

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Loud and Embarrassing Remarks

Question: Sometimes, when we are in public, my daughter will blurt things out loudly like: “That man is old!” or “Why is that lady in a wheelchair?” It can be embarrassing. As she gets older, I want her to understand that words can be hurtful. How can I help her without making her feel bad?

Your reaction is completely understandable in these moments with your child, and your child's behavior is also completely typical of preschoolers. At this age, she is learning to understand how her words affect others.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes: Between the ages of 3 and 4 years, [children] frequently ask “why” and “how” questions. Their exuberant use of language in play and social interaction often suggests a process of “thinking out loud.”

By promoting the skill of Perspective Taking, you can help your child understand when words are hurtful and when they are not, as well as how she can remain curious, but learn to express herself in constructive ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

1

Use everyday moments to talk about feelings.

Perspective Taking is fundamental to children's ability to thrive now and in the future. It involves understanding how others think and feel—their likes and dislikes—and how their views differ from your own. Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley notes: If we want to be successful and deal with other people, [we need] to understand the people around us— particularly what's going on in their minds.

Alison Gopnik finds that children learn about the perspectives of others when adults talk about feelings. Take the time to talk about feelings with your child—hers, yours and those of others.

- **Label and discuss your child's feelings:** “You were sad when your friend said she didn't like your dress.” This helps your child understand the connection between her feelings and her responses to others. As she learns more about her own feelings and responses, she can begin to make sense of other people's points of view.
- **Connect her understanding of her own feelings to those of others.** For example, you can say: “Remember when you asked the lady why she was in a wheelchair? You thought that she looked sad, just like you looked when your friend said she didn't like your dress.”

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It's okay—you were just wondering and didn't know how your question would make her feel." Keep in mind that your goal is to help your child understand others' points of view, not to make her feel bad about what she says and does.

- **Help your child think about what she sees and says.** You can suggest ideas, like: "Maybe she looked sad because she was feeling tired." Encourage your child to come up with reasons, too.

2

Start with YOU and how you interpret the thoughts and feelings of others.

Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis finds that Perspective Taking makes the social world children live in more predictable and memorable. Through his studies, Thompson concludes that how children gain insight into "what goes on in people's hearts and minds" depends on how parents interpret "the everyday events of their lives."

As we all know, children learn what they experience, not what they hear.

- **How do you react when someone says or does something that is hurtful to you?** If you try to understand why that person might be behaving this way—even when you don't like what he/she said or did—you are teaching why Perspective Taking is important.
- **Express understanding when it comes to your child's emotions.** For example, you can say: "You must be really upset about something." You are helping your child make the connection between feelings and actions.

3

Help your child practice self control and think about her options.

She can learn that there are other options besides blurting out comments that might be hurtful.

- **Help her think of ways of asking questions or making statements that might not be hurtful.** She can ask the lady on the street about her wheelchair and how it goes back and forth. If she has a question, she can wait until you are out of earshot of the person to ask it or she can ask it in a quiet voice.

4

Encourage pretend play and practice taking on others' roles.

- **Play.** Use your child's play as an opportunity for her to explore other perspectives in a fun way. Join in with your child and encourage her to think about how she might respond to different situations. When she pretends, your child has to think on her feet and not go on autopilot. You are helping your child strengthen her ability to listen to others and use self

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control to play the role she is pretending to be.

- **Role play.** You can take an experience you both have had together and have her pretend to be the other person, such as the person who is old or the person in the wheelchair. Have her pretend to be that person and make up a story about him or her. Ask her questions about how she would feel, what she would do during the day, and so forth, so she puts herself in the other's person's shoes.
- **Act it out and teach clues.** You can use dolls, puppets, stuffed animals or other toys to act out different experiences together. Point out things your 'character' is doing to give clues about their thoughts and feelings. For example, "Did you see my puppet put his head down? He might be sad or tired of playing."

The research of Larry Aber of New York University has demonstrated that simply teaching children problem-solving skills to use in social situations is not enough. Parents and other caregivers must help children practice what Aber calls an "appraisal process" in which children take a step back to look for clues that might help them understand the reactions of other people.

5

Use books and television to talk about characters' feelings and actions.

Aber's research confirms that children need to learn to figure out the intent of others when they're in situations that could easily turn into conflicts with adults or children. You can help your child learn appraisal skills by asking her what she thinks about the characters' intent in books, on television and in the movies.

- **Ask questions about character's feelings.** "I wonder how the girl felt when her grandma went back home? What clues do you have that this is what the girl was feeling?"
- **Ask questions about your child's feelings.** "What do you do when you feel sad, happy, tired, etc.?"