



Teaching
Our Children
to embrace
"The Other"

by Andrew Graham

We are created in the image of Triune God (Gen. 1:27), and we reflect our Creator when we operate within the context of community. In fact, we hunger for a sense of belonging (Gen. 2:18). God made us that way!

This longing for connection is hard-wired into us as humans. Early childhood relationships shape the attachment bonds that wire our brains. As babies, interactions with others stimulate exponential growth in our brain cells. The 100 billion nerve cells (called neurons) in the brain interact with each other by firing chemical and electrical signals back and forth. The more often that two neurons "fire together" the more likely that they are to "wire together." This process develops strong connections.

Mirror neurons are those brain cells that activate when we are observing someone else doing something (which helps to explain why you feel an urge to yawn when you see someone yawn). During the first six months of life, babies begin to learn by observing their primary caregivers. Long before children can talk, they are developing a template for future connections.

We seek out familiarity, particularly in times of distress. This provides an important function: if one of my

children were to fall and scrape his knee, I'm relieved that his immediate response is to seek out a parent, grandparent, or sibling because we are familiar—and safe. I'm glad that my children feel connected to those that they see regularly—at home, at church, in our ministry community.

Perhaps one awkward function of this brain-based bias toward the familiar is that children are simultaneously developing a bias against the unfamiliar. This phenomenon also serves a function; I prefer my young child to not accept a ride from a stranger. It's my role as a parent to help my children to navigate the fact that those who are unfamiliar need to demonstrate trustworthiness—and yet, until they have the opportunity to do so, my children still need to see them as image-bearers, more alike than different, more kin than "other." The lack of familiarity does not necessarily mean that they are dangerous and that even those who may be perceived as dangerous are image-bearers of God.

This concept of labeling those different from us as "other" has been around for a long time and takes different forms. We are created with a yearning for connection, but

when someone is different from us, we are slow to connect and quick to identify and focus on those differences.

We may see someone as “other” if they are from a different nationality, a different social class, a different political ideology, or a different religion. Categorizing those different from us causes us to see their differences as their primary identity. We no longer see our neighbors as image-bearers with whom to connect but as “the other” to avoid. This depersonalizing language makes it easy to endorse inequality and marginality.

This is true not only of interactions with individuals, it also applies particularly in the larger context of race. Children who only interact with people of one race are more likely to respond positively to strangers from that same race more than strangers of another race. Children who interact with people of multiple races are likely to respond equally positively to various races. And our lives are enriched when we interact with others—including those individuals and groups with which we are initially unfamiliar.

Experiences with diverse racial groups prepares children for living in an increasingly multicultural world. The more safety children feel, the more confidence they have in themselves and their surroundings. Empathy is promoted and prejudice is reduced as children relate more to those that they’ve interacted with; it’s hard to see a friend as inherently “other.” Creativity is fostered as children learn from collaborating with others with a different approach based upon their perspectives.

Providing our children with experiences that lead to those outcomes takes effort—we’ve been conditioned to stick with the familiar ourselves! Here are some practical steps that parents can take to help their children to overcome this idea that those who are different should be viewed as “the other” rather than as an ally.

- Seek out multicultural experiences as a family. As your children are introduced to diverse groups in the safety of your company, they will feel free to explore new relationships with those who are different from them.

- Focus on the things that you have in common with those of different races rather than focusing on the differences.
- Be respectful in your language, avoiding labels that unnecessarily categorize and jokes that ridicule.
- Be respectful in your actions, careful not to seem standoffish when engaging with those of a different race.
- Redirect your child if they respond to someone from another race in a way that demonstrates that they’ve taken an “other” posture toward them based on their racial differences.
- Advocate for those who are seen as “the other” in your own community and context, speaking out against policies that maintain group-based advantages and marginalize those who are not members of the dominant group.

We are social beings, made for reciprocating relationships. While we connect most readily with those who share our group identity, our experiences are richer when we push past the draw toward familiarity and embrace “the other” as fellow image-bearers worthy of connection. Throughout his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul admonishes his readers to move beyond ethnic labels that divide, perhaps best encapsulating this point in Galatians 5:14: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” ■

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