

# Mirrors and Windows

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In early childhood education, there's a concept called "Mirrors and Windows". When looking at the dolls in the classroom, or at the pretend food in a toy kitchen, or at the books on the shelf, we want to be sure every child finds *mirrors* – things that reflect their own identities and life experiences, and *windows* that give them a peek into the identities and lives of people who are different from them. The *mirrors* tell them that they are important and that they belong; the windows help them develop an appreciation for diversity and an empathetic connection to people who are different from them.

Let's broaden out that idea to a big picture of other ways that parents / family members can ground children in their own unique identities and cultures (mirrors) while also exploring windows.

## Identifying your culture and your family values

Like a fish trying to describe water, the first step of connecting to cultural identity may be to figure out what that identity is, and what is important to you to share. Some questions to ask yourself:

- What foods does your family eat? What daily routines are part of your family life?
- What holidays do you celebrate and how do you celebrate them?
- What are your hobbies? How do you prioritize what you spend time doing?
- Where do you most feel a sense of belonging (where you know you fit in well)?
- What values are important to you? How do you model those for your child?
- How might that be the same or different from other people that your child encounters?

## Connecting to Culture: Routines, Rituals, and Traditions

For a young child, routines create a reassuring sense of structure – the more they know what to expect and what is expected of them, the easier it is for them to succeed. They gain from daily routines the sense 'this is how my family does things.' Ritual and traditions take that to the next level: 'this is how my people do things and how we have done things for a very long time'.

Some places to consider adding routines or rituals that reflect your family identity:

- Daily: How do you begin your days together? What are mealtimes like? What is the typical rhythm of the day? What's the bedtime routine? Do you do daily prayers? Gratitudes? Stories?
- Weekly: Do you do "family date nights"? Weekly dinners with extended family or friends?
- Holidays: Which do you celebrate? How do you celebrate? Decorations? Foods? Gifts?
- Other family traditions: Do you have nicknames or family in-jokes or favorite songs?

Some ways to include cultural identity in your child's life:

- Tell stories. About your childhood, how your family did things, their grandparents' childhoods.
- Read books about your culture, listen to traditional music from your culture or music your parents played when you were young, eat foods that were traditional where you were raised.
- Learn and teach the language of your culture. Go to religious services or cultural festivals.
- Make scrapbooks with info about your family: a family tree, photographs, and documents of your family's journey. Tell stories of resilience – how you weathered hard times together.

# Windows – Learning about Diverse Life Experiences

You can also actively choose to expose your child to other perspectives. Here are some ideas:

- Eat at a variety of restaurants or try recipes at home, and talk about where those come from.
- Travel (or do virtual travel via books, movies, museums, cultural festivals).
- Learn other languages. Even just a few words here and there broadens our worldview.
- Choose to live in a diverse neighborhood so your child will attend a diverse school. Or do extracurricular activities that pull in people from wide-ranging communities.
- Seek out multi-generational communities (e.g. church, family camp, clubs) and make friends with people of all ages.

**Talk about Differences.** Research and practice shows that when parents try to be “color blind” and make statements like “we’re all the same”, it is confusing to kids, and it can imply that talking about differences is taboo or that some differences are shameful / “not to discuss in polite company.”

When reading books, watching movies, or people-watching, talk about differences easily and openly. You can talk about different skin colors, ages, gender expressions, weight, ability, clothing / hairstyles, languages spoken, family compositions, and more. Use descriptive words / labels they can use, like Asian, gay, disabled, transgender, Muslim, multi-racial. (As they get older, we’ll help them learn that no one can be defined by any one label. But, as they’re just starting to sort things out, talking about differences builds vocabulary and context for understanding the broader world.)

Be careful not to add in biased judgments or stereotypes when talking about differences: “He is \_\_\_\_\_, I bet he is good at \_\_\_\_\_.” “She is \_\_\_\_\_. She must like \_\_\_\_\_.” If your child expresses a stereotype like “all people who are \_\_\_\_\_ think \_\_\_\_\_”, you can gently correct that assumption.

**Talk about Commonalities.** If your child notices and comments on how someone is different from them, acknowledge that difference in a positive tone, and then talk about universal needs and common interests. “You’re right, her skin is a different color than yours. Her ancestors came from a different part of the world than ours did. I noticed that you two had a lot of fun playing soccer.” “Yes, you have just me as your parent, and many of your classmates have two parents – sometimes a mom and a dad, sometimes two moms or two dads. But all of you get lots of love, right?” “They wear special clothes as part of their religion. We don’t wear special clothes, but we do celebrate special holidays because of our family’s beliefs.” “Hmmm, she does only have one leg. And she uses crutches to walk. That’s different than us. But look, she’s buying a cake pop, just like we are!”

**Talking about Inequity.** In the early years, we can simply focus on building an appreciation for, and understanding of, a wide variety of differences.

As they get older (by early elementary school), *then* we can add in that even though we’re different, we should all have the same rights and we all deserve the same equitable opportunities.

As they get even older (certainly by age 10), some parents choose to refine that to “we *should* all have the same rights and opportunities, but we don’t. What can we do together to help increase everyone’s access to the same opportunities?” Model how to be an ally: If you see situations where things could be improved to make something more accessible and equitable for *all* people, speak up.

**Tip:** A great way to focus on mirrors and windows is by reading diverse books to your child. Find resources at: <https://gooddayswithkids.com/examples-of-diverse-books/>