

How to Respond When Your Children Ask Questions about Others



“Why is Jamal’s skin so dark?”

Inappropriate: “His skin color doesn’t matter. We are all the same underneath.” (This response does not answer the child’s question, but simply changes the subject to similarities when the child is asking about a noticeable difference.)

Appropriate: “Jamal’s skin is dark brown because his mom and dad have dark brown skin.” (This is enough for younger children. As children get older, you can add an explanation of melanin.)

“Everyone has a special chemical in their skin called melanin. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is dark. If you only have a little, your skin is light. If the mom and dad have a lot of melanin, the kids will, too.”

“Will the brown wash off in the bathtub?”

Inappropriate: Ignoring the question, laughing at the question, or reprimanding the child for asking. Remember, children are genuinely curious!

Appropriate: “The color of Jose’s skin will never wash off. When he takes a bath, the dirt washes off, just like when you take a bath. Everybody gets dirty, and everybody’s skin stays the same color after it is washed. Everyone is clean after they wash, no matter what color their skin is.”

“Why does Miyoko speak funny?”

Inappropriate: “Miyoko can’t help how she speaks. Let’s not say anything about it.” (This response implies agreement with the child’s comment that Miyoko’s speech is unacceptable, while also implying that the child is impolite for noticing.)

Appropriate: “Miyoko doesn’t speak funny, she speaks *differently* than you do. She speaks Japanese because that’s what her mom and dad speak. You speak English like your mom and dad. It is okay to ask questions about what Miyoko is saying, but it is not okay to say that her speech sounds funny because that can hurt her feelings.”

“Why is that girl in a wheelchair?”

Inappropriate: “Shh... it’s not nice to ask.”
(admonishing)

“I’ll tell you another time” (sidestepping)

Pretending you didn’t hear. (avoiding)

Appropriate: “She is in a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her move around.”

“Why do those ladies wear those big scarves on their heads?”

Inappropriate: Making up an answer that is not true or ignoring the question.

Appropriate: “The big scarf is called a hijab. They wear it because it is a part of their beliefs that covering their heads is important.”

