

## **“Goals and Teaching Guidelines for Anti-Bias Education with Young Children”**

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Anti-bias teaching builds on four interacting goals. These goals are for all children, though the ways of working towards these goals will depend on each child's age , family background and culture and specific life experiences.

**Goal One: Nurture every child's construction of knowledge, confident self-identity and group identity.**

This goal requires the creation of educational settings in which all children are able to like themselves without needing to feel superior to anyone else. It also means enabling children to develop biculturally. For children of color this means being able to effectively interact within their home culture and within the dominant culture. For children of the dominant culture, who are likely to experience congruence between home culture and school culture, it means developing the capacity for comfortable and equitable cross-cultural interaction.

The work of William Cross (1987,1991) and Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) is especially pertinent to this goal. Reinterpreting existing research on African American children's identity development, Cross makes a distinction between individual or personal identity and group identity or "group reference orientation". This distinction provides a more complex framework for nurturing children's identities in ways that take into account the realities of societal dynamics of power and privilege. It also becomes a conceptual vehicle for

avoiding victim blaming of groups that experience societal discrimination. Tatum (1997) further develops the implications of Cross's paradigm for parents and teachers. Personal identity development begins at home. Most families do attempt to nurture their children's self-esteem. However, societal racism and other forms of bias affect all young children's group identity through messages of superiority or inferiority. Even nurturing, loving families cannot prevent these societal forces from having a negative impact on their children.

For example, white children need guidance in their development of a positive group identity that does not incorporate societal messages of superiority because of their skin color. Conversely, children whose group identity is undermined through racist or anti-Semitic messages need guidance to develop resistance to these messages. Anti-bias education goes beyond the focus on self-concept that is prevalent in early childhood education to address the impact of societal biases on all children's identity development.

Work on this goal lays a foundation for the other three goals. Activities strengthen children's personal and group identities. Children's daily life at home and in their communities becomes a core part of curriculum content as they learn about themselves, their nuclear and extended family, and their ethnic community. Children's continued development in their home languages is fostered, while they are also beginning to learn English. The classroom environment includes objects, art, music and images of the children, their homes, their family, and the people who work in their communities. Teachers make books about the child and about each child's family. They take photos of the children, their homes, and their families and make matching games and puzzles. People in the children's communities who are working to improve community life are invited to speak with the children. In addition, activities also explore differences within the children's ethnic, gender and class group identities. Recognition and appreciation of the vast range of individual differences promotes an appreciation of diversity and counteracts stereotyping.

**Goal Two: Promote each child's comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.**

This goal means guiding children's development of the cognitive awareness, emotional disposition, and behavioral skills needed to respectfully and effectively learn about differences, comfortably negotiate and adapt to differences, and cognitively understand and emotionally accept the common humanity that all people share.

Children begin recognizing and are curious about differences related to gender, skin color, hair texture, apparent physical disabilities, and language very early in life. Research over 50 years as well as the observational data from parents and teachers documents that, contrary to a persistent myth, young children do notice skin color and other differences among people. (See Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2000 and Ramsey, 1998 for a summary of research and further references.)

Awareness of differences among people begins in the first year of life. When children begin talking (in the latter part of their second year) their questions and comments make clear that they are becoming aware of the salient features of identity in our society. As they move into their preschool years (three- to five-years old), children also have their own ideas about human diversity, reflective of their experiences and cognitive strategies for organizing the world. An anecdote from my own family serves to illustrate the way a young child seeks to organize her experience of ethnic diversity.

When my niece (A) was 4 1/2, she and I(L) had the following conversation during a Passover Seder:

A: I'm half Jewish, aren't I?

L: Yes, Dad is Jewish and Mom isn't.

A: The people who were Jewish got to the other shore and didn't get wet (referring to the passage through the Red Sea).

L: Uh-huh.

A: The people who weren't Jewish drowned.

L: Yes, the story says that many of Pharaoh's soldiers did drown.

(At this point, A was silent, but I could see the wheels turning in her mind.)

L: What do you think happened to the people who were half-Jewish? (This was the issue I believed A. was pondering.)

A: They got to the other side.

L: That's good, because they were safe.

A: Yes, but they got a little bit wet!

There is no mention of "half-Jewish" people in the narrative of the Exodus. However, my niece was putting different pieces of information together in the way young children think and she was trying to figure out her place in the Passover story -- a story that was obviously of great significance to the important people in her life.

Children enter preschool and kindergarten with varying, often unexpected ideas and feelings about their identity, about other people, and about human diversity. Education will likely miss the mark or even reinforce misconceptions, unless teachers have a good idea what their young students may be thinking and feeling. For example, consider an activity designed to help children learn about disabilities -- introducing a child-size wheelchair into the classroom. This is a good method for promoting understanding of physical differences, but it may backfire unless the teacher is able to help children uncover and express their ideas and feelings. Many young children think that sitting in a wheel chair will make their legs "not work" and therefore will be afraid to participate in the activity. The teacher needs to be aware that this is how a child may think and provide for discussion that expands the child's understanding while accepting and helping her to articulate her feelings.

In working toward this goal the focus is on learning about others. Often teachers make the mistake of moving right into this goal without developing goal one. Learning about diversity should flow out of the nurturing of self-esteem and a strong and positive sense of group identity.

Working to promote comfortable interaction and develop empathy is relatively easy in programs that are racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse. As children explore who they are, rich opportunities to develop their awareness of, comfort with, and respect for the differences among the members of the group will also emerge. Many opportunities for exploring commonalities will also arise.

In programs where children/families are racially and culturally similar, promoting comfort with and respect for differences begins with the existing diversity within the group. Families within the same culture do not live exactly the same way. Family structure, gender roles, physical abilities/disabilities, types of work, and religion all may differ. In racially/ethnically homogeneous early childhood centers and preschools, diversity among the participating children, families, and staff can be explored, while commonalities such as shared group beliefs and traditions can be discussed. This process lays a foundation for awareness of, comfort with, and respect for differences, in part simply by giving permission to notice and talk about difference.

The next step is to find ways to introduce racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Activities should focus on the lives of individual people in the children's larger community and city. Teachers should explore the ways in which the children's lives touch on a larger, more diverse community. The discussion of similarities and differences expands to involve people who are different from the children and their families by race, culture, class, religion, language, physical abilities, and family composition. Care should be taken to see and explore individual difference within all groups in order to avoid fostering stereotypes of the groups which are beyond the children's everyday experience.

Teachers using an anti-bias curriculum avoid the use of stereotypic materials or activities and are selective about ideas in published multicultural guides.

Holidays are part of a larger set of activities and used in moderation -- not the sole focus of teaching about others. Diversity is part of the daily environment of the program, not an add-on token for special days. Curriculum incorporates the understanding that humans share core similarities (e.g., need to be fed, sheltered, loved) and that they meet these core needs in different ways.

Deconstructing children's misconceptions and providing them with more accurate information and comfortable exposure to differences helps them to resist the influence of prejudice.

**Goal Three: Foster each child's critical thinking about bias.**

To achieve this goal, we must guide children's development of the cognitive skills to identify unfair and untrue images (stereotypes). We must help children become aware of comments (teasing, name-calling) and behaviors (exclusion, discrimination) directed at someone because of their gender, race, ethnicity, disability, class, age, weight, or other such personal characteristics. Further, we as educators must help children to develop empathy so that they know that all kinds of bias hurts someone.

The natural developmental process of awareness of and curiosity about human diversity, which leads to the creation of theories about diversity, takes place in the social-political and cultural contexts of the family and the larger society. Common forms of communication convey a myriad of overt and subtle messages to young children about the significance of the various aspects human diversity. Many of these messages, coming from television, video games, children's books, movies, greeting cards, images on clothing and lunch-boxes, also teach misinformation. For example, consider the messages embedded in the materials and story surrounding Thanksgiving. The prevailing story is one-

sided and inaccurate, presented from the European-American perspective only. Thanksgiving decorations give young children stereotypical information about how American Indians look, dress and live. Moreover, Thanksgiving is not a day of celebration for many of the indigenous people of the Americas, a reality mystified by its designation as a national holiday. As Dr. Kenneth Clark pointed out almost 50 years ago in his landmark book Prejudice and the Young Child (1955), the messages of bias to children do not come from direct contact with people different from themselves (as is commonly believed), but from socially prevailing attitudes and beliefs.

Since young children are just beginning to construct their ideas about self and others, they are especially vulnerable to the inaccurate and biased information which is embedded in too many of these messages. They are also quick to pick up emotional responses of bias from the people who are close to them, even though the adults are not aware of conveying any messages. The insidious "micro-contaminants" (Pierce, 1980) of racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia interact with young children's developing cognitive and emotional abilities and can be very destructive.

When children enter early childhood programs, the impact of bias on their understanding of self and others comes with them and affects their responses to diversity education. For example, here is a typical scenario:

a preschool teacher invites a person of American Indian ethnicity to her classroom, to share some cultural objects and information. If the guest comes dressed in his ritual clothing, the preschool children are afraid of him, because, influenced by racist societal messages, they think "Indians" spend their time shooting bows and arrows. If the guest comes dressed in his daily clothing, the children do not believe he is "Indian", because he does not look like the inaccurate images they see in the media. Unless the teacher knows what her children may bring to the activity and can intentionally help them talk about

their ideas and feelings, guide them to new information that contradicts their misconceptions, the activity won't achieve its intended outcomes.

However, with appropriate teaching and nurturing young children can learn to resist the destructive impact of the micro-contaminants of racism and other "isms." Here are some examples of children who have been exposed to anti-bias education and have learned that they can take action to counter bias on their own behalf or on behalf of others. These examples show the development of empathy even in quite young children.

A four-year-old tells a classmate "Don't say 'No way, Jose'. It might hurt Jose's feelings." A six-year-old writes in awkward printing, "This book is irregular. It doesn't have any women in it." A five-year-old tells her classmate to keep a stereotypic "Indian warrior" figure in her cubby, because its "not fair" to their teacher who is of American Indian background. A six-year old tells a first grade classmate "You do not have to like me, but it isn't okay to not like me because my skin color is brown."

Activities for critical thinking focus on teaching children to make distinctions between inaccurate and untruthful images and messages and accurate and truthful ones. If children insist on rigid gender-role categories, the teacher plans multiple activities that provide counter information and guides the children to see the contradictions between narrow gender role ideas and reality. If young children think, as many do, that darker skin color means dirty skin, she plans activities that enable the children to actually see for themselves that all skin gets dirty and that dark skin color remains dark even when it is clean.

Children's misinformation about American Indians is another arena for critical thinking activities which provide extensive experiences that contrast real people and pictures of real people with stereotypical, inaccurate ones. Teachers working with young primary age children use a chart activity, where the children first

name “What I think I know about Native Americans (Or whatever topic under discussion) and “What I would like to know”. Then the children and teacher spend several weeks gathering information and then return to their chart. They make a list of “What I have learned” and then compare and contrast this third list with the first one to see where they had misconceptions.

Early childhood teachers find story telling with "Persona Dolls" to be an effective strategy for developing empathy with differences and critical thinking about prejudice and discrimination. First mentioned in the Anti-Bias Curriculum book, "Persona Doll" activities have become very popular. A full discussion of how to use this strategy appears in *Kids like Us (1999)*, the culmination of many years' work by Trisha Whitney, an Oregon early childhood educator. The "Persona Dolls" technique utilizes a tried and true early childhood practice that is itself part of an age-old, cross-cultural tradition, that of story telling. The teacher creates individual personalities and imagined lives for dolls chosen to add diversity to the program. Then, the teacher regularly relates stories with the dolls based on real issues of diversity and creates anti-bias theater involving issues and events in the classroom and in the children's community. These stories invite children to explore and invent solutions to challenges a particular doll faces. Young children quickly identify with and feel empathy for the dolls. The teacher also then helps the children transfer the issues in a particular doll's story to their own lives.

Here is one example: In the following story, a child looks at a persona doll's [Lucia's] drawing of her family and tells her it can't be her family with only a grandma in it. The teacher's goals are to have the children learn to recognize insistence on conformity as a bias, to empathize with Lucia, and to validate many kinds of families. Lucia's feelings are identified as *upset, mad, and confused*. Then the discussion begins.

‘Why is Lucia so upset, mad, and confused?’

‘Cause of what that kid said.’

*'He said her grandma's not her family.'*

*'Did Lucia cry?'*

'She might have been upset enough to cry. Is her grandma her family?'

*' Yes. That's right. She told us before.'*

*' That's why she drew her grandma.'*

'It seems like that other kid wanted everybody's family to be the same. But it's not true that all families are the same, is it?'

*'No. I live with just my mom and my brother.'*

'Yes. That's your family, Han Eul. A family is the people who love and take care of each other. There are many different ways to be a family. How would it feel if someone told you your family isn't right?'

*'I'd be mad. I'd say that's not true!'*

*'That would hurt my feelings.'*

'I'll bet it would! That's just how Lucia felt. Now we know that it's not right to try to tell someone they have to be the same as someone else. And we know how much that hurts, don't we?' (Whitney, 1999, p.140)

**Goal Four: Cultivate each child's ability to stand up for herself or himself and for others in the face of bias.**

This activist goal includes helping every child learn and practice a variety of ways to act when another child acts in a biased manner toward her/him, when one child acts in a biased manner toward another child, and when an adult acts in a biased manner. Goal four builds on goal three. Critical thinking and empathy are necessary components of acting for oneself or others in the face of bias. "Anti-bias activism is a natural outgrowth of children's awareness of what's fair and not fair, a natural response to their readiness to act for fairness." (Pelo & Davidson, 2000, p.9).

Activism projects with young children "nurture self-esteem and empowerment, develop empathy and appreciation for differences, facilitate critical thinking and problem solving, provide a mental model of survival for children at risk from bias, provide a model of equity and justice for privileged, dominant culture children, and contribute to community building." (Pelo & Davidson, 2000,p.8). Here is an example, from a preschool in Seattle, WA, illustrating the capacity of four- and five-year-olds to develop activism skills.

"Hey, there's no brown crayons," Jennifer called out.

"Yes, there is ... no, there isn't! Where are the brown crayons? I need to draw a picture of my mommy!" Eula complained.

"Brown is just a poopy color anyhow," said Molly, while a few others giggled.

"No, it's not. Fran, these guys don't even know about brown. You have a meeting and tell them."

They did have a meeting. But Fran did little of the "telling." Eula was clearly in charge of the discussion, with some help from Larry and Jennifer. She talked about how all the people in her family had brown skin and that they liked the color of their skin. She also told them about all the things that she liked that were brown, like the earth, her dog, chocolate milk, and raisins. Other children added to the list.

Larry added to the discussion with some information about his family: "I have a pink grandma and a brown grandma and they are both nice." Jennifer described the different shades of color in her family, describing her dad as "almost black." She also directed me to fetch the book *All the Colors We Are*, (Kissinger, 1997), which describes "mellow stuff" (skin color and melanin production). Sean piped up, "My mom reads me *Black Is Brown Is Tan* (Adoff, 1973). You can read that, too, Fran."

Fran added to the discussion, "I feel really upset when I hear someone making fun of another person because of the color of their skin. There are many beautiful and different skin colors among the people in our classroom, and none of them are 'poopy.' Eula, is there anything more that you would like to say to Molly right now?" Eula, who had moved closer to her friend Molly and whose anger had dissipated while she talked, turned to look at Molly and said, "How would you like it, Molly, if I called your skin a bad name?" Molly didn't answer right away. The room was quiet until she said, "Hey, guys, let's look for crayons. Maybe we didn't look good enough. Anyway, Fran will have to buy some, if we need more."(Pelo & Davidson, 2000,p.63).

Including activities that support young children's learning to take action against injustice is essential to anti-bias education, and distinguishes it from other multicultural approaches.

Activities related to this goal work in tandem with critical thinking activities. Educators who use activism projects with young children are keen observers of their interests, ideas, interactions, joys, and hurts. They create activities that engage children in taking action that are relevant and appropriate in a variety of ways. By first listening to children and observing what is happening in the classroom and learning about what is happening in the children's larger community the teacher gains important information on which to draw in structuring activism projects which are relevant and important to the children. As a part of the listening, the teacher will seek to understand and acknowledge children's feelings and provide children with a vocabulary for expressing feelings. The teacher can then move to engaging the children in dialogue about feelings and events which will support and foster critical thinking, asking questions and providing information as appropriate. As teachers seek to develop activism projects with children it is most important that they remain mindful that the purpose of these activities is the empowerment of the children, not the resolution of any adult issues.

Anti-bias early childhood educators have invented a range of activism activities based on issues in their classrooms that the children thought were important. These have included children writing a letter and organizing a petition (when there was no response to their letter) to a calendar company because the pictures are only of white children. Another involved sending a letter to a Band-Aid company protesting the use of the term “flesh colored” on the box. (The company sent coupons for transparent Band-Aids.) Other children painted over racist slurs found on a wall in the children’s playground and another class made “tickets” to put on cars of teachers who parked inappropriately in the school’s handicapped parking space. (The teachers stopped doing so).

Now, teachers have a new outstanding book to help them implement goal 4. *That’s not fair! A teacher’s guide to activism with young children*, (Pelo and Davidson, 2000) is based on several years’ work in early childhood programs in Seattle. Step-by-step guidelines and numerous examples of activism projects based on real issues in the children’s lives show clearly what this vital aspect of anti-bias education includes. “When teachers follow these steps, they help children move from asking questions to solving problems, from indignation to understanding and action... they teach children to act responsibly, consider people’s feelings and perspectives and ideas, and notice how their actions might affect other people ( p.53).