

Ask the Expert: Tips for Parents Helping Children Value Their Uniqueness

By Reji Mathew, PhD



Reji Mathew, PhD

In the life of every child who has a disability, there is a moment at which she begins to see that she is different from the children around her in some ways. At what stage in a child's life does that typically occur?

It varies greatly from child to child, and I don't believe it can be thought of as a single moment or event. It is an issue that a person will revisit throughout life as she enters a new season or faces new experiences or challenges. A child who is not ambulatory will realize early that she cannot do some of the things she sees her friends doing. When the child enters school, a new set of experiences will cause her to realize the differences in fresh ways. When a teen begins dating, other issues arise. It is an ongoing process of self-discovery.



How can parents help their child to negotiate the process?

The child needs a safe place to work out his feelings about the differences he sees. A parent can provide that safe place by engaging in **constructive communication**.

The first step in communicating constructively is always to **validate the child's feelings**, whatever they are. They may be based on incorrect information, or on a poor self-image, but those feelings are real and they seem like truth to the child. She will feel safe in processing her thoughts and feelings if they are accepted as real and valid.

Once feelings have been validated, a parent can lead the child in **balanced thinking**. Balanced thinking involves taking into consideration all the facts involved. Yes, a child may be the only one in his class to use a wheelchair, but he is not the only one who enjoys painting pictures, for example. There are others who share his interest in space exploration, or in horses.

Help the child to view others as varied human beings. A few of her classmates share her passion for reading poetry, but not all do. We are all different from one another in many ways, but we are similar in many more ways. Look for **commonalities** and create opportunities where children and teens can connect with others who share their interests. A youth with an interest in politics can find belonging in a teen political action group. Sometimes teachers and school counselors can help students to make those peer group connections.

What can parents do to help their child develop a positive sense of self?

A positive sense of self is grounded in a feeling of being **accepted and loved unconditionally**. It is important that parents express love for their child for who he is, separate from his performance or abilities.

Fostering **mastery experiences** can help to bolster a positive sense of self by guiding a child to set goals and accomplish them. Establishing celebration rituals which recognize steps of progress, no matter how small, can help to keep a child's growing abilities in her view and remind her that she is a capable person.

The "it takes a village" mindset can provide much needed support to both parents and children. Create opportunities for the child to come in contact with **positive people** who can express delight and interest in him. Their interest and love can reinforce that of parents, and offer the child new relational experiences.

How can parents help children to cultivate hope for the future?

Exposing children to positive **role models** is very important for cultivating hope. Tell stories of others who have effectively negotiated their disabilities to lead successful and fulfilling lives. Let them know

that their dreams are possible, but that they may need to realize them in a different way. Offering such mental images of success can lay a foundation for a child's dreams and hopes.

I like to say that we don't have to wait for life to get better to feel better. **Schedule positive events** on a regular basis; once a month, for example, or as often as needed. The Internet offers countless resources of disability-accessible events; sign up for email announcements so you can plan for them. Go out of your comfort zone a bit and contact a prominent person in your community who has a disability. Ask if she would allow your child to visit with her for a mentoring session so your child can speak with her about how she accomplished her goals.

Hope is not something you build once. It must be refueled over a lifetime, even into adulthood as new challenges arise. As your child grows older, acknowledge that hope is an actual need, and help him to consciously seek out opportunities to build hope. As a parent, you may have to check your own "hope level." Raising a child with a disability may be a new experience for you. Make contact with other parents who are going through the same things you are, and with adults who have successfully negotiated the challenges your child may be facing.

Even if we do all the "right" things, there will be times when it can be difficult to maintain a sense of hope. At those times, I like to ask myself some practical questions:

- What do I need to do to build hope right now in this situation?
- What specific steps can I take?
- How can I think about this challenge differently?
- Is there a role model I can seek out?
- Is there a workshop I can take, do I need to learn something new?
- With whom can I brainstorm?

Giving children practical tools like these questions helps to cultivate an attitude of **skill-ability**, a mindset that can lead to seeking out new coping strategies as the need arises. When they understand that expanding their coping skills is a life-long, limitless curve, this can be a constant source of hope, and they will be well equipped to deal with whatever challenges lie ahead.

Reji Mathew, PhD, is a Psychotherapist/Clinical Instructor at New York University. The main focus of her work is to promote coping skills education for persons with chronic illness and disability. Her clinical expertise is in integrative psychotherapy, particularly cognitive-behavioral skills training. See her Web site at rejimathewwriter.com, showcasing her articles on health, wellness, living well with disability, and links to various resources.