

Did That Just Happen?

Helping Your Kids Manage Microaggressions

10/13/2020

Hi there! Lisa here. To continue our social relationships series, I'm going to talk about an important issue that your kids will encounter and that may not have even been on your radar – microaggressions. As your child's relationship coach, it's important that you understand what microaggressions are, how to talk with your kids about them, and how to help them cope when microaggressions happen.

Not quite sure what microaggressions are? Have you ever left an interaction feeling like you were discriminated against, but you couldn't point to the specific statement or behavior that made you feel that way? Or have you ever gotten the feeling that another person has reacted subtly but negatively to you based on your race, gender, disability, etc.? If so, you may have experienced a microaggression.

Psychologist and researcher in the field of multicultural psychology, Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D. defines microaggressions as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.”



Microaggressions are often discussed in the context of race or ethnicity, but they frequently happen to people of *any* marginalized group. The point of microaggressions is that they are subtle and often unintentional. They are very different from overt discrimination or hate speech. In many cases, the person is not necessarily aware that they are showing particular biases. Many microaggressions stem from subtle biases that we have been taught since birth and often seem like “just the way things are.” Their subtle nature makes microaggressions much more difficult to recognize and to confront.

Some examples of verbal microaggressions include:

“What are you?” or “Where are you really from?”

“You’re good at math for a girl.”

“I couldn’t tell you were gay.”

“Can I touch your hair?”

Teaching your kids to be “color blind.”

Microaggressions are not just words- they are also apparent in behavior. Some examples include:

Talking loudly and slowly to someone who is blind.

Holding your purse close or locking your door when a person of color walks by

Excluding girls from a math- or science-based activity

Expecting the member of a marginalized group to speak on behalf of all members of their group



Obviously, *experiencing* microaggressions has negative effects on an individual's overall well-being. It's also very difficult to know how to address microaggressions when you experience them. Many people struggle with deciding whether to even address the issue or to let it go. They may be unsure whether anything even happened or whether addressing the issue will backfire. When someone does choose to address a microaggression, it may be met with defensiveness, accusations of being oversensitive or misunderstanding the speaker. This is often (but not always) because the speaker does not realize that they have said something offensive and did not *intend* to degrade or marginalize another person. In fact, many microaggressions sound like compliments on the surface (e.g., "He's very articulate," or "You're very pretty in an exotic way"), which makes it even more difficult to call attention to the fact that these kinds of comments are problematic.

If adults have such a hard time managing microaggressions, how can they help their kids? While it may not be comfortable to think about, your kids are going to experience microaggressions and at times, they may even commit them. It may be tempting to tell yourself that this is not an issue you or your kids will have to deal with because you're not part of a marginalized group. In reality, many people experience microaggressions if they are part of a group that is not considered "mainstream." Even if that doesn't sound like you or your kids, learning about microaggressions will help you empathize with those who do experience them, and it will help you avoid committing them.

Although dealing with bullies or overt hate speech can be tough, these issues may be pretty straightforward for many parents. Microaggressions, on the other hand, may feel less clear cut and it can be difficult to know how to help your kids with these issues. Here are a few things to keep in mind when you have these conversations with your kids:

- **Educate yourself:** It can be hard to detect the thoughts and beliefs that you have that might lead you to committing microaggressions. So, like everything else, you have to educate yourself. You may be surprised by the things that you have said or done that fall into the

category of microaggressions. Don't beat yourself up- just recognize it and then change your behavior. Remember, this is something that even well-intentioned people have been guilty of at some point. The only way to stop microaggressions is to understand your own beliefs and how they may influence the way you treat other people.

- **Talk to your kids:** There's been a lot of focus this year on talking to your kids about race and racism. Those conversations need to continue, but so do conversations about other parts of your kids' and other people's identities. Helping your kids appreciate themselves for who they are and for all parts of their identities is critical. If your kids know and love who they are, it's harder for the comments and actions of others to tear them down. In addition, if identity, culture, and overall self-concept are regular conversation topics, it will be easier to talk to your kids when they encounter microaggressions. If you're unsure of where to start with these kinds of conversations, there are many children's books out there that deal with microaggressions and subtle discrimination. Reading a book and then talking about it is a great way to get the larger conversation started.



- **Head microaggressions off at the pass:** Kids as young as preschool age are able to understand the concept of microaggressions. In fact, young children are in a perfect position to learn about this. Kids in preschool and early elementary school spend a good amount of time learning lessons about how to treat other people. They understand that it's not okay to make fun of people or to treat them badly just because they are different. Kids get the subtle things that people say and do that may signal a microaggression (e.g., not

learning to pronounce someone's name correctly; one kid getting into trouble for something and then another kid not getting into trouble for doing the same thing, etc.).

- **Teach your kids how to speak up for themselves:** It's not always necessary to confront microaggressions directly, particularly more subtle microaggressions. In fact, as I noted before, confronting microaggressions directly and/or with anger often backfires. Instead, teach your kids to respond calmly in a way that brings the speaker's attention to the issue without being confrontational. For instance, if someone wants to give your child a nickname instead of learning how to correctly pronounce their name, they can say something like, "I don't feel comfortable with a nickname. I'm happy to teach you to correctly pronounce my name." It's also important to talk with your kids about how to address microaggressions with adults versus with other kids, as they will have to take a different approach when talking with adults about offensive behavior. However, it's important that your kids understand that no one- child or adult- is allowed to treat them as inferior.



- **Set a good example:** Your kids are watching you and modeling their behavior after yours. So, your actions have to match your words. If you talk to your kids about being open, accepting others and treating others with respect, you have to demonstrate these ideals in your behavior. Don't be surprised (or upset) if your kids call you on your microaggressions- that shows that they're learning. In those cases, acknowledge that it happened and then fix it. This lets your kids see that you walk the walk *and* it reinforces the idea that we're all learning. When we make mistakes, we fix them if we can and we learn from them. It's important to encourage your kids to be open and receptive to growth. It's also incredibly powerful for your kids to see your own willingness to learn and commitment to growth.



If you'd like to learn more about microaggressions, take a look at this short article by Dr. Derald Wing Sue.

https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/microaggressions_by_derald_wing_sue_ph.d_.pdf

Here's a link to his bio on Psychology Today with additional resources to help you learn more about this and related topics:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/experts/derald-wing-sue-phd>