect and kindness, then they will grow to be amazing adults.



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Hope for kids with chronic conditions

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