

How to Get Started with Anti-bias Education in Your Classroom and Program

by Julie Olsen Edwards

“What if someone told you that you could contribute in a small but significant way to making the world a better place? Would you want to do it? Of course you would. And should you choose to fully engage in the journey, your reward will be a renewed sense of hope that by our own hand, things really can change.”

Carol Brunson Day¹

Building an Anti-bias program is a way to positively respond to the challenges facing children and families in our highly diverse and still inequitable world. Perhaps a child asks you about a new teacher for whom English is a second language, “Why does he talk so funny?” Or you overhear a child in the dramatic play corner saying, “We can’t have two mommies. My Momma says it’s bad.”



Co-author with Louise of *Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Julie began in ECCE as a Family Child Care Home Provider as a way to be at home with her young children. She has taught in and directed programs for infants,

toddler, play years and Elementary School children and was the founding director of the Children’s Center at Cabrillo College where she has taught for over 45 years. A writer and activist for children, families and teachers, Julie also served on the Governing Board of NAEYC.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that children are choosing to play mainly with children of their own racial identity. Or, you may have rising concern over the news of Black deaths, or the persistence of school failure for children of families with low-incomes, or body shaming, increased bullying, or Islamophobia... any of the hurtful ‘isms’ that our society is struggling with. You want to do something so that *this* generation of children can live in harmony with others and have the tools they need to problem solve rather than attack or live fearfully.

An anti-bias program has four core goals: supporting children’s personal and social identities; increasing children’s interest, comfort, and joy in human diversity; developing children’s critical thinking about fairness and unfairness (justice and injustice); and building children’s skills in shifting unfair into fair. *An anti-bias approach, like a developmentally appropriate approach, is a way of thinking about everything we do in our programs.* It includes the environment, the one-on-one ‘teachable moments,’ both pre-planned and emergent curriculum, partnerships with families, staff relationships, and professional development. And of course, no

one begins the work doing all of these things at once!

At the heart of anti-bias education is the understanding that along with developing their individual personalities and self-concept, children also are constructing social identities (e.g. gender, racial, ethnic, economic class, family structure, ability/disability) influenced by the prevailing societal messages about who does and doesn’t matter, who does and doesn’t have power and security, what behaviors are and are not acceptable. Every activity, every interaction is shaped, not only by individual personal dynamics, but also by these societal messages. Where those messages grant superiority and status to some, it teaches inferiority and confers outsider status to others. Children’s developing social identities influence how they think about themselves and others, as well as their general social emotional development and understanding of the world.

Beginning with the Teachable Moment

Here’s a common event. Three boys are on top of the climbing structure.

Jennifer starts up the ladder to join them and the boys shout loudly, “No girls allowed. No girls allowed.” The simplest response from the teacher would be reminding children of the rules: “The climbing structure belongs to the school; all the children can play there.” An anti-bias approach asks for more. It requires the teacher to recognize that the drama playing out in the yard reflects not only the personalities and feelings of the four individual children — but also replicates a hurtful social attitude in which girls are excluded from large muscle, loud play and boys are encouraged to ignore feelings. Recognizing the societal context of the event, the anti-bias teacher might start by asking some questions to find out what the children are thinking. She might ask, “Why do you think no girls are allowed?” and would pay respectful attention to the children’s responses. Here are some of the answers I’ve heard over the years. “Girls can’t climb high “Girls can’t climb fast.” “We don’t lik girls” (usually accompanied by nervo laughter). All three statements are common stereotypes that are hurtful all the children.

Next, the teacher suggests they test th stereotype.² “Come on down and let’ see if girls can climb fast and high or not.” She might invite a few other gir to join in the challenge so Jennifer is alone. “Anyone want to guess what i going to happen?” she could ask. An afterwards the teacher could put wor to the event. “It looks like girls *and* bo can climb high and fast. That was a stereotype.” (Oh, how four-year-olds love big words!) The teacher would h the children identify why the exclusion was unfair, and how they could go about changing the situation to be fair for everyone. Follow-up includes finding books in which girls are athle and strong and fast and books in whi girls and boys play together in big

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- Tiffany Harmon
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muscle games. A female athlete as a
classroom visitor, or a mom who plays

soccer, could expand the children's thinking and help to contradict the stereotype. The children might create a "We Play Together" sign to hang on the climbing structure.

And, as the staff considers the frequency of boy-girl exclusionary play, they take the next step and consider the ways (consciously and unconsciously) they support a binary view of gender in their classroom. (Do they gather children together calling out boys and girls rather than children? Do they regularly comment on girls' appearance and clothing and on boys' accomplishments?) A common incident, viewed through an anti-bias lens, becomes the opening door to an anti-bias approach.

"In the beginning, our commitment to honoring diversity and believing in socially transformative education was implied, but now that it is named and explicit we can train new staff, examine our effectiveness, let families know what we are trying to do."

Darcy Campbell, Director,
Cow Hollow Preschool

Tools to Begin and Build an Anti-bias Program

The way to begin creating an anti-bias community in your program is simply to begin. You decide to act. You don't wait until you know enough (no one ever knows enough... there is always more to figure out). You decide it's okay to make mistakes (because you will — it's how you learn) and you put to use the same tools early childhood educators have always used.

■ **We observe:** Watch carefully and see what patterns of limiting behaviors play out in your program. What does children's play tell us about race, gender, class? Who is included? Who



One School Begins: Starting with Children's Books

In our parent-coop preschool, inspired by a guest speaker who discussed diversity/equity issues with the families and staff, a teacher and a parent decided to analyze the school's books using the criteria we found on the Teaching for Change website.³ We went through the books looking for who was (and wasn't) included and looking for story lines that reinforced or contradicted stereotypes. Then we drew up a list of the kinds of books we needed to have in a library that was rich and full and an accurate picture of human diversity.

Our school has a tradition that on a child's birthday the family gifts a favorite book to the classroom. It's a lovely tradition — but it has added to the mishmash of books, many of which contain hurtful stereotypes (e.g. the heroes are all white; most families have a mother and father and live in middle-class homes; American Indians only exist in folktales). We discussed our findings and concerns with the whole staff and then sent out an email with a list of books that the school needed and a request that the families select books from the list.

At first, there was a negative response from some of the families. "Censorship." "Why are you changing our tradition?" "You're just being 'politically correct.'" We took a deep breath and started over. We talked to the families as they arrived or picked up the children. We sent out a new email explaining the full process of how staff came to our decision, with examples of the stereotypes found in our books, and discussed how those messages hurt children. We spelled out our commitment to providing children with books that actively represent the diverse world in which they live. We invited families to participate in thinking about the books with the staff. And to our delight, the families not only came to appreciate the changes, they began recommending wonderful books to the staff and talked about how much more thoughtful they were being in their choices of videos and books at home.

Encian Pastel, Children's Community Center Teacher



is excluded? Who is teased? Who leads? Who follows?

■ **We listen, ask questions, and then listen some more:** What do children say (or show) that indicates their confusion, their misinformation, and their wariness? (Remember, children often do not have the vocabulary to put words to their thinking). Find out what the children already know, already think. "Why do you think the children in this room have different skin colors?" "Who are the people

that make a family?" "Do boys know how to cry?" "Why do you think some people have new cars and some people ride the bus?" Listen some more. Reflect on which hurtful social messages are affecting the children in your group.

■ **We pay critical attention to the physical environment:** Who is made visible and who is invisible in the pictures on the walls, in the books, the toys, the languages on labels, and within the staff? Remember:

"Invisibility erases identity and experience. Visibility affirms a child's reality and value."
Make sure all images are accurate, authentic, current, and show diversity in all its forms.

- **We tell the truth:** As best as you are able, give children clear information about all the confusing issues in our society. Keep it simple, but tell the truth. When you don't know what to say, tell the children you will ask someone else to help (great modeling that adults are still learning) and you will talk more to them tomorrow. And, be sure to pass on the conversation to families so they know what has come up and what was said.
- **We are self-aware and self-reflective:** Make the effort to figure out where your own experience with privilege or social injury has shaped the way you think. Where do you get afraid? Where do you feel judgmental? What issues from the children or families make you uncomfortable, upset, or freeze? Where do you carry bias? (We have all learned bias in our world — no matter how kind and caring our hearts may be.) On what issues have you learned to keep silent?
- **We educate ourselves:** The more you know about an '-ism,' the more accurately you will be able to help children understand at their particular developmental level and grow on all four anti-bias goals. Ask yourself: What do I already know about this '-ism'? What do I want to know? What do I know about how children develop their identities and attitudes? From whose point of view is the history I am teaching? How does gender develop in children? What is an accurate vocabulary to explain skin color and eye shapes? Become familiar with the many resources that suggest effective approaches to these issues. As Ijumaa Jordan says, "Anti-

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bias isn't something you just give to children — **it's something you study together**, with the children and the families and other adults."

- **We communicate and collaborate:** Ideally, program-wide, the staff talk to each other, work together figuring out their personal connections to the issues, share their observations, assess their effectiveness as they interact with the children in a new way. It is so helpful to have colleagues to share our mistakes and to celebrate when we are brave and when new ways work.
- **We have courage:** Too often, it is one or two teachers who decide to step up and bit by bit change the culture of their classroom. As colleagues see what is happening, the anti-bias approach can take seed program-wide. If you are alone in your program, look for support from colleagues in another program, or a friend who shares your commitment. Agree to call each other

every week and share your growing experience. Arrange to meet regularly, text each other, email each other — every week. However you do it, find someone to support *your* development as a teacher.

Does this sound like a lot? Do you remember the first time you were responsible for leading circle time? Do you remember how much effort it took to plan what to do and to practice how to do it? Did it go well? Did it fall apart? Most experienced teachers can conduct circle time with little anguish. You still prepare, you still have times it blows up. But once you know the children, know yourself, trust your skills — circle times are just one of the many things you do every day. And, if you are a reflective teacher, you keep learning deeper, more interesting and far more effective ways to use that circle time with children. The same will be true of your experience as an anti-bias teacher or director.



Children—all children, all across the country—need access to quality early education every day.

As we learn more about the positive outcomes of high-quality early learning, we see how critical it is for programs to use best practices and have a consistent understanding of ways to improve and maintain program quality.

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You begin because you care. And you begin with whatever content catches your attention and heart. You do not need to invent everything from scratch or work alone. There are many resources to help you with ideas that you can adapt to your particular setting. And there are colleagues across the country you can contact. Becoming an anti-bias teacher is an opportunity to see children develop their sense of self/family pride, their interest in human difference, their indignation at unfairness and their ability to solve problems to find fair solutions. It just gets better and better the longer you stay with it. Anti-bias work is complex and demanding... and deeply satisfying. Welcome to the process!

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Endnotes

- 1 *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (NAEYC, 2010).
- 2 Thanks to Ellen Wolpert for leading the way on helping children identify and name stereotypes. *Start Seeing Diversity: The Basic Guide to the Anti-bias Classroom* by Ellen Wolpert (Redleaf Press, 2005).
- 3 Guide for Selecting Anti-bias Children's Books by Louise Derman-Sparks www.tfcbooks.org/guide-anti-bias-childrens-books

Resources

Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards (NAEYC, 2010).

Diversity in Early Care and Education by Janet Gonzalez-Mena (McGraw-Hill, 2007).

"NAEYC's Diversity & Equity Education for Adults Interest Forum," Facebook.

"Rethinking Early Childhood Education" by Ann Pelo, *Rethinking Schools* (2008).

Roots & wings: Affirming Culture and Preventing Bias in Early Childhood by Stacey York (Redleaf Press, 2016).

Start Seeing Diversity: The Basic Guide to the Anti-bias Classroom by Ellen Wolpert (Redleaf Press, 2005).

"Teaching for Change": www.teachingforchange.org