How to talk to your kid about disability and neurodiversity

I am on the playground with Rachel, when a child approaches me pointing at my daughter's wheelchair and asks, "What is that? Why is she sitting there?" I explain to him that Rachel doesn't walk, but thanks to her wheelchair she can move quickly on her own, the same way he uses his bike. The child accepts the answer and immediately moves on to another topic, telling me about the chocolate his dad just bought him. The father, who has been listening to the conversation from afar, arrives and apologises, and tells his son not to ask ***that kind of questions***. I tell him not to apologise, rather, that it is perfectly ok to ask, but he walks away, clearly embarrassed.

What we don't know or what is different from us implicitly instils fear, a primary emotion that increases the distance between people. The best antidote to fear is knowledge. In the case described, and in many others, the solution is quite simple: ***just talk about it***. Disability is not a taboo; it is not something you cannot talk or must feel embarrassed about. It is a reality.

The child's attitude on the playground reflects a natural tendency of children, their curiosity and deep desire to understand. The role of the adult in such circumstances is to accompany the child in understanding diversity and, in this case, disability.

It all starts with a question followed by an honest and clear answer. An attitude such as the one shown by the father - "*don't ask, let's go now*" - creates confusion in children and contributes to them developing the idea that disability is something that cannot be talked about, a taboo subject to be avoided. This is how we feed the social prejudice that is better not to talk about disability, especially with disabled people themselves.

It is essential to talk to children about disability as naturally as we talk about other parts of the human experience. ***Accept and welcome their curiosity*** and pass on the message that it is healthy to have an open attitude towards disability.

When we adults have to explain disability to a child, it is first and foremost an opportunity to confront ourselves. What are the images that I as an adult or parent associate with disability? Do I have a stereotyped view of what a disabled person is? What kind of emotions does being in contact with a disabled person arouse in me? Being aware of one's own understanding of disability is a necessary first step.

We adults should be open and honest in addressing the topic of disability with our children. There must be no denial of the diversity of a particular experience. It is important to ***use language that is accessible*** to the child's age and to provide examples that the child can easily identify with: "*Everyone is different. You like drawing, and your sister loves maths, right? Well, just as you communicate with spoken words, that child communicates with signs she makes with her hands because she is deaf – cool, no?*" Examples of this kind help the child understand that not only people are different, but that diversity brings great value.

Creating opportunities for interaction, particularly through games, where everyone contributes according to their own interests and talents will make this concept even more understandable. It also presents a great learning opportunity. A blind friend can teach our child a lot about the Braille language, or about how to perform everyday activities, such as pouring water into a glass without spilling it when you have to be guided by things other than your sight.

We are all unique: different looks, different tastes, different ways of doing things, different interests, and different abilities. ***Disability is just another part of what every person is***. If supported, children can understand and accept this, perhaps even better than adults.

Discussing **invisible disabilities** can be more challenging, precisely because they are invisible and therefore less noticeable. "*Why is my classmate allowed to get up all the time and I'm not? Why does he have more time for tests?*" We can start by telling your child that everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses. Explain that the child may find it more challenging to demonstrate his value in certain situations and therefore needs support. Equally, that same child will have qualities and talents that others will not have and that are better expressed in other circumstances.

Any individual has a number of characteristics, some similar to ours, some different. While a person is not *only* their disability, their disability is part of their unique identity and it is important to accept the entire person.

In dealing with these discussions, ***language*** plays a fundamental role, and ***must be a tool of respect and recognition***. Avoid words like '*disease*' or expressions like '*there is something wrong with them*' or '*abnormal*'. It is very important to avoid comparisons between children by using the word '*normal*' to identify non-disabled children.

Disability is a neutral term. it does not make you better or worse than others, and it is important to convey this neutrality in language. Using pity does not help the child to see their friend as a peer. Children with disabilities are not "*unfortunate"* or to be pitied. Equally, disability, in itself, does not make one *special* or *inspirational*. The type of language used influence the way children will think about disability once they are adults and therefore has a huge impact.

But let's not forget that ***children learn more from acts and the environment than from speech***. We should ask ourselves how we ourselves approach and interact with disabled or neurodivergent people. The way we behave when faced with disabilities, the conversations we have in our kids' presence count more than any explanation. Our words can only carry weight if we reflect them credibly in our behaviours and acts.

One of the most useful tools for this purpose, is the opportunity to live experiences that enable us to put ourselves in the other person's shoes. This can be done through play and shared reading. These activities favour the development of empathy with the character who narrates their condition as a disabled person, and the self-awareness and regulation of the child's emotions when faced with the topic of disability.

All these considerations highlight how the social and cultural inclusion of people with disabilities starts from childhood, and as adults and educators we have a fundamental role in fostering the development of empathy and emotional intelligence in children.

A child endowed with emotional intelligence and empathy has the tools to relate to and communicate with others, putting themselves in other people's shoes, perceiving the value and intensity of other's emotions and adjusting their behaviour accordingly.

Because, after all, ***today's children are tomorrow's adults***.