

How This Mom Turned a Rude Question Into a Vital Teaching Moment

Many times, my daughter, Grace Anna, has been referred to as a “cute little baby.” She is a 9-year-old girl, not a baby. This kind of statement never goes over well. Grace Anna is becoming increasingly aware of how people look at her and assume things about her because she doesn’t fit the “normal” mold.

One such instance in which Grace Anna was treated differently was when a family stared at us from across a room, and I wasn’t the only one who noticed their staring. “Mom, why do they keep looking at us?” Grace Anna questioned me. I felt awful. She was immediately overcome with concern about her looks being criticized.

At first, I thought they might recognize her from social media videos and posts, but that wasn’t the case. “What’s wrong with her?” one family member finally asked, loudly enough for both Grace Anna and me to hear.

I paused for a few moments, letting it sink in that they didn’t say hello or introduce themselves. Instead, they verbalized a negatively phrased question about my child. Some people don’t realize that questions like “What’s wrong with her?” leave a child feeling inadequate and ostracized. It hurt my heart to see the nervousness on Grace Anna’s face about what I might say.

“Hi! My name is Angela. This is Grace Anna. My beautiful girl has Conradi Hunermann Syndrome. She is beautiful, smart and super talented. Yes, she uses a wheelchair, but nothing is ever going to hold her back from what she wants to accomplish. She’s the toughest girl I know,” I kindly explained.

Maybe it was what I said or my facial expressions, but something must have impacted them because they stood there speechless. Grace Anna smiled. I took what could have been a discouraging remark and used it as an opportunity to boost her confidence. I also hope the interaction educated the family on how to be considerate toward someone with a physical abnormality or disability.

How do we stop the culture of pointing out differences and start incorporating the idea that we are all far more alike than we are different? How do we combat the generalization that people are defined by the way they look? We educate and encourage our children to do and be better.

Children are remarkable beings; their minds absorb all kinds of information at incredible speeds. They are often brutally honest and do not hold back from asking about anything and everything that pops into their heads, especially when they see someone who looks different. This may seem like a negative impulse, but it is the perfect opportunity to educate them.

We can teach children to develop an awareness of how their words affect the feelings and lives of others, particularly those with disabilities. Some of the primary lessons to stress to a child are:

- It is OK to ask questions as long as they are asked respectfully.
- It takes all kinds of people to make this world a wonderful place.
- Everyone has something to offer the world, no matter what he or she looks like.
- A person with a physical disability has hopes and dreams.
- God designed each of us in his image, which makes all of us beautiful.

As parents and citizens, we have a responsibility to make this

world a better place for everyone. It is vital that we learn to appreciate people with disabilities as valuable members of society in order to cultivate a harmonious environment. This movement can start with children. When we prepare our future generations to be empathetic and educated about people with disabilities, we have hope for positive change. And maybe one day in the future, when a child like Grace Anna rolls by in her little wheelchair, a person's first thought will not be *What is wrong with her?* but *What gifts and talents make her unique?* {eoa}

Angela Ray Rodgers *is the author of two books: Grace Anna Sings and Who Do You See When You Look at Me. Who Do You See When You Look at Me is available for preorder now.*

If you'd like to learn more about Grace Anna, check out this recent video.