

# march @ symbio

## upcoming presentations

### Open Forum on Toddlers & Preschoolers

Tuesday 16 March  
7:00-9:00pm

This evening will be an open discussion rather than a presentation. If you've got questions or quandaries regarding anything related to guiding young minds, nurturing young hearts and preserving your own sanity in the process, drop-in for a while to chat with us, compare notes with other parents or simply reassure yourself that other people go through this too. Any topic is fair game, whether it's sleep, discipline, separations, potty training, pre-schools, siblings, or any other item on that ever-expanding menu of character-building exercises designed for you with love by your children.

@ Peekadoodle Kidsclub  
Ghiradelli Square  
900 North Point Street, F100  
San Francisco CA  
RSVP: info@thepkc.com

Peekadoodle members:  
\$40/person or \$60/couple  
non-members:  
\$45/person or \$65/couple

### Sibling Rivalry

Tuesday 23 March  
7:30-9:00pm

Dealing with sibling rivalry can be one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of family life in any family; and sibling rivalry between twins and multiples has special dimensions that sets it apart from what goes on between singleton siblings. In this presentation, we'll look at how best to interpret and manage the rapid cycles of symbiotic and competitive behavior between multiple siblings. We will discuss how to encourage strong, healthy sibling relationships, create clear



## q&a

*I am the mother of a four-year-old boy and an eleven-month-old girl. Last week, some of my friends who have children my son's age were discussing a book that says that we need to be discussing things like gender equality and racism with our kids. My husband and I are both deeply committed to social equality and it's important to us to teach these values to our children. But I've always thought it was better to avoid introducing ideas like racism or stressing gender differences too early. Our thinking has been that if we just set a good example, our children will learn from watching us. But last week my son threw me for a loop – two loops really. On Wednesday when I picked him up at preschool he was crying because another child had made a remark that amounted to a racial slur about his best friend, who is Japanese, bi-lingual and has a mother who is a fantastic cook. Our family is Caucasian and Trader Joe's is my idea of gourmet. His friend's snack box always contains a mix of Asian snacks, and the boys love to trade items. When they refused to let a five-year-old girl join in the exchange she used a word to insult both boys that I am shocked any preschooler would know. The school and all the parents dealt with the incident well, but that hasn't helped me feel much better. Later the same week, my son ran through a list of all the male-female pairings in his life (mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, he and his sister) and declared that each male was smarter than each female. My husband gallantly protested that I am unfairness in our world, much smarter than he is, but again, I don't feel like we effectively addressed the problem. I am wondering what we missed; maybe we*

guidelines and boundaries, model independent problem solving and maintain your own sanity. Topics will include empathy, sharing, communication, guidelines and how-to's for parental intervention, and managing aggressive behaviors.

Twins By The Bay  
College Avenue Presbyterian Church  
5951 College Avenue  
Oakland CA

RSVP: [www.twinsbythebay.org](http://www.twinsbythebay.org)

TBB members (suggested donation):  
\$10/person or \$15/couple  
non-members:  
\$30 person/couple

### Setting Limits and Dealing with Tantrums

Tuesday 30 March  
7:00-9:00pm

Southern Marin Mother's Club  
Mill Valley CA

RSVP: [jen@ofire.com](mailto:jen@ofire.com)  
\*members only event

*were wrong to downplay all the unfairness in our world. Should we really be talking to our kids about these heavy, awful issues? He's so innocent now and I don't want him corrupted by the wrong messages. How do I protect him?*

Your impulse to downplay these weighty issues in order to avoid introducing an undesirable social norm is understandable. However, your doubts about the effectiveness of this strategy are well founded and on target. Messages regarding racism, gender inequality, classism, homophobia, able-bodied-ism and every other "ism" you can think of are deeply embedded in our cultural fabric. Sadly, they will make their way to your children one way or another. When you avoid addressing ideas and beliefs that are wrong-minded but widely held, you leave your children vulnerable to the abundance of spoken and unspoken messages reinforcing those ideas. Social and developmental research has made it clear that the best way to protect children from absorbing the wrong messages is to preempt those messages proactively. But finding a way to talk to kids about such things can be hard: you are dealing with subjects that many adults are uncomfortable addressing. Many of us have been brought up to avoid these conversations altogether; and the attempt to articulate such a message forces one to encounter the sadness and shame that accompanies these difficult topics. However, the process of doing so is both valuable and timely.

For a four-year-old, the world is full of hazy ideas that come suddenly into focus when he or she stops to consider them for the first time. At this age, parents have the magical power to demystify the wonders of every day life for their meaning-hungry children. When your son looks to you and ask you "why?" he is no longer asking only for knowledge, he is building understanding. He's exercising a power that development has bestowed on him only recently: he can extrapolate patterns from specific instances and apply them to a broader concept. He is collecting data for this process from many sources: facial expressions, body language, observed social interactions and offhanded comments. Among all these sources, your words carry a very

heavy weight. Your son will remember, consider and internally repeat the explanations you give him now with a sense of primary acceptance that will not be equaled at any later point in his development (rest assured this is true even if he happens to be one of those kids who makes a sport out of arguing with everything you tell him). This developmental intersection between his need to make meaning and the credence of your word in his mind is a place of consequence. Your words and your silences will both have meaning to him, which is why it's so important to talk to him now, during his late preschool and kindergarten years, about the values and understanding you want to convey to him. If you don't directly convey the messages you want your son to receive, your son will build his understanding on information from indirect sources. Unfortunately, when it comes to the idea that some sorts of people may have more strength, intelligence, and even value, the indirect messages he receives are not likely to carry the messages you'd like to reinforce. Indirect messages are also harder to monitor because they are transmitted by automatic habits that we don't think to question but which take on meaning in the eyes of a young child who is eager to understand the rules and structure of the social world around him. For example, a child will notice if Mom drives when Dad is not around, but Dad always drives when both parents are in the car. Every child who has ever been thwarted in his demands that you stop at the park on the way home or turn down the street that leads to Baskin Robins understands that the driver of the car is the person with the power. So a simple family outing can become a data point indicating that men have more power than women. In a four-year-old's cosmology, having more power is generally lumped together with being stronger, smarter and more desirable. The good news is that you do not have to carefully log how many hours each parent spends behind the wheel in order to insure that your daughter grows up with solid self-esteem and that your son grows up to be a man that respects women. Your commentary is just as good a prophylactic and has the added value of establishing a practice of questioning, talking about and considering behaviors and expectations rather than just accepting them. (If you think ahead to the teenage years, you will see the tremendous value in this.) Saying something as simple as "Dad, would you drive so I can have a break?" or "I like to let Dad drive when he's around because I like riding in the other seat" reframes your position as a matter of choice rather than convention.

On a broader scale, it's important to establish an ongoing conversation about issues of values, and value differences. Explain to your son that people have different values and beliefs; that people see things differently. Prepare him that he will meet people that hold beliefs with which you do not agree. You hold the position of moral expert in his eyes and as he watches you consider, agree with, and disagree with multiple points of view or ways of behaving, he will learn to do the same. In the end, the habit of consideration and the ability to be discerning will protect him from corruption much more effectively than attempting to insulate him from the wrong messages.

Finally, it's important to remember that when children first begin to recognize the issues of gender, race and other qualities

that are often used to draw distinctions between people, they are mere facts for them. Of course, the basis of your concerns is that you would like for it to remain so, but cannot prevent ugly "ism's " from changing that. If you introduce a dialogue about these issues, and about the difference between the characteristics that are associated with race or gender and the values that are misattributed to them, you will give your son a frame of reference for understanding multiple layers of difference. This will help ensure that he has the freedom to relate the differences between he and his best friend's skin color and lunch box contents with enthusiastic curiosity, and yet relate to the differences between his enthusiasm and someone else's disparaging remarks with confident disavowal.

# sybio

support for families with young children

[www.symbiosf.com](http://www.symbiosf.com)

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