

By Barbara Holden

We have all been in the situation where a toddler announces in a very loud voice that something is wrong with another child or person.

Often we talk about the importance of parents making “teachable moments” out of life’s everyday twists and turns, but what about an uncomfortable and embarrassing moment like this one?

How are you supposed to play the role of teacher when you are so uncomfortable and fearful of another parent’s reaction that you are practically frozen?

These awkward moments are inevitable. Especially once your toddler begins expressing his curiosity with the places, people and other children around him.

“It’s more important for you to let your child *discover* the natural differences in other children and adults than it is for you to actually *teach* him about those differences,” said renowned early childhood brain development specialist, pediatrician and director of the Boling Center for Developmental Disabilities Frederick B. Palmer, MD.

“Young children are broadly accepting of differences and don’t categorize them like adults do,” he said. “Names and reactions to disabilities are usually learned from parents.”

Palmer and his colleagues at the Boling Center stress the importance of adults not letting their own fear, awkwardness or discomfort restrict their child or grandchild from the discovery process.

The earlier our children understand that we are all different in some way, shape or form, the more likely he is to accept that as a natural fact instead of curious wonder. And don’t forget, he’s taking his cues from you.

It’s your everyday actions, speech and reactions that teach your child how to approach those who look, talk, worship or develop differently.

“Words are powerful. This invisible, but potent, barrier is the greatest obstacle facing individuals who have disability diagnoses. When we describe people by their medical diagnoses, we devalue and disrespect them as individuals,” says Kids Together, Inc. a non-profit volunteer organization that advocates for the rights & interests of people with disabilities.

A great way to reinforce the person before the disability is to use what Palmer refers to as “people first language.”

“It may be grammatically correct to say ‘he’s an autistic child,’ but he is a child before he is autistic, so we should identify him as a child first and autistic second,” Palmer said. “Clearly, people with disabilities want to be known as people first.”

Boling Center Family Faculty Coordinator and mother of a son with autism, Laurel Ryan, says that no matter what order your words or how awkward the situation, it really all comes down to the fact that you're all just parents and children going through life.

"You have a green apple and I have a red one – but we both still have apples. We are both parents with highs and lows. We may have different ways of approaching parenting, but we are all parents just the same.

Ryan says there are several good books available on the topic including the children's book, *What's Wrong with Timmy?* By Maria Shriver, and the grown-up book, *Nobody's Perfect* by Nancy B. Miller.

"Everyone just wants to be as independent and included in life as possible so we can be as productive as we can possibly be -- no matter our differences," Palmer said.

Fear of the uncomfortable is normal and that's okay, but don't let your emotions get in the way of your child seeing the beauty of our differences and naturalness of our disabilities.

Putting people first is not being politically correct; it's about respecting each other and taking responsibility for what we teach our children.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.