

'Supporting Your Children with Difficult Questions' CASE STUDIES

During this workshop Rt Hon Stewart Lawrence took difficult questions from the audience (submitted beforehand via a google form).

He then discussed, guided and supported parents and carers to answer difficult questions.

The main points of these discussions are summarised below:

Case Study 1 : Answering Big Questions - “Why do you think black gladiators are faster?”

The Question:

One curious child recently asked their parent: “*Why do you think Black gladiators are faster?*”

It’s a big and important question—and a great opportunity to explore facts, challenge stereotypes, and have a meaningful conversation about our bodies, history, and respect for others.

Step 1: Explore the Facts Together

Rather than brush off the question, it’s helpful to say, “*That’s an interesting question—let’s find out more together.*” You can then explore topics like:

- **Genetics and Physiology:**
Some people of African descent may have a higher proportion of *fast-twitch muscle fibres*, which can support explosive power and speed. Others, such as those living or descended from high-altitude areas (like East Africa), often develop greater *lung capacity*, giving them “more fuel in the tank” during endurance sports.
- **Environment and History:**
Bodies adapt to survive in different environments. Historical and social experiences, including oppression or hardship, may have influenced not just physical traits but motivation and opportunities to excel in areas like sport.
- **Real-World Examples:**
After Usain Bolt’s Olympic wins, the BBC aired a documentary looking at why so many top sprinters come from similar genetic or regional backgrounds—like the Jamaican team. Watching or reading about real stories can help children understand the science and the humanity behind the headlines.

Step 2: Talk About Healthy Living

This is also a great moment to pivot the conversation to how we all have different bodies, and we can all take care of them through healthy eating, sleep, exercise, and self-respect. You might say:

“Everyone’s body is different and amazing in its own way. What’s important is how we look after it—fuel it with good food, rest it, and move it.”

Step 3: Tackle Stereotypes with Sensitivity

While discussing physical traits is part of understanding biology, it’s important to make sure children understand that no race or group is *better* or *worse* than another. Try saying:

“Being good at something isn’t just about your background. Hard work, practice, and love for what you do matter just as much—maybe even more!”

Why This Matters

When children ask tough questions, they’re trying to understand the world. Honest, open conversations help them become curious, informed, and respectful individuals. Guiding them through complex ideas—like race, history, and health—in a safe and factual way helps prevent bias and builds empathy.

Case Study 2: “*Why do I have black hair and brown skin?*”

A child expresses distress about their appearance, saying, “*Why do I have black hair and brown skin? It’s ugly... it looks dirty and terrible. How can I dye my hair?*” The parent is guided to respond by first understanding the emotional root of the question—where these negative self-perceptions are coming from.

The workshop highlighted the influence of historical and media-driven beauty standards, such as Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Marilyn Monroe, in shaping societal ideals. These narratives can negatively affect children who don’t see themselves reflected in mainstream media.

Key strategies for parents include:

- **Challenging harmful opinions:** Ask the child *who* says those things are ugly and *why* they believe it.
- **Validating individuality:** Affirm that beauty standards are opinions, not truths.
- **Explaining hair dye:** Clarify that while some adults choose to dye their hair, children’s hair is still growing and sensitive.
- **Modelling self-acceptance:** Discuss personal choices (e.g., a parent dyeing their hair) as preferences, not necessities.
- **Offering role models:** Introduce children to positive, diverse role models who look like them.
- **Fostering open communication:** Create a safe space for ongoing dialogue, building trust so children feel comfortable sharing when they’re vulnerable.

Case Study 3 - *“Why do people ask me if I’m Chinese just because I look Asian? I grew up in England and only speak English, so I don’t know why people think I’m from somewhere else.”*

A child asks, *“Why do people ask me if I’m Chinese just because I look Asian? I grew up in England and only speak English, so I don’t know why people think I’m from somewhere else.”* This question reflects feelings of being misunderstood or singled out based on appearance, and opens the door to conversations about identity, cultural heritage, and curiosity vs. assumption.

The parent workshop recommends the following approach:

- **Unpack the question:** Ask the child how they feel when people say this. Do they feel confused, annoyed, or curious? Understanding their emotional response is key.
 - **Explore why people ask:** Explain that people come from all over the world and have different features, skin colours, and cultural backgrounds. Sometimes people ask out of curiosity, but the way they ask matters.
 - **Challenge assumptions:** Help children understand that it’s okay to be curious, but it’s never okay to make assumptions based on someone’s appearance. Questions should come from a place of respect.
 - **Discuss identity and heritage:** Help the child clarify their own identity—where they were born, where they live, and how they see themselves. It’s valid to say “I’m British” if that’s what they identify with, regardless of their ethnic background.
 - **Model respectful questioning:** Teach children how to respond confidently, and if they wish, how to open up about their cultural heritage. Also model how to ask others respectfully: *“What’s your cultural background?”* or *“Would you like to share where your family is from?”*
 - **Encourage curiosity with care:** Suggest healthy ways to explore different cultures—read a book, watch a film, or have conversations. But always start from a place of listening and accepting someone’s answer without pushing further.
 - **Create inclusive spaces:** Offer children opportunities to talk about their heritage if they want to, but never make it an expectation. Schools and libraries can support this by ensuring books and resources represent a wide range of cultures and experiences.
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