

9 TIPS TO HELP KIDS COPE WITH DIFFERENCE



Jacob's Eye Patch

A tip sheet for parents by Beth Kobliner Shaw

TIP SHEET

A friend was on an elevator with her three-year-old son. “Look, Mommy,” he shouted. “That man is really, really fat!”

We’ve all been there. Your kid spies someone who looks different, and suddenly that adorable, ingenuous, kids-say-the-darndest-things honesty turns lethal. It’s tricky. On one hand, we tell our kids don’t stare, don’t point, and definitely don’t say anything when you see someone who is different. On the other hand, we encourage our children to ask questions about anything that confuses or disturbs them.

How can little kids tell when it’s okay to say something, and when it’s not? And even more important, what if your own child has something different? How can you arm him with the right words?

It’s an issue that my family has dealt with ever since we found out that my youngest son, Jacob, at just five days old, had to wear an eye patch. Now that he’s nine years old and patch-free, Jacob and I decided to write a children’s book about his experiences. It’s called *Jacob’s Eye Patch*, it’s illustrated by the brilliant Jules Feiffer, and it speaks to what it’s like to be a kid with a difference.

Here’s some advice on how to help kids cope with difference that I gathered from psychologists, educators, parents, and my own life lessons:

1. Make it a mantra: Everyone is different in some way

Maybe it’s fiery red hair, a freckle on his ear, or something a bit more serious like baldness from chemotherapy, but everyone has something—whether they were born with it or acquired it along the winding path of life. Just knowing this has helped Jacob and me find our way.

2. Be honest, but not overwhelming

If your daughter has trouble saying Rs and gets teased, you’ll be tempted to tell her, “You speak perfectly. Ignore those meanies!” But that’ll backfire when she realizes that she does have a bit of a speech challenge. At the same time, you don’t need to get too detailed, like “Weak tongue muscles prohibit strong contact with the alveolar ridge...” Simple, age-appropriate explanations—with a plan to tackle whatever the issue, big or small—is usually best.

3. Be your child’s behind-the-scenes gentle advocate

A friend’s child was born with a missing finger, and his kindergarten classmates started asking lots of questions. His mom called the teacher and suggested an idea: The students could discuss what each of them was born with that was unique—whether it’s flat feet, wavy hair, or allergies. Working with the teacher in a friendly,



Jacob’s Eye Patch

by Beth Kobliner Shaw & Jacob Shaw
Illustrated by Jules Feiffer

On sale September 24 from
Simon & Schuster

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open way is important so that she's on your kid's side.

4. Keep it light, when possible

To take the edge off of Jacob's patch time, we'd find all kinds of zany patch designs—from leopard spots to skull and bones. As much as you can get a child to have a sense of humor, the better, even if it's not always fun or funny. At the same time, when you or your child is asked about his difference, no need to dwell on the most serious or negative aspects. Keeping explanations brief and simple—and adding more only when asked—is usually the way to go.

5. Come up with a signal

In our family, we joke around a lot. But when we use the word “really,” it is a signal that we are serious. So if a tickling match goes too far, my daughter will say “really stop” and it'll cease immediately. Come up with a family word, code, or hand gesture to indicate that we can talk about it later; one family I know uses the term “take it offline” to indicate that now is not the time.

6. Don't make it all about the difference

One of my dearest pals' young son has cancer. At every school event—whether it's an ice skating party or spring dance—she makes sure her son is active and engaged, treating him just like everyone else. And you know what? He is just like everyone else—but even more beloved for his strength, bravery, and awesome dance moves!

7. Spin positive

A young girl we know has a rare fragile bone syndrome that requires her to be particularly careful during recess. Her active parents recently sent an amazing note out to friends asking to sponsor her in a swimathon that she had created in order to raise money for the cause. The event showed everyone her inner and outer strength.

8. Use it to preach the kindness gospel

Let's face it. We all need to be reminded of what it's like to be in someone else's shoes in order to have real empathy. Talking about how the most beautiful characteristic is what's on the inside—and how sad it makes us feel when someone says something unkind—are great lessons to offer if the issue of someone being different comes up.

9. Empower with snappy phrases

The coolest teacher at Jacob's school perfected the art of the crafty comeback, and recommends it as one more weapon in a child's verbal arsenal. So when someone would ask about Jacob's patch for the tenth time in a day when he was young, he'd get creative: “I come from a long line of dangerous pirates” or “It's a disguise for my latest CIA mission.” Saltier one-liners are a last resort, but almost always effective, as kids approach the tween years.

Adopting these tips can provide the compassion and grit that can make kids who are different so inspiring. Despite his patch and four operations, Jacob is an outgoing, exuberant, astonishingly happy child who approaches his difference with a quirky flair that makes him accepted by all. ●



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