

# Outside the Box

## a story about differences



Where you came from, who you are, and where you fit in: the family history of the Fergusons.



Stuck in a Box .....	01
Why these Race boxes? .....	02
America, Jamaica, Brazil .....	03
After Slavery .....	04
What we Don't Know. ....	05
American, Jamaican, Brazilian .....	06
Talking about Differences .....	07



## Table of Contents

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Note: I realize that many, many things in this are generalized or even overlooked or oversimplified. This is working to describe deep, complicated issues to my young daughters: the beginning of a long, deep, and complicated dialog about our past, present, and future.



# Stuck in a Box

01

**I know you are curious and want to know where you fit and where you came from. Let's try to explain about boxes.**

Most people like to put things into boxes, so they can understand them, and put the information they learn away to use later. This isn't a good or bad thing: just a tool.

For example, there are many kinds of animals, but you learned how to tell which ones are dogs and cats and cows and pigs. You divided them into categories. As you get older, you can learn even more boxes, like a golden retriever from a pit bull: they are both dogs, but they are different.

Also, you have started to learn how to see the difference between a kind, gentle dog, and an angry, excited dog. These categories, and what we know about them are ways our brain makes sense of things around us.

The problem is when we think the way we put things into boxes are right, and other ways are wrong, without being open to learning more. What if a dog bites you? You will probably be scared of all dogs, because you don't want to be bitten again. But does that mean all dogs will bite you?

**Its a bigger problem when it is about people.**

When it comes to who you are, most people in America will normally try to put you into one of five boxes: White, Black, Hispanic, (meaning anyone south of America), Native, and Asian. This is because of a lot of things, that we will talk more about later.

The truth is, most people don't fit into just one box. They are a mixture, or consider themselves part of a smaller box (or category) called "**Ethnicity.**"

Ethnicity is from a specific country or culture. A Brazilian would never call themselves "Hispanic" but in the USA, they would probably be put into the race box of Hispanic (even though they don't speak Spanish) by other people. Mostly this is because the person putting other people into boxes just doesn't know enough.

Mommy's family is mostly all put into the White box, but came from (mostly) Switzerland and Scotland. They've all been in America for a while now. Daddy's family is mostly all put into the Black box, but they are from Jamaica. You were born in Brazil, so you can check most all of the race boxes except Asian or Native. This will confuse people, and that's ok.



## Families take care of Family

Just like our family takes care of each other, people have always gathered into groups to stay safe. Groups joined other groups and become bigger groups. Sometimes a group would fight another group to get something they wanted. The winning group could do whatever they wanted to do with the losing group. Oftentimes, the losing group had to serve the winning group. This was called **slavery**.

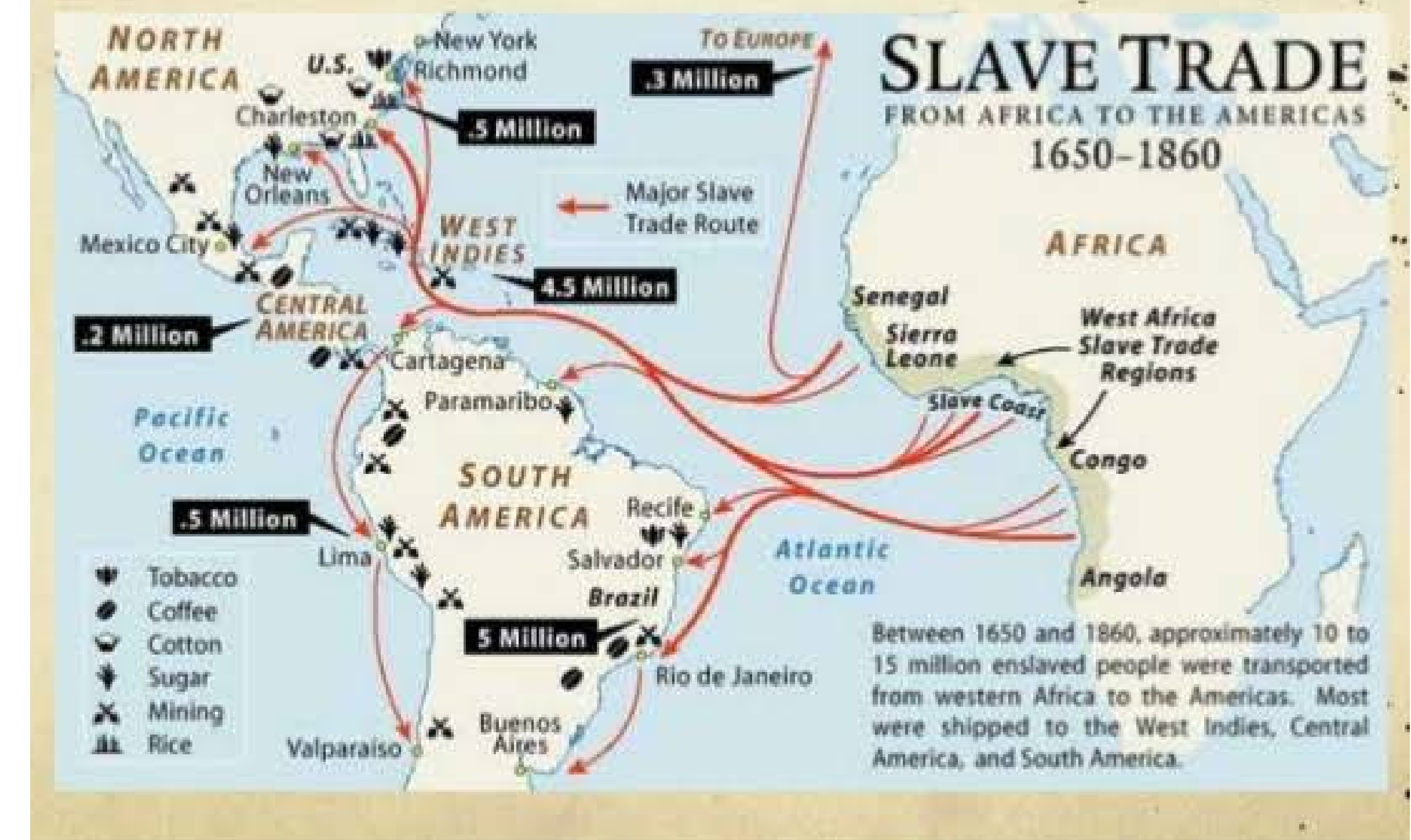
As history moved forward, people from Europe started exploring the rest of the world. They found there were people all over in places they never knew existed. Unfortunately, they made themselves to be the winning group, and made the people from other places to be their slaves. This time in history was called **Colonization**.

To make things work best for themselves, they moved around 10 million people from Africa to North and South America. This was called the **Atlantic Slave Trade**.

The people who originally lived in North and South America were either enslaved, forced to leave their homes for other places, or died from the new sicknesses that the Europeans brought. Most of the people in this “winning” group were lighter shades of brown, while those in Africa were often darker shades of brown, and the local (called **Indigenous or Native**) people were more of in the middle.

The people with lighter shades of brown began to think they were better than the others since they had “won,” and so their skin tone must be better too.

## Where did they go and come from?



The really sad thing about all this is that most of the people from Europe who did this said they were *Christians*. They said they wanted to tell the other people in the world about Jesus. But very few of them really wanted to invite others into God’s family, and instead wanted to control others and make money from the work the enslaved people did.

The enslavers used the Bible (the story of Noah’s son Ham having to serve his brothers) to say that people from Africa (darker skinned) were supposed to serve the people from Europe (lighter skinned). Since it is easy to see color, and you can’t hide your skin, this was the way people from Europe (mostly lighter brown skin) started to put everyone into boxes: their color was the best, and the other colors served them.

Because of how many people were moved around from Africa, the history of slavery is a bit different in each of the places you are from: America, Jamaica, and Brazil.

## Why these Race boxes?

02





# America, Jamaica, Brazil | 03

**Growing up, you soon realize there are two kinds of people: people who are like you, and people who are different from you.**

The people who are like you are pretty easy to understand, but the people who are different from you are harder to understand. So you start creating boxes to try to understand them.

Some people are taught about specific boxes from their parents and teachers on purpose. For example, you have been taught to not go anywhere with strangers. “Strangers” is a box (a category) of people that we have taught you. When you are taught on purpose, it is called **conscious learning**. When you learn something just from watching other people or your own experiences, it is called **unconscious learning**: like when Sofia got scared by a dog, and then decided that all dogs were scary, when no one had taught her that dogs were scary.

For slavery (especially by people who said they were Christians), people had to make and teach racial boxes to feel okay about treating someone else—who is human like them—not like a human, but as something you own. They decided that if you were in the White box, you were certain things, and if you were in the Black box, you were other things: these things are called **Stereotypes**. They may or may not be true.

**Stereotypes** are the ways that people think someone in a particular box acts like. Common stereotypes that were taught during slavery were that people in the White box were *good, free, right, and wealthy*. Common stereotypes that were taught about people in the Black box were that they were *bad, non-human, wrong, and poor*.

**In America, about 500,000 people were stolen and brought from Africa.** There were more white people than black people, but there were many more poor people than rich people. The rich people had to make sure the poor white people were on “their side” without really helping them, so they made sure that poor white people felt better treated and had more rights than black people so they wouldn’t try to change anything that was making the rich people richer. Slavery was made illegal in 1865 after the Civil war.

**In Jamaica, about 4,500,000 people were stolen and brought to the West Indies area.** Those who were enslaved far outnumbered those who enslaved them. There were places where those enslaved took over (like Haiti) or where those enslaved ran away and made free areas, such as the Maroons in the mountains of Jamaica, where some of your grandmother’s family is from. Slavery was **abolished** (that means illegal) in 1834 in Jamaica, as it was England’s colony.

**In Brazil, about 5,000,000 people were stolen and brought from Africa.** Those that were enslaved outnumbered those who enslaved them, but not as much as in Jamaica. Portugal asked for more people to come to Brazil to help “whiten” the population. Their goal was to intermarry so that generally people would look “lighter.” The idea they spread was that whiter was better and richer, so you wanted to be whiter to have a better chance in life. Slavery wasn’t ended until 1888, Brazil being the last major country to do so.



**Just because slavery was illegal, didn't mean people didn't find other ways to do it.**

Just because the laws said that all people were equal and human, didn't mean that people stopped teaching or thinking that the boxes they had made with the stereotypes were wrong.

Unless you purposefully learn to take people out of the boxes you've put them in: they will stay there in your mind, and that will affect how you act.

As more **immigration** (that is people moving from one country to another) happened around the world, people added a couple of boxes and stereotypes, such as the Asian box, with the stereotypes of being *quiet and smart*, the Hispanic box, with the stereotypes of being *dirty and illegal*, and the Native box, of wearing *feathers and paint*.

Just as the White and Black box stereotypes, these stereotypes end up hurting everyone—even those who get privileges from it: as that is not the kind of world we want to live in.

When slavery ended it stopped one way that people in the white box were treated better, but there were still many other ways. We call these things “**white privilege.**”

When you (and many of those around you) think that your box is better, you don't want that to change.

The easiest way to make sure you get to keep your box the same is to make sure other people in other boxes don't get to have the same benefits, and have to stay in their boxes.

## Modern Slavery



**In America**, many laws were made to help white people that were not given to black people. One way of having slavery another way was through how prisons were used. Police were also often used to “protect” the White people box from the Black people box.

**In Jamaica**, the White and Black boxes became a bit more fluid and turned into more of a light-skinned box and a dark-skinned box: this is called **Colorism**.

**In Brazil**, many people were now a beautiful mixture of black and white, so their boxes slowly changed to be more about a “rich box” and a “poor box,” with the same qualities and stereotypes from the previous White and Black boxes.

It takes a lot of work to change how you think. Slavery was one result—a horrible action—of making race boxes. When that was taken away, other ways of using race boxes happened.

**Where do we  
go After  
Slavery?**

**04**



# What We Don't Know

05



**We are so grateful to know a lot about our past, but it is hard to see what race boxes has cost us, and what we don't know.**

Mommy has always been in the White box with most of the people around her being white too. You have lots of Aunties who have worked hard to preserve our family's stories. In your family you have a whole lot of hard working people who loved Jesus who came to America from Switzerland: "Winzeler" comes from wine-seller, because we grew and sold grapes. On Mommy's mom side is "Coombs" which is from "McCombs," and from Scotland. We have family tree lists going back generations and generations, and we are grateful.

Your last name, "Ferguson," Is a bit more complicated. Ferguson is Irish, so a Ferguson family probably came from Ireland to Jamaica, and owned slaves: we don't know. What we do know is that your Dad's great-grandpa was a light-skinned teacher in Jamaica with the last name of Ferguson. That means he had some power and education, and wasn't enslaved. Perhaps he was the son of a slave owner named Ferguson, who got an enslaved woman pregnant and freed their son.

What we do know is that Daddy's great-grandpa Ferguson got a white student, Ms. Hudson, pregnant, and was never seen again. We don't know if he loved her, she loved him, if he wanted to stay, or if he was run off because it wasn't socially acceptable for them to be together. The unknown details are the only things to fill our minds.

Your Dad's Grandfather was raised by old Grandma Hudson, as his Mother was young, and her parents refused to see your Dad's Grandfather as part of the family. This pain led to Colorism issues, as your Dad's Grandfather treated lighter skinned people in his family as better than darker skinned. When your Dad's Father (Your grandpa you never met) died in American while waiting to get heart surgery, your Grandma made the tough decision to work really hard to move the family to Connecticut.

Auntie Suzette took care of Daddy when he was 1 year old to 6 years old, while Grandma worked to get things ready for Daddy to come to America. When Daddy was 6 years old, he came to the USA and grew up there. Some of his classmates made fun of his Jamaican accent, so he learned how to hide it, acting and speaking like the other students around him. He didn't want to be different.

It is hard to be different from those around you, especially if someone is mean about it. But the more you understand the stories of why you are different, the more you can know that those differences are special and important, no matter what anyone else says.



## Living Outside the Box

You have an **American passport**, and most of your family is in America, so you will always have roots there.

Your Father was born in **Jamaica** and you still have some family there, so we really hope to visit and see more of this part of your story. You can learn a lot about Jamaica from your Grandma, aunties, uncle, and cousins.

You were born and have lived most of the first part of your life in **Brazil**, where you look a lot like the people around you. Not many people asked you why you were different from them.

But in America, things are different, and people don't know your beautiful American, Jamaican, Brazilian stories: they just know that you probably look a bit different from them.

Some people have race boxes and stereotypes that they will try to put on you. They may be kind or unkind, or done on purpose (**consciously**) or accident (**unconsciously**). You do not fit into anyone else's box. Don't accept a box that doesn't feel right for you. Some people will do this in a mean way: we call that **bullying**, and it is not okay.

Some people will do this without knowing it, and that can hurt too. It is okay to tell people that you don't fit into their box, and that isn't how you are or who you are or what you do.



We want you to know that you can come to us, your Mom and Dad, about anything, big or little.

Not many people know what it is like to be American, Jamaican, Brazilian, but your Mom, Dad, and Sister have been with you through it, so can understand many things other people can't.

Keep looking though, and you will find other people who don't fit into boxes, or who don't want to live in boxes, that you can connect with too.

You are very unique with your story, and that can help you understand that everyone else is very unique in their own ways too!



# 8

## Things to say When Talking to Kids About Differences

Bullying is a huge issue for kids, and for us all. We need to give them some ideas and ways to understand and learn.

**Prejudice and unkindness to other people because they are different is wrong. What steps are you taking to help your kids learn and champion that?**

### 1

#### Different is Normal

- a. How do we look the same?
- b. How do we look different?
- c. What things do we do that are the same?
- d. What things do we do that are different?
- e. How are you the same as your classmates?
- f. How are you different from your classmates?



### 2

#### Normal is Different

- a. What is your "normal?"
- b. What is "normal" at school?
- c. What is "normal" in Brazil?
- d. What is "normal" in the USA?

**Different is normal and normal is different. Everyone has a unique story: but not everyone knows your story and you don't know everyone else's story. Yet.**



**Some people make their "normal" box, and people who do or look different are in another box that is not normal, or as good.**

### 3

#### Some people think "normal" has to look and be only one way: their way

- a. Are girls better than boys?
- b. Are thin people better than thick people?
- c. Are abled people better than disabled people?
- d. Are white people better than black people?
- e. Are young people better than old people?
- f. Are rich people better than poor people?
- g. Is English better than Portuguese?
- h. Is Brazil better than the USA?

### 4

#### When you start thinking one normal box is better than another normal box, it is called prejudice

When you act on your prejudice, it is called different things depending on what the focus is on. That is saying or doing something that lets other people know that your box is better than their box.



**"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."**

AUDRE LORDE

- a. Are girls better than boys? Sexism
- b. Are thin people better than thick people? Weightism
- c. Are abled people better than disabled people? Ableism
- d. Are white people better than black people? Racism
- e. Are young people better than old people? Ageism
- f. Are rich people better than poor people? Classism
- g. Is English better than Portuguese? Linguicism
- h. Is Brazil better than the USA? Nationalism

### 5

#### When you are prejudice, it comes out in different ways, sometimes on purpose (consciously) and sometimes on accident (unconsciously).

- a. Have you ever done this on purpose?
- b. Have you ever done this on accident and realized later?
- c. Have you left someone out because they were different from you?
- d. Have you thought someone else was better than you because of how they were different from you?





6

The more you let your prejudice grow or be unchecked, the more you will consciously or unconsciously act on it. The more you find people who agree with your actions and who are in your box as you label it, the more you will think those in your box are right and good and those outside your box are wrong and bad.



7

**How can you stop acting and thinking that your box (your normal) is better than others?**

- a. Remember/Learn that different is normal and normal is different
- b. Remember/Learn that everyone is unique (just like you!) and has a unique story that you probably don't know all about
- c. Examine your life and see if you are treating some people better than others—and figure out why
- d. If someone you love and trust tells you that you are being prejudice about something—figure out why they think that

When you realize you are prejudice (we all are!), learn how to stop: make friends with people who are different than you. Read books, watch movies, follow on Social media people who are different than you. Break the stereotypes!

make people feel loved today

8

**How can you help someone else stop acting and thinking that your box (your normal) isn't as good as theirs?**

- a. Tell an adult (especially your parents!) if someone is bullying you
- b. Sometimes you can't help others. Sometimes they are not ready to learn, and you need to just walk away.
- c. Sometimes you can encourage someone to realize their prejudice: choose your battles wisely.



Sometimes you can share your story and connect and help someone learn: that feels really good. But remember, if someone doesn't change—that isn't your fault, and it doesn't mean that you did anything wrong. That is their choice.



Written by Rachel Ferguson, for her wonderful American, Jamaican, Brazilian daughters

