Developing Inclusive Youth

How to Reduce Social Exclusion and Foster Equality and Equity in Childhood

By Melanie Killen

In the past two decades, psychologists, educators, and economists have shown that social stratification creates social inequalities that have long-term detrimental effects on children's physical, emotional, and academic development.[1] The segregation of social networks, as well as experiences of social inequality in the form of prejudice and bias, contributes to negative developmental outcomes for children over and above unequal access to material resources.[2] Unfortunately, hate and bias crimes have increased significantly over the past decade, turning the clock back on progress toward just and fair treatment of individuals.[3] For the past 25 years, my colleagues and I at the University of Maryland have researched the emergence of children's conceptions of fairness and equality, their experiences of prejudice, and children's likelihood to perpetuate bias, to help us understand how to improve children's lives.[4]

We have learned a number of lessons about what helps to reduce prejudice and to foster an understanding of the need to treat others fairly and equally. Based on our extensive research findings over the past two decades, we developed an intervention program for elementary school classrooms, Developing Inclusive Youth, which includes a web-based curriculum tool and teacher-led discussions, to reduce prejudice and social exclusion, support socioemotional well-being, promote friendships among children from diverse groups, and increase children's motivation to succeed academically.[5]

Understanding Bias among Children

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, K–12 schools are the most cited locations for discrimination and bias-related harassment.[6] Most commonly, children discriminate against and harass other children because of their race/ethnicity, gender, immigration status, or religion.[7] These reports are consistent with extensive developmental research that has shown that children are both the recipients and perpetrators of prejudicial attitudes.[8] Implicit and explicit biases emerge as early as the preschool period and become more pervasive by late elementary school.[9] Explicit biases refer to stereotypes and generalizations about individuals based solely on group memberships. Implicit biases refer to negative attitudes toward other social groups that the beholder is unaware of, such as subconscious or automatic responses.*

Considering how prevalent bias-based harassment is among children, it is crucial that educators better understand how children develop these biases and how these biases can be reduced.[10] The high rates of bias among children underscore the importance of schools as settings for changes in attitude and behavior, and elementary

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*For more on what educators should know about implicit bias, see "Understanding Implicit Bias" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/staats.

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school classrooms as the most developmentally appropriate venues for leveraging change among young children to reduce prejudice in adulthood. The consequences for children who *experience* discrimination (e.g., name-calling, bullying, exclusion, relational aggression) as a result of prejudice include compromised health and well-being, stress and anxiety, and low academic achievement.[11] Moreover, children who *perpetuate* bias (i.e., hold biases about social groups that restrict their social interactions) also experience stress associated with negative intergroup relationships in school settings. Thus, reducing prejudice and bias in childhood has positive academic, health, and attitudinal outcomes for *all children.*

One of the most explicit ways in which stereotypes and biases have an impact on children's development is when children experience social exclusion and discrimination from peer groups because of stereotypes and biases held by their peers. Inclusion and exclusion from social groups is already a complex arena, contributing to social rejection and isolation for many children, with negative consequences such as depression and anxiety. To effectively reduce prejudice, interventions must facilitate: (1) social and moral reasoning about intergroup relationships and attitudes, (2) experiences of positive intergroup friendships, and (3) adult-child discussions regarding the unfairness of social exclusion and prejudicial attitudes.

Social and Moral Development

Unlike an act of physical harm where children receive consistent messages about what makes it wrong ("You shouldn't hit someone; how would you feel if someone did that to you?"), messages about social exclusion from groups generate a range of responses and vary depending on the specific parameters of the exclusion. For example, most people view it as legitimate to exclude a slow runner from a track team. One has to run fast to be on the team and contribute to its success; the criteria of speed and endurance are agreed upon as appropriate by most individuals. Thus, even if the slow runner feels bad about being excluded, it is understood that speed and endurance are legitimate exclusion criteria.

Yet, if someone is excluded from the track team because of his or her religion, race, or ethnicity, many people would view it as unfair. The reasoning is that one's religion, race, or ethnicity is not related to the agreed upon criteria for being accepted to the track team. Thus, the exclusion in this case is unfair because it is unrelated to the group goals and, importantly, involves the unfair treatment of others.

Children also understand these distinctions, but such understanding emerges slowly over the course of childhood. Children often demonstrate inconsistent judgments about the fairness or unfairness of exclusion. For example, children 4 to 6 years of age often view exclusion of someone because of his or her gender as wrong and unfair ("Girls can play with trucks, too"; "It's not fair to tell the boys that they can't play with dolls") but also demonstrate gender-specific play preferences ("Let's play with the girls and not the boys because they're mean"; "Girls can't play with us 'cause they'll just cry").[12]

When children view social exclusion based on group membership as unfair and wrong, they cite moral concerns to justify this stance ("It's not fair to treat her differently"). However, in situations with ambiguity or complexity, children justify exclusion based on traditions ("We've never 'mixed' before"), conventions ("It's not done that way"), or stereotypic expectations ("Girls aren't good at science"). Children and adolescents also refer to group identity as a basis for social exclusion ("They don't belong to our group"; "He won't fit into our group"; "She doesn't know how we do things because she's from a different place").

What we have learned is that children actively reason about the social world and consider issues of group identity, group norms, and morality. Concepts about both group identity and morality emerge early in development. Morality involves judgments about the fair, equal, and just treatment of others,[13] which emerge during the preschool years. At the same time, children form a group identity that involves affiliating with a group that provides support and friendship.[14] However, group identity can lead to in-group preference ("My group gets more than your group"), which has the potential to create prejudicial attitudes.[15] What turns in-group preference into prejudice is when out-group dislike or distrust manifests. Many children identify with a group without simultaneously identifying or showing dislike for an out-group. However, when forms of threat exist, then in-group preference can turn into out-group dislike, resulting in prejudicial attitudes and behaviors.[16] Forms of threat often surface when resources are limited or competition is high. In these cases, individuals (including children) can align themselves with their own group to compete with other groups, creating derogatory attitudes about the out-group. Further, when adults convey negative messages about groups (such as gender, race, and ethnicity), or when stereotypes are perpetuated and reinforced through the media, then children often turn their in-group alliance into out-group distrust.

The high rates of bias among children underscore the importance of schools as settings for changes in attitude and behavior.

Group dislike extends beyond the literal dislike of a group to mistrust of someone who is affiliated with a specific group. The process becomes one in which children (and adults) assume homogeneity of the out-group. One way to reduce these types of biases is to help children understand that groups are heterogeneous and that attributing traits to an individual based solely on group membership (or identity) is unfair and prejudicial. Experiences that are most effective in reducing assumptions of homogeneity come in the form of positive intergroup contact.

Experiences of Positive Intergroup Friendships

Under optimal conditions, positive contact between groups can reduce prejudicial attitudes.[17] Optimal conditions for reducing prejudice are met when those in the advantaged and disadvantaged group (or in-group and out-group) begin the interaction with *equal status* and share *common goals*, when *authority figures* support contact for the goals of mutual respect, and when *cross-group friendships* can be formed. In fact, the most robust finding in developmental (and social) psychological research pertains to the condition of cross-

group friendships.[18] Such friendships enable individuals to have personal experiences that refute stereotypes disseminated in the media and elsewhere in society ("My friend is not like that").

These conditions are not easy to achieve given the pervasive pattern of racial and ethnic segregation in the United States and many places around the globe. (For more on the importance of school integration, see the article on page 26.) Further, in many contexts, ethnic minority group status is associated with socioeconomic status, with low-income groups more often associated with ethnic, racial, and cultural minority status backgrounds. These pervasive demographics that result from social status hierarchies make it difficult to achieve equal status in schools and workplaces. Even though positive change regarding different forms of status have occurred across ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds over the past 50 years, positive intergroup contact remains difficult to achieve naturally due to persistent residential segregation patterns. Fortunately, schools can foster positive intergroup contact and encourage relationships that reflect equal status.

Cross-group friendships enable individuals to have personal experiences that refute stereotypes.

Some examples of positive outcomes of cross-group friendships include students using moral reasoning in their rejection of race-based exclusion, students wanting to be friends with students of other cultural and ethnic backgrounds when they had previously excluded them, and students experiencing a reduced rate of negative implicit bias. Moreover, two forms of cross-group friendships have been shown to be effective: direct (actual positive interactions between individuals) and indirect (hearing or reading about two other individuals, one from one's own group and one from another group, who have become friends). Developmental research has also shown that the promotion of a common inclusive group identity (e.g., a shared nationality or school identity) rather than a singular exclusive group identity (e.g., only identification with being either an ethnic majority or minority) can reduce children's biases against those from other group affiliations.

Teacher-Child Discussions about Intergroup Relationships and Bias

While students are often the perpetrators of bias in the classroom, teacher bias has been identified as a source of promoting prejudicial experiences for children.[19] Teacher biases about children's ability and aptitude have been demonstrated through research on stereotype threat as well as for an array of academic decisions, such as assessment. Stereotype threat is when students feel at risk of conforming to stereotypic expectations, which negatively impacts their own academic performance.[20] Most of this research is experimental in nature, and little work has focused on incorporating teacher bias in interventions designed to change children's attitudes about peer group social inclusion and exclusion. Some school districts ask teachers to take online implicit bias tests to become aware of their own biases. This is helpful for discovering one's own implicit biases, often unbeknownst to the beholder. This realization, however, does not equip teachers with the tools necessary to address bias and social exclusionary practices that they observe in school settings.

What is needed, then, are curriculum programs designed to promote intergroup friendships and reduce social exclusion and prejudice in childhood as well as to provide teachers with a vocabulary to discuss social exclusion, bias, and stereotypic expectations (recognizing that teachers have their own biases about social groups). Further, measuring teacher bias needs to be included in a program designed to reduce student bias. Moreover, programs must be designed with an awareness of the social, cognitive, and emotional developmental levels of participating students. An intervention study that focuses on diverse group categories and multiple grade levels will enhance the effectiveness and generalizability of the program.

Promoting Intergroup Friendships and Reducing Prejudice

Our team at the University of Maryland created Developing Inclusive Youth, an interactive in-classroom program that has two components to it: a web-based curriculum tool and a teacher-led classroom discussion session that immediately follows students' use of the tool. The goals of the research-based program* are to provide children with the experiences of viewing both inclusive and exclusive behaviors by characters similar to their peers. These characters are diverse in gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and immigrant status to increase the chances that one of them will reflect children's own identity. This will provide an experience that will be relevant for most of the children in the classroom. We chose to focus our program on 8- to 11-year-old children because children younger than 8 may be unfamiliar with certain types of diversity. Further, we know that children acquire an understanding of group dynamics (in-group and out-group) between 7 and 9 years of age. Also, we wanted to include an age group that had an emerging understanding of group dynamics and when groups might hold norms that individual members would reject. Finally, we wanted to focus on children prior to middle school (ages 12 to 14), when dating and romantic relationships enter into peer group dynamics, creating new sets of issues that we wanted to avoid.

In the Developing Inclusive Youth web-based tool, shown in Figure 1 on page 11, children progress through eight scenarios, one per week. The interactive design of the tool allows children to watch simulated peer interactions that involve social exclusion. Children are then asked to make decisions, form judgments, and observe the outcomes of their own decision making (these responses are recorded in the tool and produced as a file for statistical analyses). Decisions include whether it is all right or not for several students (in the scenario) to exclude another child, how the different characters will feel, whether the group should include or exclude, and the reasons for doing so. To capture reasoning, children are presented with four different reasons for their decisions and asked to pick one (reasons include unfairness, group functioning, stereotypes, and group norms).

*We are currently evaluating the effectiveness of the program, and our preliminary analyses reveal statistically significant effects. When our analyses are complete, the tool will be made available to school districts for implementation. To learn more, visit www.killenlab.umd.edu.

The focus of the program is not on children's behavior in the classroom but on the consequences and outcomes of prejudicial attitudes in social relationships at the group level. This focuses the learning opportunity away from the potentially self-conscious focus of individual behavior in a public forum (public reprimands of negative behavior) and instead toward group discussion about the negative dimensions of prejudice and stereotypes. Moreover, the intervention focuses on the common group and shared interests held by children from different backgrounds. Previous research has shown that children use group membership, such as ethnicity, as a cue for friendship. But when they are made aware of salient common interests, such as hobbies and values, then these interests take priority over ethnicity. When children exclude others based on group membership alone, there is a missed opportunity to find a friend with shared goals and interests. To that end, the intervention program focuses extensively on shared goals and interests, such as play activities, hobbies, and values, displayed by children from different backgrounds.

In designing the tool, we used a narrator with voice-over to control for individual differences in children's reading levels. The tool is also interactive; at multiple points, the action freezes and participants make a choice, a judgment, and/or a rating, providing an online record of their responses to the different facets of each exclusion scenario. For example, in the "Science" scenario, four children have to create a science project. Three boys are sitting next to a girl, and one boy says to another boy that he wants to make a robot. The girl asks to join the boys, but one boy whispers to his friend that girls are not good at science. The boy whispers back that his sister is good at science, but this is dismissed by the first boy. The action freezes and the narrator asks the student to make a decision as to whether the boys should include or exclude the girl. Then the student must pick a reason for his or her decision and how each character will feel. The action unfolds and the student watches what happens. The student also has a chance to see what happens when the other choice is made (inclusion or exclusion). The student then responds to new probes about the characters' expected feelings and the group's reasons for the act of inclusion or exclusion.

Each week (for eight weeks), the program addresses prejudice for multiple group categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, immigrant status, and socioeconomic status), which removes the focus from only one group of participants in the role of potential victims. This optimizes the probability that all participants will identify with at least one of the eight scenarios and relate to both the excluded character and the perpetrator roles in different scenarios. Thus, each week, a new character makes decisions related to including or excluding others.

To illustrate, each week involves an exclusion situation with multiple viewpoints expressed (one child advocates for exclusion, another child advocates for inclusion, and another child is the excluded target). For the first week, the "Recess" scenario features two girls jumping rope who must decide whether to include or exclude a "new kid" at school—a situation that everyone can relate to. The second week's scenario, "Science," mentioned earlier, includes a science project in which boys must decide whether to include or exclude a girl from their task. In the third week's scenario, "Park," the action centers around a tire swing where some white boys decide whether to let a Latino boy join their game (one boy tells the Latino boy to play with his friends from Mexico, and the Latino boy tells him that he was born in the United States and doesn't know anyone from Mexico).

In "Bowling," the fourth week's scenario, some girls must decide whether to invite an immigrant girl from Poland to their bowling party (debating whether she can learn how to bowl). The fifth week's "Arcade" scenario involves exclusion based on wealth status (whether a character has enough money to play games at the arcade), while the sixth week's scenario, "Dance," focuses on two white girls unsure about including a black girl in their ballet group. The seventh week's scenario, "Party," features a Korean boy and his Korean friend deciding whether to invite a non-Korean boy to a birthday party (thinking that he might not like Korean food).

Figure 1. Portal for beginning the Developing Inclusive Youth tool, revealing the eight scenarios, one per week for eight weeks: Recess, Science, Park, Bowling, Arcade, Dance, Party, and Movie.

Finally, the eighth week's scenario, "Movie," involves two boys, one Arab and one non-Arab, watching a movie with negative stereotypes about Arabs. While the non-Arab boy enjoys the movie, the Arab boy wants to do a different activity, and the two friends must decide whether to continue watching the movie or not. Watching each of the eight scenarios and responding to the prompts takes students about 15 minutes.

The teacher-led classroom discussion, which lasts for 30 minutes, is the second component of the intervention program. After each child has had an opportunity in the classroom to individually complete the scenario of the week using the web-based curriculum tool, teachers engage students in a discussion regarding the choices and decisions presented in each scenario. Teachers lead this discussion without knowledge of, or reference to, students' own individual decisions. However, teachers are provided with a sequence of questions designed to foster discussion. Teachers also ask students to discuss their own experiences relevant to the scenario. The issues surrounding each scenario are about social inclusion and exclusion, stereotypic expectations, biases, peer relationships, friendships, shared interests, and common goals. Thus, the scenarios depicted in the web-based curriculum tool provide the basis for substantive teacher-led, face-to-face classroom discussions.

Overall, the intervention program creates both indirect and direct intergroup contact. The *indirect contact* in the intervention program occurs with the use of the animated intergroup scenarios in the web-based curriculum tool (which children use in the classroom). Children watch peer exchanges in which children like themselves become friends with those from different backgrounds, and they learn that these peers have common goals and shared interests. The *direct contact* occurs in the program when children discuss their views of the peer scenarios in class with children from different backgrounds, and when these discussions occur among peers. The use of both direct and indirect intergroup contact, as well as including characters from diverse backgrounds, means that this program can be applied in schools with both homogeneous and heterogeneous student bodies.

Through this web-based tool, we hope to promote positive intergroup friendships to reduce prejudice and increase socio-emotional well-being. To date, very little research exists on how to change children's attitudes among diverse groups in the context of everyday interactions in school. Yet, exclusionary behavior has extensive negative outcomes, such as the denial of opportunities (e.g., belonging to school clubs that are educational as well as social) and the denial of friendships. One of the expectations of our program is to change children's behavior and attitudes, which in turn will foster healthy child development.

Currently, we are conducting a randomized control trial of third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders in six schools to determine if the program is effective, and our preliminary results are very promising. Overall, students in the intervention program are statistically more likely to desire to play with peers from different ethnic and racial backgrounds following the program than are children in the control group. In addition, children in the intervention group are statistically more likely to feel a sense of classroom support from their peers.

Children's Voices

In implementing this web-based tool, the most poignant discussions arose when the teacher asked children to talk about whether they had experiences like the characters in the scenario of the week. For example, one week, a third-grade African American girl stated, "Some kids said, 'No you can't play with me because you're a different skin color.'" A European American girl sitting next to her said, "That's not nice," and rubbed her back. The teacher then focused the discussion on what can be done when someone says something like this. Other statements that arose were personal experiences of identity, such as when a third-grade Korean boy said, "People assume I'm Chinese, but I'm Korean, and it makes me feel sad because they are judging me by my looks, my nationality." The teacher followed up by asking others what they thought should be done to address this.

Sometimes children reflected on how it must be for other children who are not white, such as when a third-grade European American girl said, "I feel bad about color because white people used to be mean to black people." The teacher responded to this statement with, "Courage is doing right when everyone around you is doing wrong." Regarding gender, children had lively discussions about equality. A fifth-grade boy said, "Give everybody a chance. Your gender doesn't define you. Just because she's a girl doesn't mean she's bad at science." Children also debated gender differences. One fourth-grade girl said, "We have different thoughts. Boys like to mess around, and girls like to get things done." A boy responded with, "That's kind of rude to boys." Other boys chimed in to agree with the girl's statement. The teacher then asked the class to consider what basis they had for thinking about boys and girls differently, and to think about what they shared and had in common.

Enabling children to communicate their attitudes, judgments, and reasons with one another in a supportive classroom is important for progress toward mutual respect and equality. Discussions provide children a chance to hear what their peers are thinking and to challenge or accept their ideas. Teachers provide a framework for encouraging children to listen to one another and generate solutions to problems and negative attitudes. In our feedback from teachers, they often told us that they learned things about their students that they never knew they had experienced, and this helped them understand their perspective and foster a more inclusive environment.

Prejudice and discrimination observed in adults often originates in childhood.[21] Research on child development has investigated the origins of prejudice, how it evolves, and what factors both accelerate and diminish prejudice. At the same time, children develop concepts about fairness, equality, and rights, and apply these concepts to their daily interactions with peers.

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Group identity, though, along with negative messages from adults and the media, often perpetuates in-group preference, which fosters out-group dislike. It is of paramount importance to determine how best to reduce prejudice early in life, not only because by adulthood prejudice is deeply entrenched and difficult to change, but also for facilitating healthy development and motivating children to enjoy school and achieve academically. □

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