

FIVE WAYS TO ANALYZE CLASSROOMS FOR AN ANTI-BIAS APPROACH

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Increasingly, we are becoming aware of bias in our society. This may be bias based not only on culture or race, but also on social class, religion, or physical and mental abilities. One of the goals of high quality child care programs is to help children become sensitive to issues of bias and to develop anti-bias skills.

The materials and pictures in your program may not totally represent an anti-bias curriculum. But pictures do provide one way to introduce anti-bias concepts into your program. Analyze your classroom with attention to the particular children, families, and staff who are served. What is appropriate or inappropriate will be based partly on the culture and context of the people involved. Don't remove all "biased" materials, however. Children and adults need the opportunity to talk about and think through issues of bias. This will help them develop the critical thinking skills needed to identify bias. It will also help them to be sensitive to and to better understand the feelings of people who are hurt by bias. Children who are discriminated against also need the skills and knowledge of how to respond when bias happens to them. Since our world is ever changing, we all must continue to analyze our work and leisure for bias; it is a journey and a struggle. Consider the following areas as you think about anti-bias issues in relation to your work and lives.

ONE: EVERYDAY AND EVERYWHERE

You may feel overwhelmed when you first begin to think about bias and anti-bias. You may suddenly begin to see bias everywhere - in the newspaper, on the television, or on the bus on your way to work. You may be saddened by the subtle, unspoken messages in children's books or games.

As you struggle with the issues and images, you may also become aware of the wonder of people around you. You may make new friends from diverse cultures. You may explore your own history or the history of those around you. You may find leaders today who are like you or very unlike you.

Although you now recognize that both bias and the possibility of anti-bias exists, you may not know just what to do. But at least you know that something must be done. This is the most important step in your journey; you have recognized that choices matter and that you can make choices that support both you and the children and families you serve.

For children, remember that it is what you make available to them (not what is in the closet), that will affect their growth today. We don't know which day is the most important in a child's life. As a result, anti-bias concepts must be a continuous part of the curriculum rather than being presented as occasional "scheduled" activities. This doesn't mean that everything related to every issue of bias is displayed everyday. Rather, messages about bias and anti-bias are everywhere, everyday. One child may remember only the books you have, another only the music you play. Make a conscious decision to include some anti-bias concept somewhere, everyday.

TWO: MIRRORS TO SELF-ESTEEM

All children need positive self-esteem. Some, however, see positive messages everywhere without trying. Others never see themselves positively in the world around them. Base your selection of materials on the context of the children you serve. If positive images abound for your children, begin to think about how to bring diversity and balance into the classroom. If society's images are not very positive for your children, make your classroom a safe island in a hostile world.

THREE: WINDOWS TO DIVERSITY AND BALANCE

All children experience diversity because our world is diverse. The key question is whether this diversity is perceived as positive or negative. Think about who the "other" is as you work toward opening windows to diversity and balance.

If your classroom is naturally diverse racially and culturally, for example, you will not have to worry about providing opportunities for interactions between diverse groups of children. You will focus instead on how to promote positive interactions between the children.

If your classroom has little diversity, build first on the differences that are there. Start with boys and girls, for example. As you help children recognize and respect the diversity of others, pay careful attention to how this "other" is generally perceived by the community you serve. The balance of diversity you bring into this classroom is what will

be different, based on the context of the children who are there.

Balance, on the other hand, doesn't just mean 50/50. It means evaluating the context of the children in your classrooms and the larger society. Some children need more positive images of themselves in your classroom because such images can't be found in their community. Others need positive images of people who are different from them because the community already includes images like your children, but not of other people.

Take care not to degrade someone you think is not present. We may not know which child is adopted, or whose parent is unemployed. Listen to the children. Answer their spoken questions. Also try to answer unspoken questions about diversity that may not be so obvious. Help your children be sensitive to others, and to not be afraid for themselves.

FOUR: CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE, HISTORICALLY ACCURATE, AND NON-STEREOTYPICAL

It is impossible for all anti-bias classrooms to look the same! Each classroom serves different children with different families and different staff in different communities. Programs and families should take time to make conscious decisions about how they look and act in these actual contexts.

If your classroom or community is not diverse, or if you don't have personal experience with diversity, make sure any image of diversity you bring is accurate and non-stereotypical. Portraying Native Americans in traditional costumes tells children little about Native Americans today and can foster stereotypes. Providing accurate images may mean more work for you, but it is important because of the subtle messages that children will receive.

Be open to hearing other points of view. Reflecting on your own childhood, and on the lessons you learned, may help you imagine how a message is perceived by a child today. Families and staff must work together to sort through these issues.

FIVE: CRITICAL THINKING AND ACTIVISM

Child care professionals cannot protect children from the realities of life. We can, however, build the child's strengths. Children can develop skills to evaluate our world for respect and diversity. Talking about a book that is biased can help children think about why it is biased, and what they might do about it.

Caring for others and ourselves requires attention from all of us. Help the children and families in your program develop the skills needed to work toward anti-bias. Learning

how to do this in the child care setting helps the future leaders and workers of our world know how to do it in their homes, work and communities.

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The images of "mirrors and windows" is based on unpublished materials from Emily Style of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Project S.E.E.D. (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity).

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