

Tough Topics:

Approaching Sensitive Issues in Developmentally Appropriate Ways

Presenters:



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Acknowledgements

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**Get a Head Start
with the Smithsonian**



Welcome

We are happy to be here to learn together with you.

This will be an interactive course!

Ways to engage:

- Use the chat function.
- Polls

Introduce Yourself!

- Where are you joining us from?
- What are you excited to learn?

Please take a moment to enter your answers in the chat.

Session Objectives

Our goal for this presentation, you will:

- **Consider** why it is important to address children's questions about sensitive topics.
- **Explore** strategies for addressing complicated content and celebrating differences between people, in ways that are developmentally appropriate for ages 0-5.
- **Learn** how a supportive community of adults and peers strengthens children's ability to explore complex topics and ask critical questions.
- **Discover** helpful resources from the Smithsonian Institution to build community and support discussions around complex topics.

Why the Smithsonian?

How Does the Smithsonian Support Strategies for Conversations About Tough Topics?

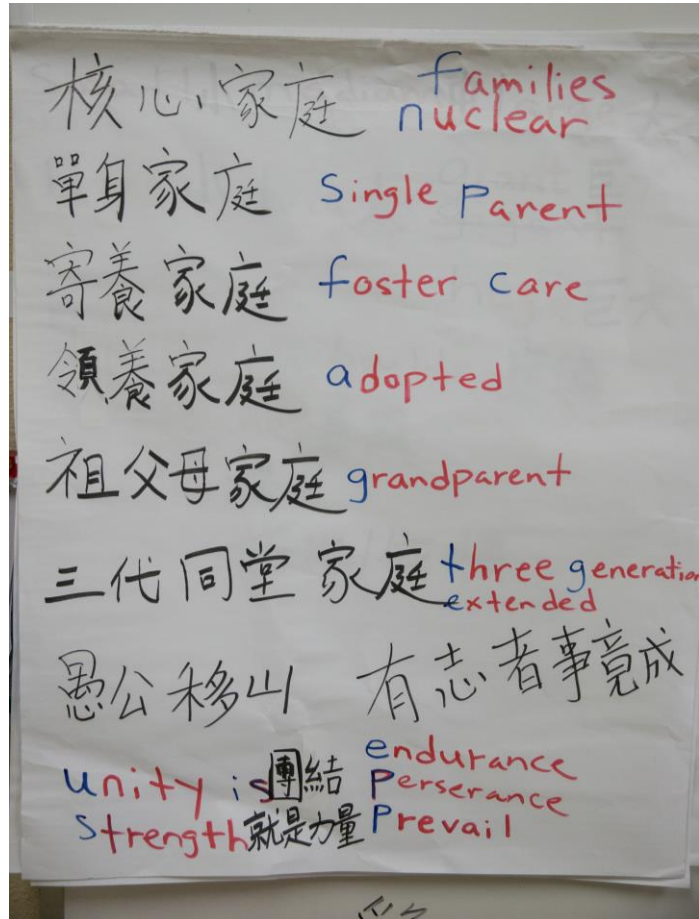
The art, objects, and ideas in Smithsonian collections can introduce powerful ideas and stories of change agents and role models to inspire and engage young children.

Our educators have unique expertise and resources to help you explore complex ideas with your young learners.



What Makes a Topic Sensitive?

What Exactly Is a Sensitive Topic?



We often call subjects that make us feel uncomfortable "sensitive topics."

Topics that can be controversial, involving many different and strong opinions with no "right" answer.

Sensitive topics might be ones you were taught not to talk about or had an uncomfortable conversation about before.

Community
Share

Please post in
the chat.

What topics feel
uncomfortable
or tough to talk
about for you in
your classroom?

Children Notice Differences

Children are naturally curious. They can see difference between themselves and others, but they don't know why those differences exist.

These differences are what make each one of us unique and special.



When Tough Questions Come Up



Children learn by connecting new information to information that they already have.

Without support, children may connect new information to prior knowledge in ways that lead them to make incorrect connections.

When children ask tough questions, start by considering what they might already know.

Steps for Using Prior Knowledge



- Consider what prior knowledge might be prompting the child to ask.
- Acknowledge the student's statement in concrete terms.
- Acknowledge the incorrect information in the child's question.
- Give them an opportunity to share what made them ask the question / make the connection.
- Use the child's response as an invitation to learn new information.
- Provide new information in age-appropriate language.
- Take the opportunity to celebrate differences.

Building a Bridge to Understanding

Learning with Everyday Objects

Everyday objects from a child's daily life provide a comfortable foundation that caregivers can use as a bridge to build toward a discussion of less familiar topics.



Learning with Everyday Objects

Objects are real, tangible items that children can handle and manipulate. This naturally supports the concrete learning style of young children.



Responding in the Moment: The Why

Reinforces Child's Sense of Self



Important to respond to the child's question or comment, even if it's uncomfortable so that the child understands that:

- their thoughts are valued.
- the issue they've raised is worth talking about and exploring more fully.

Avoids Misinterpretation



If we ignore or brush off a child's question about a sensitive topic, or statement rooted in an incorrect connection, she may misinterpret that as our apathy towards that sensitive topic or our agreement with or approval of the incorrect connection.

Sensitive topics are sensitive because they matter!

Establishes the Caregiver as a Safe Guide



Sometimes it feels safer to say nothing when children ask challenging questions.

However, that places the responsibility for navigating these topics on children, and they can easily come to incorrect conclusions.

Models Strategies for Understanding Differences



Children are not born with an innate sense of the right or wrong way to view human differences.

The adults around them teach and model their values about the kind of world they want to live in.

Responding in the Moment: The How

Dig a Little Deeper

Find out what brought on the question or connection with open-ended conversation prompts:

- What makes you say that?
- How does that make you feel?
- Have you seen something like that before?
- What do you think that word means?



Acknowledge and Defer

If a question or a statement comes up when you can't stop what you are doing, you can acknowledge what the child has said in the moment while allowing flexibility to discuss more thoroughly later.

- "It's interesting to me that you said that. I want to find out more about the way you're thinking. How about we find a time to talk when it's quieter?"



Role Playing

Using role play to explore sensitive topics can be particularly useful with young children. It helps them see things from others' perspectives and builds social and communications skills.

- Consider creating recurring characters to use in your classroom to increase comfort and participation in role play.
- Give the child a voice in the interaction.



Parent / Family Engagement

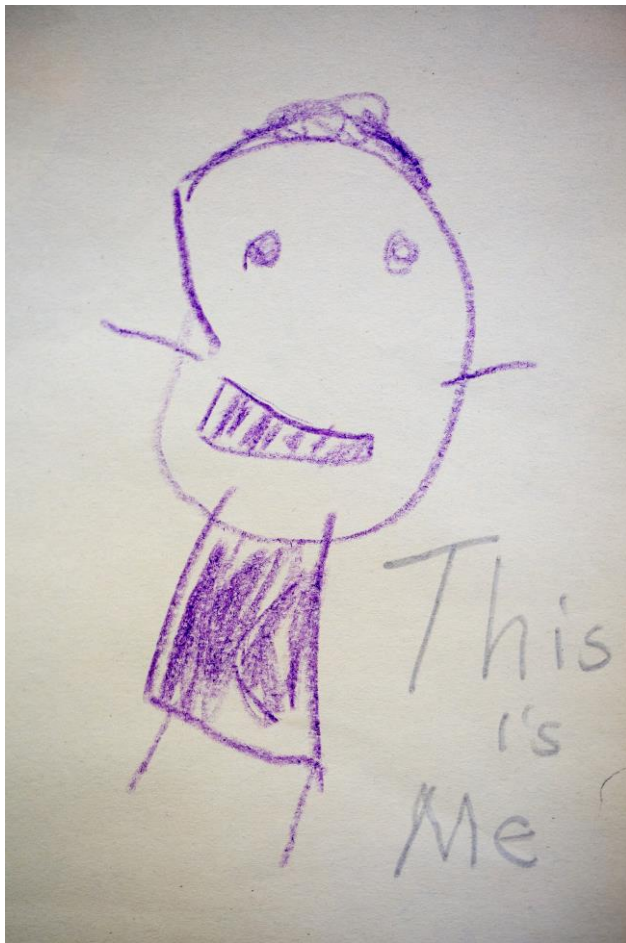
Some topics are more appropriate for children to fully explore with their caregivers than with a teacher.

You can say something like, “that’s a really good conversation for you to have with an adult at home. I can mention it to [child's caregiver], if you feel ok with that.”

This is also an opportunity to loop in your program's parent engagement staff and make it a team effort.



Creating a Safe Space For Questions



Building a Caring Classroom Community

Making your classroom a place where difficult subjects feel safe to bring up.

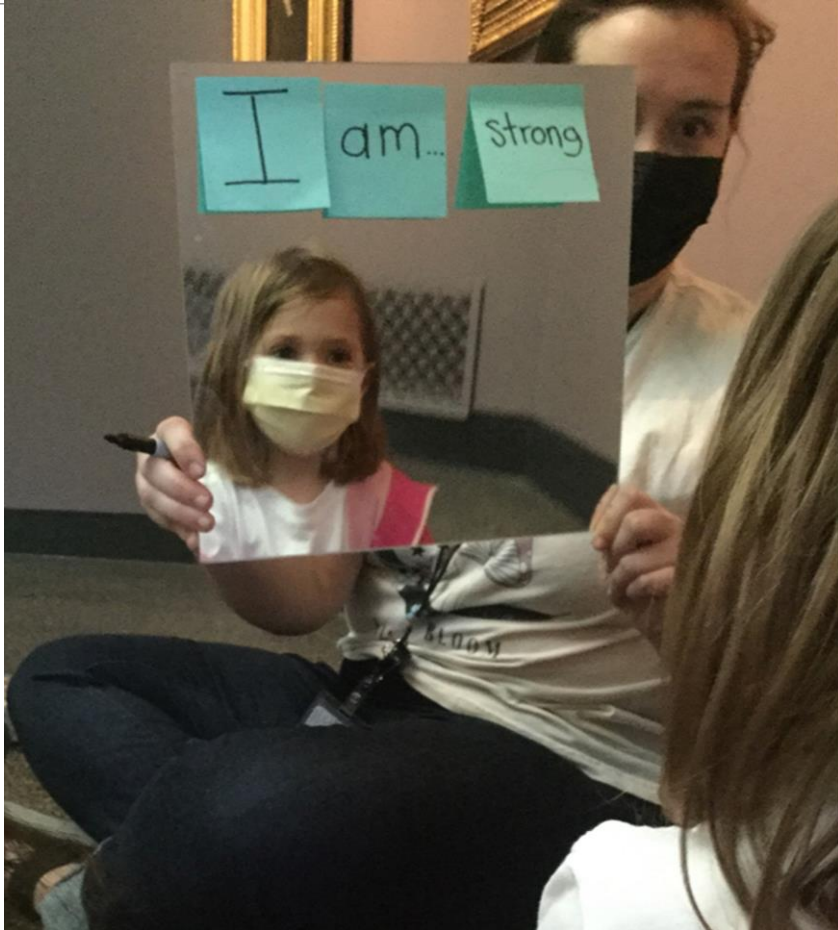
Caring Starts from Within



Positive self-identity means you see yourself—and all your attributes—in a positive way.

Developing positive self-identity is critical for self-esteem, empathizing with others, developing friendships, and contributing positively to the classroom.

What Can You Do?

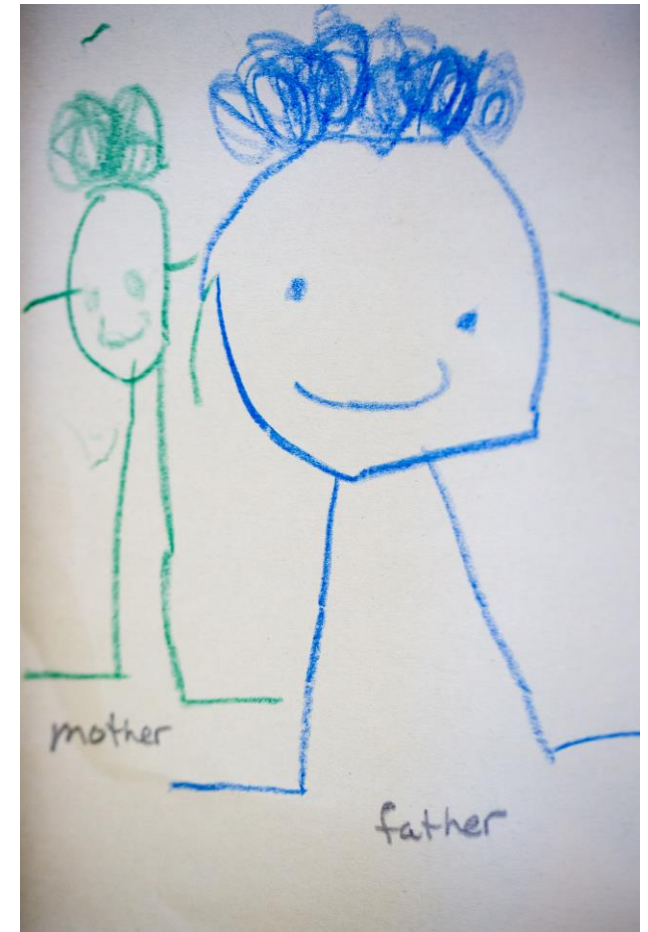


Reinforcing students' positive self-identity establishes your classroom as a space where children are free to explore and celebrate their differences.

Community Share

Please post in
the chat.

Share some ways
that you are already
promoting a sense
of community in
your classroom.



Representation Matters

Making your classroom a place where difficult subjects feel safe to bring up.

Representation Matters: Celebrate Your Unique You

- Post photos of your students and their work around the classroom, making the space a celebration of them and their unique selves.
- Post artwork and portraits that represent the diversity of your classroom.



Representation Matters: Check Your Bookshelves

Storytelling can be a powerful vehicle to help children work out problems.

Do the books in your classroom:

- Have inclusive characters?
- Use multiple languages?
- Include celebrations from different cultures?



Representation Matters: Practice Caring Behaviors

Playing with dolls and other figures is a great vehicle for helping children learn and strengthen empathy for others.

- Young children practice caring for others
- Adults model caring, inclusive behaviors.

In your toy area, are there:

- Multiple skin colors?
- A variety of hair and clothing styles?
- Different ability levels?



Representation Matters: Feature Your Families

Celebrate your unique classroom community by inviting families to share their diverse stories.

- Encourage families to visit and talk with the class about their cultures and/or their heritage country.
- Work with your family engagement team to create an "International Heritage Week" or "Family Heritage Week."





Celebrate Differences through Self-Expression

Drawing, painting, and making things can help children of all ages process.

Celebrate Differences: Self-Portraits



Creating self-portraits can help kids develop their sense of self. Self-portraits allow children to reflect on who they are and think about who they want to be.

Set up your classroom to be a space that invites self-expression and celebrates all the wonderful, beautiful, and different aspects of each and every child.

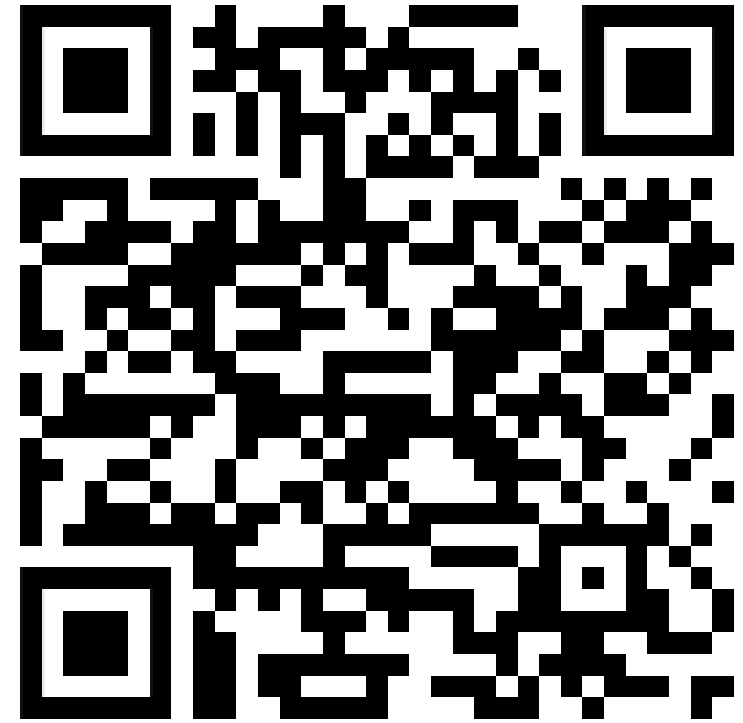
Reflection

Community Share

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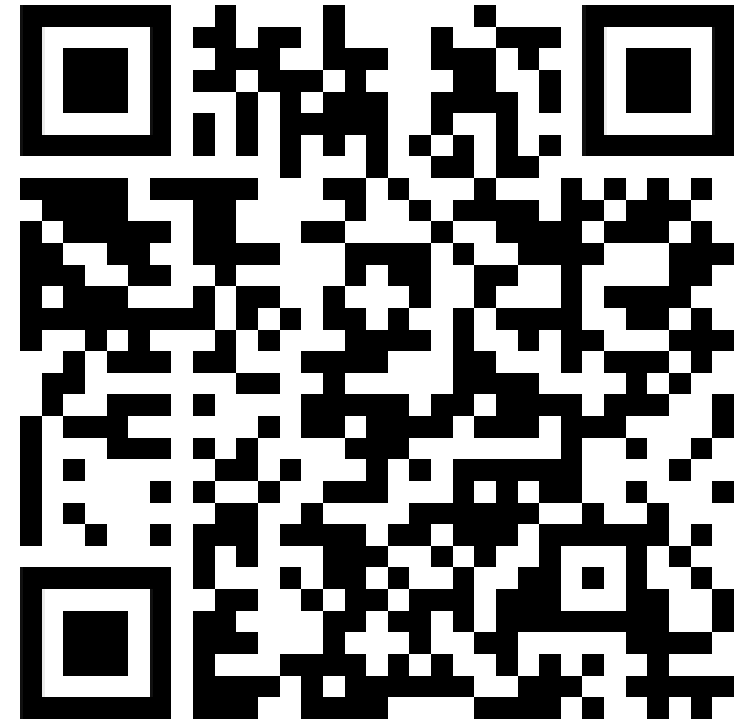
What are some new
ideas that you
will implement in your
learning environment?

Resources



Pictures of Me: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

From the "Identity, Community and Culture" Digital Backpack



"Introducing..." Video Series: National Portrait Gallery

Introduce children to the stories of changemakers in America



"Stamp Stories" Video Series: National Postal Museum

Celebrate diverse figures like Celia Cruz, Roberto Clemente, and Isamu Noguchi

Questions

Upcoming Live, Virtual Field Trip

Celebrate Head Start's Birthday
with a virtual field trip to the
Smithsonian's National Zoo kids'
farm!

Date: 5.16.24

Time: 2:00pm-2:30pm ET



Thank You for Joining Us
