Children today live in an interconnected world. They are exposed to cultures, belief systems, and families different than their own. Newer ways of relating like the Internet and social media accomplish this in a way that older people never experienced in childhood. These changes make teaching tolerance to children ever more important.

What is tolerance?
Tolerance is the ability to both appreciate others’ diversity and not to allow these differences to influence your respect and objectivity towards others. It is the foundation for children working and playing well with their peers who might be different than them. Tolerance is not just a concept to apply to religion or skin color. One can embody tolerance for any characteristic that makes people “different”-gender, sexuality, ability level, values, etc.

Why is teaching tolerance important?
Increased tolerance can reduce bullying and open up valuable learning experiences for your child. It reduces conflict and increases peace. The effects of cultivating tolerance can continue far into the future as your child grows and enters the workforce. Sometimes it is difficult to speak to children about tolerance because it may bring up the topics of racism, sexism, and other uncomfortable subjects. However, when parents choose not to discuss these issues, children can get inaccurate messages elsewhere. Parents are the most important influence in children’s lives- for better or worse!

Do even young children need to learn about tolerance?
Yes! Studies show that even toddlers are becoming aware of differences between themselves and other people. As children enter preschool, they might start assigning values to these differences based on their observations of others. For example, a child might think that either straight hair or curly hair is “better” because of attention another child receives. School-aged children place a lot of importance on belonging to a peer group and compare themselves to other students. This age group might need guidance if they are treated differently because of their own differences, or if they treat other people differently. Teenagers are more able to understand the concepts of tolerance, inequality, and prejudice and can benefit from more in-depth discussions. Don’t forget to ask your teens about their own experiences and opinions.

How can we teach children to be more tolerant?
• **Be a good role model.** Children internalize and mimic what adults do and say. Parents should pay attention to their own beliefs and actions and remember that these are being passed on to their children. Don’t just focus on your words. Body language and facial expressions can also convey strong messages to children.

• **Read books that expose your child to diversity.** From an early age, children can be exposed to different cultures, types of families, and ways of thinking through books. Read picture books with depictions of other cultures and story books about inclusion and respect. Find stories with main characters who differ from your child in some way (ability level, ethnicity, beliefs). Have discussions with your child about these differences and about their similarities, too.

• **Pay attention to media.** Take time to observe the television shows, video games, and Internet sites which your child views. Do they promote diversity or prejudice? Take time to have discussions with your children about the media. For example, if a person with a disability is teased on a television show, ask your child, “How do you think that character felt?” and “What would be the best thing to do if you saw that happening in real life?”

• **Allow children to ask questions and talk about differences.** Children, especially young ones, are naturally curious and typically do not mean harm. Listen and speak with your heart to help your children understand differences.

• **Expose children to differences.** Give your children opportunities to make friends with people outside your community. Bring children to cultural festivals, restaurants, and museums. Allow children to participate in other cultures rather than just being an onlooker.

• **Value the differences within your own family.** Respect everyone’s different limits, abilities, interests, and styles.

• **Do not limit choices.** For example, do not give your child the idea that “only girls can play with dolls” or “sports are for boys.”

• **Discuss similarities as well as differences.** At their cores, people are more alike than different. Allowing children to see these similarities will help foster tolerance and empathy.

• **Observe your child interacting with others.** This is a good way to pick up on any areas for growth in tolerance. If you notice your child using any derogatory language, make sure to have a discussion with him or her.

• **Do not stay silent.** If your child or anyone else says or acts in an intolerant way, use the opportunity to have a kind discussion about why it is inappropriate. Remember that the person may have not intended or been aware of the offense (children especially).

• **Give praise when your child displays compassion and tolerance.** Praise is the best way to increase children’s good behaviors.

• **Celebrate your family’s culture.** Give your children a sense of pride in their heritage (without a sense of superiority).

**References**


http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/tolerance/