

A World of Difference

Helping Children Embrace Differences and Learn Empathy

by Donna Housman

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

—Nelson Mandela



Donna Housman, Ed.D., is a clinical psychologist with over 35 years of experience in child development and early childhood education. Knowing it is far easier to prevent than repair, she founded Housman Institute, and its lab school/early

childhood development center, based on emotional foundations of learning and cognition. 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. As children develop within the context of relationships the ECSEL relational approach trains educators to understand and manage their own emotions before they can model for and guide children in theirs. 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 first in the series, *“Gilly and the Garden,”* focused on helping young children to understand and deal with loss, as well as *“Theo’s Deliciously Different Dumplings,”* a story about helping children understand the importance of diversity, inclusivity, and equity will be released this fall.

One of the magical aspects of early childhood is that everything is new and open to discovery and exploration. Human development is the dynamic interaction of biology and experience. Given the plasticity of the early developing brain, it is the context and daily experiences that help to shape and inform the brain’s architecture. Children are not pre-wired with their beliefs, values, or morals. These are developed over time, including children’s knowledge of and understanding of others and of differences.

We often assume children recognize differences from the start—the difference between red and blue, big and small, round and square. In fact, children are not born understanding differences. They are, however, born with the propensity to develop an understanding of differences. It is important to note that the formation of bias—an unfair tendency to believe that some people, experiences, or ideas are better than others—is also not ingrained. Children need to be taught biases in order for them to take root and develop.

Think about it: an infant does not know from day one that there is a difference between a dog and a cat, but, over time, they will learn this difference. They will see pictures in books and media, and they will have experiences that help them to understand the differences. They will interact with these animals directly and begin to notice the way a cat may move versus a dog, or how a dog sounds versus a cat. Children are naturally curious, and as they become aware of even the smallest of differences such as hair color, eye color, or body shape, they may look around them and then look at themselves and say, “That is not how I look!” They start to notice “differences.”

A World of Difference

What does “difference” really mean?

There are differences within us, between us, and among us. Our individual differences include physical characteristics, cognitive abilities, personality, individual character traits, and more. Differences between us can

be our personal thoughts and ideas, religions, beliefs, gender identity, race, ethnicity, and culture.

Differences can be the motivator for many positive and empowering aspects of our lives—competition, progress, choice, and innovation. Differences, and the special—often unique—aspects of differences, especially for young children, should be points of exploration and celebration. Introducing children to understanding differences with empathy is key to helping them form their own sense of self and providing them with the empowering knowledge of who they are.

So how does this happen? When do we begin to introduce children to how to view and understand themselves, their friends across their play space, and the world around them? When is the opportune time to introduce and teach children to discover and embrace differences and to do this with empathy—the ability to understand, care about and share the feelings of others?

Start From Birth

Babies come into the world with no assumptions, no sense of one color from another, one vegetable from another, or one animal from another. They will learn these differences through experiences as they develop. It is important to guide their discovery right from birth. This is the time we can begin to explore differences and celebrate diversity, and we can begin to help children identify and understand what others are feeling. Why from birth? Because children are born ready to learn, with emotions as their first language. They have an insatiable curiosity and a sense of wonder. Young children question everything from the start—importantly, however, they have

not yet formed their understanding and critical judgment of differences.

Starting from infancy, we have a window of opportunity to help build awareness, understanding, and acceptance, allowing children to embrace differences and build empathy, caring, and kindness. From birth, children's brains develop very rapidly. Before children reach pre-K, 90 percent of their brains have developed! Brain function is the interaction between genetics and experience. From birth, it is the context—environment, and presence or absence of experiences within key responsive relationships—that determines what genetics are expressed and what neurons are activated. This contributes to who we become and how we learn to manage our emotions, thinking and behavior, as well as how we interact with and view others and the world around us.

Our Emotions Unite Us All

When we start to guide children from the earliest age in their discovery of differences, we can help to show them that, yes, everyone is different in some way and difference is a part of life and living. But everyone has something that makes them unique and special—be it their skin color, hair texture, body shape, gender, religious beliefs, or ethnic or cultural background. We all have something “different,” within our families, between one another, and within ourselves, which impacts our feelings. But what is it that we all share?

Our emotions are the key connector that unites us all. Emotion is the first language of every child. Starting at birth, we can begin to model and guide to help children understand that though we may think differently or look differently, we are all bound together by a common thread: our emotions. You may have freckles, and

I may have green eyes, but how do we feel when mom and dad drop us off at school, or when we lose a favorite pet? Learning how to understand and manage our own emotions and those of others underscores our ability to accept and embrace differences with empathy. By realizing that we all have feelings and that all our feelings matter, we are building that bridge to understanding that differences are a part of life and should be celebrated.

What are the ways that we as educators and caregivers can help children learn about and celebrate differences as they grow and develop?

Children are Emotional Detectives

Children are emotional detectives—they are always observing, reading, imitating, and absorbing the emotions, actions, and reactions of the key adults in their world. Children are taking it all in—everything they observe is informing their understanding of how to act, interact, and react. So, what is the critical role that adults in their world should play in their emotional development and the fostering of empathy? Exactly how vital are supportive responsive relationships?

We know from research that young children are not pre-wired with bias, but rather they acquire their understanding and develop any biases by observing trusted adults in their world. Children are sponges and they pick up on adult reactions and actions toward others through verbal and physical cues, and by watching everyday behaviors and interactions. Quite simply, when a child sees an adult they trust showing bias in favor of or against another person, that child will then learn to behave in the same manner. Even the smallest cues such as tone of voice, body language, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, judgments, and

interactions with and toward others will be picked up, remembered, and replicated. Because of this, it is critical for educators and significant caregivers to be self-aware of their own biases, and to be aware of their own attitudes, beliefs, and emotions.

Responsive Relationships are Essential

The critical job of educators and caregivers is to help young children understand that noticing similarities and differences is normal, and then to openly discuss differences in a way that promotes acceptance rather than judgment, fear, antipathy, mistrust, or even hate. This starts with awareness and understanding of one's own emotions and those of others—one's emotional intelligence—and then being able to recognize and identify, understand, express, and manage emotions and those of others constructively. Children from birth are internalizing this information, based on how we direct, model, guide, and respond to them.

It is important to be aware that your attitudes, emotions, behaviors, and non-verbal body language heavily impact how a child learns and develops. They hear our words and tone of voice, they watch our actions, and they pick up on our feelings. When a child observes or senses that the adults in their world avoid or are uncomfortable around others who do not look like them, live near them, or even speak the same language as them, children pick up on these cues and those cues become the basis of their knowledge of others. This informs how they will then act toward and interact with those who are not receiving "acceptance" from the adults they are watching and learning from. These cues will become ingrained.

Before we can help children build their own emotional and social muscles around diversity, we must first look at our own. How do we respond? What is our attitude? How do we express that attitude? Starting with self-awareness, being open and honest, and recognizing the messaging we are sharing with children, we can then best recognize and help children with their emotions and understanding.

Helping Children Understand and Embrace Differences

We can start with our littlest learners by explaining what differences are and how each person is unique in so many ways. With infants, for example, we point out and discuss differences such as the colors around them, in dolls' clothing, hair, skin, and eyes. With toddlers and preschoolers, we can begin by explaining the differences between something the child knows, such as differences among their pets, or vehicles they see on the road, or the differences within a box of crayons. We can ask the child, "What if all of the crayons were the same color?" and discuss how different colors make drawing more fun, interesting, and unique. This concept can be related to people as well. Everyone is different, and these differences should be embraced and celebrated. Ensuring that your classroom is filled with diverse materials, toys, books, images representing different cultures, lifestyles, skin and body types, beliefs, and identities is vital to creating a space that is safe, embracing, and welcoming of the exploration and celebration of differences—allowing difference to become the "norm."

Building Bridges of Awareness and Understanding

What are the vital ways that we as educators and caregivers can help children learn about and celebrate differences each day? We need to:

- Model behaviors and attitudes and discuss differences openly, to best promote conversations about differences in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, abilities, physical appearance, and family background. Do not shy away from those big questions—they are learning opportunities. Provide examples of how to be inclusive when interacting with others. Talk about your own differences. You can explain differences in your family's culture, physical features, personality, and experiences, and relate them to how wonderful it is to be different and unique. This opens the doors for children to recognize, discuss, and embrace their own different experiences as well as their friends and begin to see that those differences are what makes you ... you!
- Listen and respond appropriately to children's questions about differences in a way that models effective communication, openness, and acceptance—rather than judgment—toward others. Children come equipped with lots of questions, and it is our role to guide their understanding without bias or judgement, helping them to see differences in themselves, to embrace those differences so they can then look around them and realize everyone is unique.
- Ensure that we expose children to different cultures and traditions. Create space and time to participate in cultural celebrations, particularly those that differ from your own. Introduce children to activities where they can explore, learn about,



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and meet people of different backgrounds and experiences.

- Surround yourself and your classroom with a network of diverse people, materials, and books. When children are only exposed to people of their shared race or experience, they begin to form the opinion that they are comfortable with those who look like them, making everything else different, and tacitly less comfortable.
- Redirect unaccepting language or behavior—use those moments as a learning opportunity. Children often have questions when it comes to differences and diversity. Help probe biases by discussing, asking questions, answering questions, and providing opportunities for children to share their thinking as a way

of reshaping to one of acceptance. Ask questions such as, “What was it about that person that made you feel that way?” and follow up with a discussion to provide an explanation and reason to correct unjust assumptions about differences.

- Open conversations through books and media. Books have been central in my life and in my work, and as a children’s author myself, I know the power a book can have in helping a child to understand who they are, the world around them, and how they are feeling—opening critical conversations around emotions and differences. Books can truly be the magic door for guiding children to understand and embrace differences from an early age. Reading stories that reflect children’s lived

experiences and that represent their own identities through the characters is important; helping them feel seen, heard, and validated is something all educators strive for. It is also important to read stories that reflect experiences different from our own, and to be taken out of our bubble of personal experiences, in order to realize that there is an entire world of differences to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Remember to:

- Acknowledge similarities and differences between all things without judgment. Use opportunities such as nature walks or read-alouds to ask children, “What do you notice?”
- Redirect unkindness as a learning opportunity. Just because something is different, does not mean it is bad

or weird—in fact, it can be really cool!

- Emphasize that every single person has feelings and experiences different emotions. Building emotional understanding means being able to acknowledge and identify the differences between emotions, link emotions to causes, and understand that the same thing may cause different emotions in different people. With this understanding, children will be more able to empathize, sympathize, and may be more open to listening to others' experiences and perspectives.
- Validate the emotional experiences of all children. We all feel sad sometimes, and what makes me feel sad may not make someone else feel sad. My feelings of sadness are nonetheless valid. Verbalize the feelings of others as they arise, to build empathy around all feelings and experiences. Helping children to identify, understand and manage their emotions allows them to understand and empathize with the emotions and experiences of others, building a bridge of understanding.

Creating Safe and Embracing Spaces

All of this needs to happen within an environment where children feel safe and secure—a space where every child and educator has a voice and their experiences and emotions matter. It is important to create learning spaces where sharing our own experiences and learning about and listening to other experiences is encouraged. How exciting it is to be consistently learning and discovering new things, exploring what a big world it is and how we all have something different that makes us special.

Children are endlessly curious, and they explore their world by asking questions and learning from adults' responses to those questions. It is key to help them to understand that even when we cannot fully relate or connect with another person's experiences, we can still learn to be open to listening to others' experiences with empathy. We can connect the dots to our own experiences and what we see in our own world. While we may not always be able to fully understand the experiences of others, we can take in new information, listen to different perspectives, and direct that inwards to shift how we think and view others. In this way, we can build the muscle of empathy and start to understand how others are feeling, helping us move forward together to share and navigate our big, beautiful, diverse world.

