



Save the Children



# fairplay

talking with children about  
prejudice & discrimination



**Barnardo's**

NORTHERN IRELAND

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

# fairplay

**This booklet was written by Dr Paul Connolly.**

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**Barnardo's Parenting Matters Project runs support groups for parents and carers. Programmes are developed to meet the needs and interests of each group.**

**Save the Children's work in Northern Ireland focuses on children's participation in society, countering discrimination and disadvantage, and ensuring that the best interests of individual children are a primary consideration in all matters that affect them.**



**"Funded by the Community Relations Council  
with assistance from the EU Special Programme"**

# about this book

This book has been produced by Barnardo's Parenting Matters and Save the Children. It has been written for parents and guardians of children in Northern Ireland and aims to:

- Increase our understanding of prejudice and discrimination in Northern Ireland and the ways they effect children;
- Offer practical advice and guidance on how we can help and support children who are discriminated against; and
- Give us the confidence and skills to talk to our children about prejudice and discrimination.

# why do we need this book

- **"A Protestant is a bad person ...because they want to kill all Catholics"** (6 year old girl).
- **"Catholics are the same as masked men, they smash windows"** (4 year old girl).
- **"If you sit on a Chinese (person's) wall they come out with knives ... They sit and stare at you and your waiting for them to turn on you"** (12 year old boy).
- **"Gypsies - they're all tramps, whores"** (14 year old boy).

Unfortunately, comments like these are made all too often by children. As can be seen, children can learn prejudices from a very early age. These attitudes can often lead to children being bullied and discriminated against. For example, did you know that:



- Nearly a third (27%) of all 12-17 year olds in Northern Ireland have been threatened or verbally abused because of their religion.
- Two thirds (66%) of minority ethnic school children in Northern Ireland have experienced racist harassment.
- Over 90% of girls in one study reported being sexually harassed.
- 48% of lesbian and gay students under 18 had been violently attacked. Nearly half of these attacks (40%) had occurred in schools.

A child can be discriminated against for any reason, whether it is because of their size, the fact that they wear glasses or the colour of their hair.

The problem is that prejudice and discrimination seriously limit children's development and growth. They lead to some children being left out and denied the opportunity to develop friendships and to learn new things. Prejudice also narrows children's horizons and makes them frightened of anything that is 'different'.

In the end, everybody loses out from the effects of prejudice and discrimination. As parents and guardians we have a powerful influence over the lives of our children.

**Prejudice** is an opinion or attitude about a group of people that is based upon lack of understanding or incorrect information.

We can hold prejudiced attitudes about any group of people (i.e. men, women, Catholics, Protestants, Chinese people, Travellers, the elderly, people with particular disabilities, lesbians or gay men). They are assumptions we make about a person simply because of the group they belong to.

Some prejudices may sound positive and be well-intentioned. Examples of these include:

- **“Black people are good at sport”.**
- **“All gay men are really sensitive and caring”.**

However, such assumptions are still patronising and wrong. They encourage us to see all people from a particular group as the same rather than to accept that there are lots of differences within any group.

Unfortunately, prejudiced attitudes can all too often be found among children, even at a very young age. Research has shown that children are capable of holding prejudices and negative attitudes towards others from the age of three.



It is our job, as parents and guardians, to ensure that we do what we can to deal with the prejudice and discrimination that will effect our children's lives. This is what this book is all about.

## so what can we do as parents?

**Discrimination** is when a person is treated unfairly because they are a member of a particular group.

Discrimination can take a variety of forms and occurs for many different reasons. For children, they are most likely to discriminate because of the prejudiced attitudes they may hold. Examples include:

- **making fun of a deaf child because it is thought that she is thick and stupid;**
- **not playing with a Traveller child because it is believed that they are dirty and smelly; and**
- **not allowing girls to play football because it is assumed that they will be no good at it.**

As parents and guardians, we have an important role to play in combating prejudice and discrimination among our children. We are the most significant and influential people in our children's lives. We have an opportunity to make a real difference by:

- **setting a good example for our children through our own attitudes and behaviour towards others;**
- **talking to our children about prejudice and discrimination and getting them to think about their attitudes and the way they treat others; and**
- **giving our children support and encouragement if they experience prejudice and discrimination.**

The rest of this book offers some practical help and advice about how we can go about these things.

“that’s all well and good **but** ...”



“Won’t talking about prejudice only whip things up and make matters worse? Isn’t it better just to ignore it?”

Ignoring the issue will not make it go away. We can be certain that if our children are not aware of the prejudices around them now it is only a matter of time before they will start picking them up.

We’ve got the opportunity to get in there first to make sure that our children’s understanding is fair and accurate and less likely to be influenced by the prejudices of those around them.

“But I don’t want to upset my children by talking about these things”

It all depends how we go about it. There is no need for it to be upsetting. Hopefully, our children will find it very interesting and rewarding.

More importantly, our children are likely to find it much more upsetting to come across the prejudices of others if they have not been prepared for them. We have the chance to explore the issues with them now so that they are much more prepared when they do come across them in the future.

“This may be appropriate for older children but mine are just too young to talk to about these things”

As we have seen, children are capable of being prejudiced and discriminating against others from about the age of three onwards. Fortunately, they are also able to learn that doing certain things is wrong and to begin to understand that it's wrong from that age. Even at this age children have the ability to begin to appreciate the feelings of others. If they say or do something that is hurtful to someone else, just ask them how they think that makes the other person feel? As they get a little bit older we can ask them whether they think it's a 'good' or a 'fair' thing to say or do?

“But I haven't got the skills to talk to my children in this way”

We don't need special skills to talk to our children about prejudice and discrimination. All we need to do is to be open and relaxed, listen to our children, take them seriously and ask them questions. The more we do this, the more we will gain their trust and allow them to talk about and explore what they are really thinking. Also, helping our children to think about their views will develop their intelligence and social skills.



### **Research** on Sectarianism and Children in Northern Ireland.

- Children are capable of recognising differences and holding sectarian prejudices from the age of three.
- By the ages of five and six, a significant number of children show awareness of bombs and explosions.
- By the ages of ten and eleven, many children have developed deeply engrained sectarian attitudes.

# what's your style?

Think about how you handle discrimination and prejudice by checking out this list. Which of these approaches do you use most often?

- 1. Head in the sand** - I try to ignore discrimination and prejudice, my own and what's around me.
- 2. Giving out** - I tell my children what to think. I don't really spend time discussing things with them.
- 3. Making space** - I help my children explore what they think and feel as well as telling them my views.
- 4. Getting support** - I find out more about things I am unsure of, or unfamiliar with, by talking, discussing, and finding out, so I get a clearer idea of where I stand.
- 5. Seeing the big picture** - I make links between my experience and between different types of prejudice and discrimination. I discuss these issues with my children as they grow older.

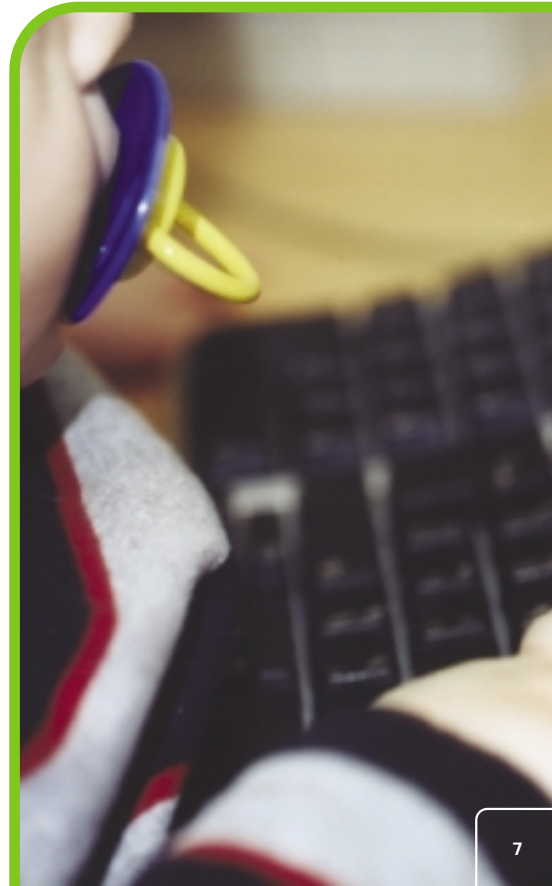




# what might the **results** be of each approach?

As parents we may move between these different approaches in our everyday lives. Each approach has a different effect on your relationship and on your child's development.

- 1. Head in the sand** - Children don't learn to think about or deal with the issues (and are less likely to question what they hear from other people). Opportunities for building relationships and learning are lost.
- 2. Giving out** - Children may feel that their views are not important and opportunities for building relationships and skills are lost.
- 3. Making space** - Children develop skills, confidence and conscience.
- 4. Getting support** - Parents develop skills, confidence and a clear understanding.
- 5. Seeing the big picture** - Children and parents are able to make links between their lives and the lives of other people.



# how can we **talk** to our children about prejudice and discrimination?

There are plenty of opportunities for us to talk to our children about prejudice and discrimination. Our children may be on the receiving end of it or we may see them behaving in an unfair way to someone else. We may come across prejudice or discrimination while we are out and about with our children or when we're watching television together.

Anytime it comes up naturally like this it is a good opportunity to talk about it. There are also some resources - listed at the end of this book - that have been produced to help us explore some of the issues involved with our children. Whichever way we choose to discuss prejudice and discrimination with our children, there are some simple guidelines.

## Be open and relaxed

Arguing with or shouting at our children does not work. It will only lead to them clamming up and refusing to talk to us at all. While we may disagree with what they are saying, we must allow them to say what they really think.

## Always show our children respect and take them seriously

We may not respect what they are saying but we must respect their right to say it. Unless they feel that we are really interested in their point of view and are willing to understand them, they are not likely to bother telling us what they really think.



## Be willing to learn from our children

It isn't all a one-way process in which we are always right and our children always wrong. If we go in with that attitude then we'll never convince our children that we respect their views. We can learn from them. While children are capable of being prejudiced, they are also capable of holding very positive and progressive views. We may well find ourselves learning something from them.

## Don't force things - take your time

If our children do hold certain prejudiced views, we won't be able to persuade them there and then to change their attitudes. It takes time to build up children's trust and confidence so that they can honestly and openly talk to us about their own views. It also takes time for the things that we are discussing to sink in. We need to give our children time to think through what we have talked about and mull it over.

We may think we're getting somewhere with our children only to find that they come home one day with even more rigid attitudes on something. This is natural and simply reflects the fact that they are picking things up and learning all the time. All we can do is to lay the right foundations for our children. By creating an environment where talking and listening happen normally we will help them to think through the attitudes they pick up over time.



## Think about our own attitudes and behaviour

Finally, what example are we setting our children? We all carry prejudices around with us to one degree or another. It is important that we are honest with ourselves and think about our own attitudes and habits.

The best way to do this is to ask ourselves whether there are certain people that make us feel threatened, awkward, intimidated or angry? Having any of these feelings towards particular groups of people are signs that we may hold prejudices about them.

If this is the case, we could make an effort to find out a little more about them. We can talk to people that we know who may have more information. Alternatively, there's likely to be a group or organisation representing their interests - see the list at the end of this book.



## but what do we actually say?

There are no ready-made scripts to follow. If we take on board the ideas already mentioned we will create an atmosphere where conversations will develop naturally. There are a few things we can do when talking to our children that will help.

### Ask questions and listen rather than give lectures

This is probably the main piece of advice. We don't have to have ready-made things to say. We can simply try to get a conversation going with our children. For example, we could begin by asking our children what they think about an issue they've raised and encourage them to talk about it.

### Encourage our children to think through the consequences of prejudice & discrimination for themselves

Rather than just telling them that prejudice and discrimination are wrong, we can encourage our children to work it out for themselves. They are much more likely to remember and accept something that they have struggled with themselves rather than something they have just been told.

One of the best ways of doing this is to get them to understand how certain attitudes and behaviour effect others. We could ask them questions such as 'How do you think it makes that person feel?' and 'How would you feel if you were in that situation?'

Another way we can do this is by getting them to think again about what they have just seen or said. We can ask them questions such as 'Do you think that was a fair thing to do?' and ask them to say why they think this.

If they make generalisations about a particular group of people we can ask them what makes them think that and point out examples that contradict what they are saying.

### Answer any questions our children may have clearly and honestly

Of course, it is inevitable that our children will have plenty of questions for us. If we can't be open and honest with our children about our own attitudes and behaviour then how can we expect them to be the same with us?

### Don't pretend we know the answers when we don't

There will also be questions that we don't have the answers to. There is nothing wrong with simply saying to our children: "To be honest I don't know but I will find out for you". This is far better than trying to bluff our way through it.



# examples of questions children might ask

Children are naturally curious and will take an interest in the world around them. If we let our children know they can talk about anything then we are bound to get a lot of questions.

Talking in a way that makes sense to your child will take imagination and tuning into their world. Young children under five will repeat things without always knowing what they mean. They need you to use real examples linked to their own experiences. As children develop they become more able to think about things which they haven't experienced themselves.

Below are some examples of the questions our children might ask and what we could say in reply. The answers are examples of things you could say, or questions you could ask.

The important thing is just to talk about these issues and to acknowledge that there are differences between people. Ignoring them does not stop your child noticing them, or picking up other peoples' opinions. How you talk about it depends on you and on your child. There are no right and wrong answers.

**Q What's a Taig?**

**A** That's a word some people use when they want to call Catholics names. Have you ever been called names? How did it make you feel?

**Q Claire says that she lives with her two mummies. How can that be?**

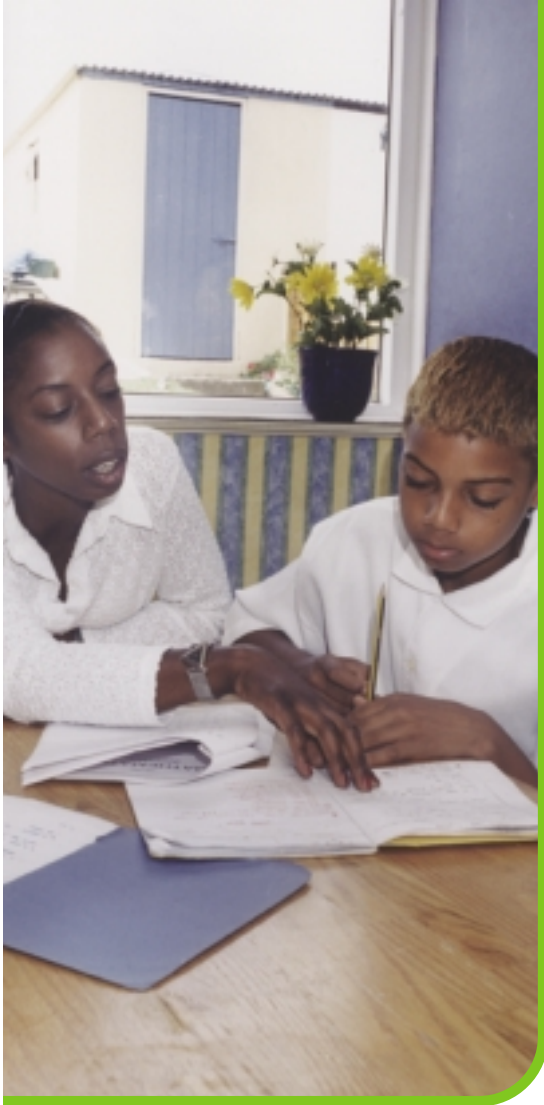
**A** When two women love each other they might decide to live together and they may also have children. That's what it's like in Claire's case. That's why she's got two mummies.

**Q Why is that girl in a wheelchair?**

**A** She uses a wheelchair because she can't walk. The wheelchair is her way of getting around. What do you think that would be like?

**Q Am I a Catholic or a Protestant?**

**A** We're Catholics. You know Davey, he and his family are Protestants. It means we go to different churches and sometimes believe different things. We're both Christians. Do you know what that means?



**Q** Paul's daddy says that Gypsies are always robbing off others.

**A** I think they like to be called Travellers not Gypsies. People say things like that because they don't know much about Travellers. How would you feel if people said things like that about us?

**Q** I don't want to play with Joanne anymore, she's stupid and she talks funny.

**A** Joanne has what is called Downs Syndrome. She doesn't learn or speak in the same way that you do but she does like to play just like you do.

**Q** Declan says that unemployed people are lazy and don't want to work.

**A** Most people hate being unemployed and would love to have a job. It's just that there's no jobs out there for them at the moment. It can be very hard being unemployed. You don't have enough money to buy all the things you need.

**Q** Sinead called me a chink. Why did she call me that?

**A** They call us that because they don't understand us. Some people can be scared of others who are different to themselves and so say things like that. Did it upset you when she called you that?

# how can we **support** children hurt by prejudice and discrimination?

Some of us have children who are picked on or treated unfairly because they are seen as different. If nothing is done about it, it can make them feel less confident about themselves and what they can achieve.

Examples of the effects of discrimination include:

- A girl deciding not to bother doing well in her GCSEs and possibly going onto college because she believes that she has to get married and have children;
- A Muslim child asking his mother not to cover her head when going to meet his teachers at school;
- A child who is deaf being reluctant to use sign language in public because it would draw attention to her; and
- A child feeling frightened travelling to and from school because of sectarian abuse.

Because each child's situation will vary so much, there are no simple answers as to what we should do to support her or him. However, there are a few general guidelines to bear in mind.

- Give comfort (physically, if appropriate) to our children if they are discriminated against. We should make sure they know that they are loved, wanted and that they are important.
- Always be positive about their identity. We can praise who they are and give them strong support by pointing out role models and examples of powerful figures who share their identity.
- Listen carefully to what they have to say and give them the space to explain how they are feeling and what their fears and anxieties are. We need to help them to work through how they might best deal with the situation.



- Make sure we show our own disapproval of any prejudice or discriminatory behaviour. We can stress how the problem lies with the attitudes or actions of the others involved. It is important that they do not blame themselves for what has happened. However, we need to condemn the attitude or the behaviour rather than the individual personally.
- If the problem is occurring at school or in a playgroup or youth group then we should talk to someone in that organisation about it. They will often have policies and procedures for dealing with incidents like this in a sensitive and constructive way.
- Talk to others. It is unlikely that our child is the only one facing these problems. There are many organisations and support groups in Northern Ireland that are there to help us. See the list at the end of this section. They would be happy to hear from you.

**Finally** we are learning too. We would like to know what you thought about this booklet.

Please let us know by phoning or writing to:

**Barnardos**  
**Parenting Matters Project**  
**453 Ormeau Road**  
**Belfast, BT7 3GQ**

**Tel: 028 9049 1081**

**Save the Children**  
**15 Richmond Park**  
**Belfast, BT10 0HB**

**Tel: 028 9043 1123**

## useful contacts

### **Barnardo's Parenting Matters Project**

Tel: 028 9049 1081

Parents support groups and training of facilitators.

### **Save the Children**

Tel: 028 9043 1123

### **Barnardo's Tuar Ceatha Project**

Tel: 028 9066 8766

A community based project working with and supporting ethnic minority families.

### **Cara Friend/Gay and Lesbian Youth N.I.**

Tel: 028 9032 2023 / 028 9027 8636

Information service for gay men, lesbians and bisexual's.

### **Childline**

Tel: 0800 111 111

Free 24hr confidential counselling phone line for children.

### **Children's Law Centre**

Tel: 028 9024 5704

Helps young people, parents and families understand laws relating to children.

### **Chinese Welfare Association**

Tel: 028 9028 8277

### **Community Relations Information Centre**

Tel: 028 9022 7555

### **Disability Action**

Tel: 028 9029 7880

Advice and information for anyone affected by disability.

### **Foyle Friend**

Tel: 028 7126 3120

Information service for gay men, lesbians and bisexuals in the North West.

### **Mencap**

Tel: 028 9069 1351

### **Multicultural Resource Centre**

Tel: 028 9024 4639

### **N.I. Council for Ethnic Minorities**

Tel: 028 9023 8645

### **Parenting Forum NI**

Tel: 028 9031 0891

All parents are encouraged to join - local events, newsletter and support.

### **Parents Advice Centre**

Tel: 028 9023 8800

Helpline, face to face support for parents and parenting courses.

### **Traveller Movement N.I.**

Tel: 028 9020 2727

## useful resources

### **[www.thinktank.org](http://www.thinktank.org)**

Creative resources website for community relations.

### **Save the Children Bullying Resource -**

Don't Let Them Suffer in Silence.  
Tel: 028 9043 1123

### **Save the Children We Can Work It Out -**

Parenting With Confidence.

### **Save the Children All Right At Home -**

Promoting Respect for Human Rights of Children in Family Life.

### **Save the Children**

Anti-Bias Approaches in the Early Years.

### **Playboard**

Games not names programmes.  
Tel: 028 9056 0010

### **Workers Education Association**

Community education courses including community relations.  
Tel: 028 9032 9718

### **Barnardo's**

Getting positive about discipline.  
Tel: 020 8498 7363



