TEACHING ABOUT IDENTITY, RACISM, AND FAIRNESS

Engaging Young Children in Anti-Bias Education

By Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins

Anti-bias education is an optimistic commitment to supporting children who live in a highly diverse and yet still inequitable world. Rather than a formula for a particular curriculum, it is an underpinning perspective and framework that permeates everything in early childhood education—including your interactions with children, families, and colleagues. Anti-bias education developed from the need to identify and prevent, as much as possible, the harmful emotional and psychological impacts on children from societal prejudice and bias. Its four core goals reflect research about these negative influences.

Louise Derman-Sparks has been an anti-bias education teacher of children and adults, author, and national and international consultant. Julie Olsen Edwards has been a family childcare provider, teacher, center director, teacher educator, writer, and advocate for children, families, and teachers. Catherine M. Goins is an early childhood education administrator, diversity educator, and college instructor. This article is adapted with permission from their book, Anti-Bias Education for Young Children & Ourselves, *Second Edition (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).*

GOAL 1, IDENTITY

- Teachers will nurture each child's construction of knowledgeable and confident personal and social identities.
- Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

GOAL 2, DIVERSITY

- Teachers will promote each child's comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.

GOAL 3, JUSTICE

- Teachers will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and will nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes.
- Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

GOAL 4, ACTIVISM

- Teachers will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for others in the face of bias.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; ALLISON SHELLEY FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION: IMAGES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN ACTION

PRETENDING NOT TO NOTICE DIFFERENCES DEVALUES THE EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR AND IGNORES THE REALITY OF WHITE ADVANTAGES.

- Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

More specifically, applying the four anti-bias education core goals to racialized identity includes:

- Children will feel positive, but not superior or inferior, about their racialized identities. They will understand that their skin color or eye shape or hair texture does not determine their value as human beings.
- Children will have accurate words and information about each other's different racialized identities. They will also appreciate their shared humanity and how they are like each other.
- Children will develop beginning skills for identifying and questioning misinformation, stereotypical ideas and images, and hurtful behaviors directed at their own and others' racialized identities. They will know that it is not fair to treat people hurtfully because of who they are.
- Children will demonstrate beginning skills for interrupting biased behaviors targeted at their own and others' racialized identities and for creating a fair classroom environment.

AWARENESS AND CURIOSITY

Young children are aware of and curious about people's features related to what society calls *race*. Eye shape, skin color, and hair fascinate children and are the first aspects of racialized social identity that they notice. By age 4, children begin to pick up on social identity terms for their own and other groups, which can be quite puzzling for them. They also begin to pick up misinformation, stereotypes, and negative attitudes about themselves and others. Here are three examples of young children grappling with these ideas:

"How do people get their color?" asks 3-and-a-half-year-old Thomas, who is white.

* * *

"I'm not Black. I'm African American," Ebonie, 4 years old, says earnestly to her teacher.

* * *

Rosalie, a 5-year-old Puerto Rican girl, is reluctant to move out of the shaded areas of the play yard. She explains to her teacher, "If I get sun on my skin, it will get darker. My family says I'm dark enough already."

Biologically, there is no such thing as race. All people are members of one race, *Homo sapiens*, the human race—even though everyone does not look the same. However, in a society where systemic racism exists, *everyone* has a racialized identity, an identity that holds power in the life of each person. All children grow up surrounded by and absorbing the socially prevailing positive and negative messages about themselves and others, which come from media; from educational, religious, and legal institutions; and from the behavior and beliefs of the important adults in their lives.

No one has the individual choice to opt out of socially assigned racialized identities. *But each person has a choice about how to live with them.* People have the capacity for acquiring new knowledge and feelings about their own social identities as well as the social identities of other individuals. Members of the white racial group can choose to believe in the myths of superiority that justify advantages and privileges to their group. Or they can reject those myths and work to end the system of racism that creates these dynamics. Members of groups targeted by racism can live as if the myths of inferiority are true descriptions of themselves. Or they can reject those damaging notions and work against the ideas and structures that create social disadvantage for them.

Some people think that if no one noticed or spoke about differences in skin color, racialized social identities and racism would disappear. However, that isn't the answer. Pretending not to notice differences devalues the real-life experiences of people of color and ignores the reality of white advantages. Anti-bias education rests on the premise that, as long as *racism* continues to exist, everyone—children, families, teachers, community members—absorbs society's messages about racialized social identity groups. But—and this is a big but—*anti-bias educators can learn to clean their lenses to see with a more accurate eye and mind and a caring heart.*

INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND CLASS

Systemic racism continues to powerfully affect the lives of children and their families. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), children of color are still more likely to experience adverse societal conditions than white children. "Poverty is the single biggest threat to children's healthy development."[1] NCCP's analysis of 2016 statistics illustrates how the relationship between families living with low income (below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold) or in poverty (below 100 percent of the federal poverty threshold) varies by race and ethnicity. While some young children of *all* racial backgrounds live in low-income, poor, or deep poverty (less than 50 percent of the federal poverty threshold) families, the data reveal the impact of institutional racism on economics.[2]

In 2016, 13 percent of white children lived in poor families and 6 percent lived in deep poverty.[3] Thirty-seven percent of African American children's families were in the poor category and 19 percent in deep poverty. In addition, 30 percent of Latinx young children's families lived in poverty and 13 percent in deep poverty. Among Native American children's families, 39 percent were living in poverty and 19 percent in deep poverty. These systemic economic facts tell us that white children and families are still more likely to have access to resources that support healthy development and future success than are children and families of color. Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young or experience deep, persistent poverty.[4]

Incarceration of a family member is another developmental stressor that reflects the systemic racism in the lives of children of color. The Annie E. Casey Foundation looked more closely at the 5 million children with a parent in jail or prison at some point in their lives. African American and Latinx children are over seven times more likely than their white peers to have a parent who is incarcerated. This situation exists for several reasons, including racial profiling, lack of money for bail, and longer prison sentences. "More than 15 percent of children with parents in federal prison—and more than 20 percent with parents in state prison—are 4 or younger."[5] The incarceration of a parent has a great impact on a child's well-being.

There is research evidence that high-quality early childhood education programs can play a valuable role in countering the traumatic effects of poverty and racism. One world-renowned longitudinal study explored the outcomes of the Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Project (1962–1967), an experimental high-quality preschool program for African American children living in poverty in a small Michigan city.* The HighScope Educational Research Foundation documented the lives of the children attending the preschool program and followed them until midlife.[6] A control group of children with similar demographics but no preschool experience was also followed. The Center for the Economics of Human Development, at the University of Chicago, then carried out further assessments when the children were in their mid-50s.[7]

These studies found that children participating in the Perry Preschool Project had important lifelong gains in education (completing high school and, for a few, college), in employment, and in personal life outcomes. All of these outcomes were significantly better than those of the children in the control group. Of equal importance, the next generation, the children of the Perry Preschool participants, also showed significant gains in education, health, employment, and civic life.

YOUNG CHILDREN CONSTRUCT IDEAS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT RACIALIZED IDENTITIES

From infancy on, children absorb messages about the construct of race from a range of sources—family, teachers, media, peers, books, and social, political, and religious institutions. From these messages, they gradually form an internalized racialized identity. Thus, everyone's racialized identity is imposed from the outside and constructed from the inside.

This process is based on three dynamics. One is how the society into which children are born defines racial groups and assigns racialized identities. These definitions are often codified in law and then disseminated through a range of sources. A second dynamic is children's life experiences, particularly how children are valued and treated by the significant people in their lives, such as family and teachers. The third dynamic is how individual children come to think and feel about who they are, a process that continues throughout life.

Research studies exploring young children's awareness and attitudes about racialized identities seriously began in the 1950s.[8] This body of research contradicts the mistaken belief that young children do not notice or show interest in features connected to racial group membership, particularly skin color. Even infants and toddlers begin to notice and show curiosity about differences in skin color.[9] By the time children are 3 and 4 years old, they become aware of value judgments and feelings related to various racialized identities and begin to act on negative feelings about others that they absorb.[10]

Diversity does not cause prejudice, nor does children noticing and talking about differences, as some adults fear. Children learn prejudice from messages and images of prejudice. They also learn from the silence or discomfort of adults when children ask or comment about the human differences they see around them.

In contrast, when you actively pay attention to children's developing ideas and feelings about their own and others' racialized identities, you foster their ability to gain accurate knowledge and develop self-esteem. Interacting with children about their developing ideas and feelings also counters misinformation, unease, or hurtful ideas about members of various racialized groups. By breaking the silence, you and the children's families can nurture

*Louise Derman-Sparks (the first author of this article) was one of the Perry Preschool teachers. For her account of the educational program she and her colleagues developed, see bit.ly/3jHPjzG.

their accurate knowledge, empathy, enjoyment, and anti-bias relationships with racially diverse people.

Contrary to what some people assume, white children—as well as children of color—also develop a racialized identity. White children continually receive messages from families, communities, and media about white normalcy, superiority, and entitlement and construct their ideas about being white in the context of systemic, cultural, and individual racism.[11] Very early, white children come to value their whiteness, presume it is the definition of normal, and believe that therefore all other skin colors are strange and less than.[12] While early childhood teachers want all children to like who they are, the challenge for an anti-bias educator is to enable white children to like who they are without developing a sense of white superiority.

One of the pioneers in the study of how young children develop identity and prejudice, Kenneth Clark, noted many years ago the ways racism also harms white children's development. He describes how growing up with the societal contradiction between the professed goals of equality and democracy and the pressures to violate them by acting on racial prejudice can create moral conflicts and guilt for white children. He also warned that white children "are being given a distorted perception of reality

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES ABOUT RACIALIZED IDENTITIES AND FAIRNESS

Anti-bias educators intentionally and proactively integrate the message into the daily life of their classroom that people of every racialized identity are valuable and deserve caring and fairness. Here, we offer ways to go about this work in your classroom.

Use your school philosophy, handbook, and enrollment materials to welcome all people. It is not enough to say your program does not discriminate. Throughout the setting and in materials provided to families, include images of peoples of many racial (and ethnic) groups. Ask *all* families questions about what terms they use to describe their racial and ethnic identities so you can respect their choices. You may also learn that some families aren't sure how to name their children's racialized identities or prefer not to give them a racialized identity at all. As all children are exposed to ideas about racialized identity, it becomes important that they have words to describe themselves and others. This is likely to be an ongoing conversation with families.

Make racial diversity visible in your learning environment. Children learn what is important to adults in the program by observing what is and isn't in the learning environment. Make racial and cultural diversity visible in the books, posters, dolls, puzzles, and art materials (crayons, felt pens, paints, and paper in different skin tones). Be sure to include accurate images of children and families with biracial and multiracial identities. Some teachers mix up all the people figures in one box so children can form whatever variation of a family they wish.

Go through your classroom library and assess your collection. How many books do you have in which the main characters are white? In how many are people of color the main character of the story? What appearance and cultural stereotypes of people of color do your books perpetuate? Make a list of books you would like to have in the classroom and outline a plan for how you will acquire new books. Add to your collection with books from your local public library.

Use teachable moments. Children's questions and comments are all potential teachable moments. What may seem like a little thing by itself can be a big thing to a child. If you can't think of what to say or become uncomfortable responding directly and matter-of-factly to an incident, or later feel you didn't handle your initial response well, talk to someone you trust to explore your feelings and possible alternative responses. Then, *always* go back to the children with your new response. The following is an example of one such teachable moment:

During story time, Hector (white, age 4) leans over and touches Jamal's hair. Jamal (African American, age 4) pushes his hand away. Their teacher observes the interaction and steps in.

Teacher: What's happening?
Jamal: Don't like him touching my hair. He didn't ask me if it's okay.
Teacher: How come you touched his hair, Hector?
Hector: Wanna know what it feels like.

and of themselves and are being taught to gain personal status in unrealistic ways."[13]

The social-political and psychological dimensions of race and racism remain a contentious and painful issue in society. If early childhood educators want children to thrive in a diverse world, they must commit to helping them make sense of the confusing and often emotionally charged messages they receive about their own and other people's racialized identities.

Give children language to discuss their identities, and answer their questions in an atmosphere of interest, delight, and accurate information. Plant seeds of openness and connection. Teach them tools for addressing the unfairness they will inevitably encounter, and encourage them to stand up for themselves and others. You can help children construct a strong foundation for thriving in a diverse world now and into the future. ☐

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This article is adapted from *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children & Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, with Catherine M. Goins, which offers a comprehensive look at helping children understand multifaceted identities, respect diversity of all kinds, think critically, and take action against biases. This volume is needed now more than ever. Our country is rife with division and discord, so it is even more important to teach fairness and inclusion. Doing so can be challenging, but this book offers educators concrete examples for engaging young children in conversations that deepen their knowledge of themselves and ultimately strengthen their relationships with each other.

–EDITORS

Teacher: Jamal, would it be okay if Hector asked first?
Jamal: Yes. *(He turns to Hector.)* Ask me and then you can touch it. Then I want to touch your hair.

Because Jamal has given his permission, the teacher says, "Yes, it's interesting to touch and learn about each other's hair as long as we ask first. Did Jamal's hair feel the same as or different from your hair?" (If Jamal had said it was not all right for Hector to touch his hair, then the teacher might have said, "We need to respect what Jamal says. There are other ways to learn about each other's hair.") The teacher decided to plan a series of activities for children to learn about and appreciate different kinds of hair.

Explore how physical features are both alike and different. Make a life-size cutout of each child from butcher paper. Use mirrors to help each child observe and paint their skin, eyes, and hair color. Be sure you have crayons, paints, and yarn in all the shades you need.

Ask children for their ideas about what skin, hair, and eyes do for them. Talk about how skin, hair, and eyes do the same work for all people, regardless of their color.

Explore the range of ways that children and staff look. (Even in a classroom of all white children and staff, there will be differences in skin color and features like freckles, skin tone, eye color, and length of hair.)

Make a bulletin board of color photographs of each child and the members of each child's family. You can take photographs of the family members yourself or invite them to provide their own. Talk about ways in which each child looks and does not look like their family members. Focus on the fact that everyone gets their looks from their birth parents, but they never look exactly the same as their birth parents. Also, make clear that children who are adopted get their skin color, eye shape, and so on from their birth parents, and these attributes may or may not be like those of their adoptive parents. Place the bulletin board at the children's viewing height.

Explore how children who look different from one another still often like to do the same things. Take photographs of the children doing various activities and make a book featuring children who look different doing the same activity (e.g., "Pedro and Amani like to create new songs and dances" or "Heather and Kia like to write messages on the drawing tablet").

Read books about the beauty of the different ways we look, such as *Shades of People* by Shelley Rotner and Sheila Kelly, *All the Colors We Are/Todos los colores de nuestra piel* by Katie Kissinger, and *I Am Latino: The Beauty in Me* by Sandra Pinkney. All of these have simple language and beautiful images.

Pay attention to indicators of confusion or self-rejection. When children make self-portraits or family drawings, sometimes they choose colors that do not correspond to their actual skin, eye, or hair coloring. It is important to ask the child about these choices. Sometimes they indicate discomfort or shame about the child's actual coloring. It is useful, in a conversational tone, to ask the child to talk to you about the portrait. If the coloring is playful (some children paint themselves with rainbow colors or bright green) and the child seems relaxed, you need not take further action. If the child seems uncomfortable describing the colors in the portrait, it is useful to watch for additional indicators of confusion or self-rejection.

If you are concerned, observe the child and make a plan for what you can do to strengthen the child's identity. Check in with other staff about what they have observed and speak with the child's family about what they want their child to know about racial identity and how you can support the child's positive sense of self in the classroom.

–L. D.-S. and J. O. E., with C. M. G.

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