

Vanaski: Teaching toddlers — and ourselves — that color is OK



By [Nafari Vanaski](#)

Thursday, Jan. 23, 2014, 12:01 a.m.



We are teaching our toddler about colors.

One recent day he and I were having one of our winding, rambling conversations that we tend to have while I'm changing his diaper. This often includes random observations from him ("I faster than you!" "Christmas over?" "Baby crying.") and my efforts to coerce him into taking potty training seriously.

Then out of the blue, my 2½-year-old looked at me and said, "What color are you?"

For some reason, this wasn't a conversation I was envisioning until he was 6. Or maybe like, 18. Even though our house is like the United Nations. He can see his parents do not look remotely the same.

The question gave me an uneasy feeling. My first instinct was to avoid answering somehow, perhaps by mentioning instead that any kid with the presence of mind to ask that question should be using the bathroom himself. But then I didn't.

"I'm brown," I finally replied. "Like a dark brown."

"What color am I?"

"You're light brown or tan-nish."

"What color is Daddy?"

"He's like a pink-y, beige-y, kinda white ..."

That was pretty much it.

More interesting than this exchange was the one I had with my husband afterward, who initially also was taken aback.

"Where did he learn that?" he asked incredulously.

His reaction was familiar, but it was exactly what I felt in that split second before I answered him – some notion that he was asking a taboo question. But why did we feel that way?

It's society's knee-jerk reaction to avoid any unpleasantness in discussing race, even though this subject isn't even about that.

In our efforts to become politically correct, we have overcorrected to the point that we can't even note our differences without potentially offending each other. Just the fact that we look different is enough to set off an alarm when a toddler asks a simple question.

I've actually heard two different parents tell their children not to use the word "black," even if it's the true description of an object. How ridiculous have we gotten?

When I was in elementary school, we talked about immigration in one of our classes. There were two approaches to adjusting to life in America, we were told. There was the melting pot, where everyone became one, based on the shared experience living in the same country. The other was the salad bowl approach, where everyone remains an individual but still on the same plate.

In retrospect, it always seemed to me that in school we were pushed toward the melting pot approach. But even as a child, that disturbed me somewhat because people can lose their identity. Do I really want to forget my parents' Caribbean roots or where my family comes from?

Following that thinking, do we really want to teach our children to be color blind? I don't.

I want them to see what they see now — that we look different (even within our own house). And that's OK.

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