

# Promoting an Appreciation and Celebration of our Differences

by Donna Housman

## Emotions Are Our First Language

Emotions are universally everyone's first language beginning from birth; they are the key connector that unites us all. Globally, even before babies learn language, they respond to and communicate with emotion. Regardless of one's race or ethnicity, the way each of us first understands the world and people around us is through our emotions.

Recently, researchers gathered voice recordings from parents on six continents, and in a study published in



Donna Housman, Ed.D., is a clinical psychologist with over 35 years of experience in child development and early childhood education. Her evidence-based emotional, cognitive, and social early learning approach, *begin to ECSEL™*, fosters the

building blocks of emotional intelligence starting from birth to promote self regulation and empathy for lifelong learning, mental health, and well-being. Housman is an active presenter and speaker both nationally and internationally, and her opinions and contributions have been published in numerous national and international publications, research journals, and platforms. Housman is the author of the *ECSELent Adventures children's book series*.

the journal *Nature Human Behavior*, they concluded that “parentese,” or the high-pitched, sing-song “baby talk” adults use when interacting with babies, is profoundly similar across cultures. The study underscored that sound is used to convey emotion throughout the animal kingdom.

The researchers also found that the sounds we use with infants are used to communicate, soothe and teach—all foundational elements of emotional regulation and learning.

“Parentese” is one way that caregivers are emotionally attuned to and responsive to their infants, which is essential as 90 percent of a child's brain develops during early childhood. During the first three years of life, the brain develops the fastest and is most malleable to being shaped and informed by a child's daily interactions and broader social experience.

The earliest years are a sensitive and critical period of development, and it is imperative that parents and key caregivers place emotions and emotional intelligence—the ability to understand and manage one's own

emotions, and interpret and respond to others' emotions—at the center of children's learning. Emotional competence, self-regulation and pro-social skills are foundational to attentiveness, self-control, working memory, decision making, and problem solving.

## Responsive Relationships

Children develop within the context of caring, responsive relationships. They learn self-regulation—how to manage their feelings, thoughts, and behavior—through co-regulation. Caregivers engaging in co-regulation model appropriate emotional responses and empathically guide babies and children through emotional experiences with calm and measured tones, soothing touch, and eye contact, letting infants and toddlers know they are seen and safe. These sensitive and supportive interactions that children observe and experience promote healthy brain development and help foster the skills of emotional, cognitive, and social competence.

Responsive caregivers validate children's feelings and teach children to identify, understand, and eventually manage their emotions and understand others' emotions—the building blocks of emotional intelligence—in effectively dealing with heightened emotions, stress and anxiety. Becoming emotionally aware and competent teaches children how to be empathic and understand the feelings and differences of those around us.

## Children Can Learn to Understand Differences

Importantly, although children are born ready to learn, they are not born with nor have they yet formed their understanding and critical judgment of differences. Learning to understand and manage our own emotions and respond to the emotions of others is foundational to developing the ability to accept and embrace differences. When it comes to appreciating diversity, similar to modeling emotional regulation, we need to also model how to understand, accept and embrace differences during these key, early formative years.

Just as babies and children are not born understanding differences, they also are not born with biases. Yet, they are born with the propensity to develop understanding of these constructs. It is important to keep in mind that the formation of bias—an unfair tendency to believe that some people, ideas, or perspectives are better than others—is not ingrained, nor is the understanding of differences. Both must be taught to take root and develop. However, beginning from the earliest years, we can teach children that everyone is different in some way, and that differences are a part of life to be understood and embraced.

## Birth to Three: Rapid Brain Development

The most opportune time to lay the foundation to understand, accept, and embrace differences starts from infancy, when the brain is developing rapidly, with one million new neural connections forming every second. It is during this sensitive window of opportunity that helping build children's awareness, understanding, and acceptance, allows them to embrace differences and build empathy, caring, and kindness. Promoting these important capabilities during the critical early years not only helps to inform and shape the architecture of the brain for life, but also will become a part of children's character and moral development for the rest of their lives.

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Let's take a moment to understand this rapidly growing brain. Brain function is the interaction between genetics and experience. From birth, it is the context—environment and presence or absence of responsive relationships—that determines what genetics are expressed and which neurons are activated, contributing to who we become and how we learn to manage our emotions and behaviors. This is the time to lay the foundation for healthy

brain development, a positive sense of self, and children's understanding of themselves and the world around them.

## Look Inside First

Before we can help children build their emotional and social muscles around diversity, we must examine our own beliefs. Our attitudes, behaviors, and body language impact how children develop and learn; they are always watching our actions, tuning into and absorbing our feelings, and listening to what we say and how we say it.

Our differences can range from skin color, hair texture, body shape, gender, temperament, religious beliefs, or ethnicity, to interests, talents, values, and more. Learning to be aware of, understand, and manage our own emotions is foundational and underscores the ability to accept and embrace differences. Children must and can be taught that differences are something to be celebrated, not something to fear, mock, run away from, or hate.

## Addressing and Embracing Differences in Early Childhood

With toddlers and preschoolers, you can open the discussion of diversity beginning with topics such as the differences between and within groups of pets (cats, dogs, birds), modes of transportation (cars, buses, trains, planes), or boxes of crayons (colors). Ask the child, "What if all the crayons were the same?" and discuss how different crayons make drawing more fun, interesting, and unique. This concept can be related to people as well.

In promoting diversity within classrooms, there are ways to make learning environments more culturally inclusive.

When children share their traditions, language, cultural dishes, or read stories with characters who are similar to them, they feel seen and respected. As key socializers for children, when parents and teachers openly discuss differences, we send the message that these differences are important and make us who we are. Additionally, we can respond openly to questions about differences. When we see unacceptable language or behavior, we must address it and help correct biases that children may have. By asking reflective questions and sharing our own experiences, we can help children view differences with curiosity and enthusiasm.

## The Role of Storytelling

I wrote the children's book "Theo's Deliciously Different Dumplings" to create an age-appropriate book with relatable characters to open the discussion about diversity and acceptance. In the book, the main character, Theo, is teased by his classmates for bringing dumplings for lunch on his first day of school. As the story unfolds, the children learn to share all of their differences and what makes them unique, as well as to empathize with how Theo felt when he was bullied by classmates. In the end, Theo and his classmates are able to both embrace and celebrate their differences.

Storytelling is a powerful way to engage young children in conversations around challenging topics. At the end of each of my children's books, I include guiding questions to help parents and teachers discuss the book and personalize the experience for the children. One recommended question is asking children how they think Theo felt when his classmate, Emmett, made fun of him for bringing the dumplings. By asking children this question, I address not only differences, but bullying. Bullying has devastating effects on children of all ages. Bullying,

intolerance, and a lack of empathy take a serious toll on the mental well-being of our children.

The groundwork for emotional well-being and acceptance is laid in children's earliest years, for it is far easier to prevent than repair this crucial foundation. As teachers are struggling with increased rates of behavioral challenges, bullying, stress and anxiety, it is more important than ever that while we teach emotional competence, we also teach empathy. It is through our empathy with others and appreciation of differences that we tap into the compassion necessary to help and understand each other. By teaching children to welcome and celebrate diversity, we can play a part in fostering a global society that promotes unity and peace.

