

CREATING AN ANTI-BIAS ENVIRONMENT

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An environment that is rich in possibilities for exploring gender, race/ethnicity, and different-abledness sets the scene for practicing anti-bias curriculum. The material and people resources in the classroom provide children with important data. What is in the environment also alerts children to what the teacher considers important or not important. Children are as vulnerable to omissions as they are to inaccuracies and stereotypes: What isn't seen can be as powerful a contributor to attitudes as what is seen. Creating a diverse environment is the first step in implementing new curriculum. Then the classroom has the materials and conditions which serve as a basis for children's initiating conversations and for teachers introducing activities (Neugebauer, 1987).

In most early childhood programs there is an abundance of materials reflecting White, able-

bodied children in traditional gender roles. This is often as true in classrooms for children of color and children with nonstandard bodies or senses (vision, hearing, etc.) as it is in classrooms of White children. In addition, materials depicting people of color are frequently biased: They may be stereotypic, or reflect only images of the past, or only token images of people of color (one or two in a sea of White). So the challenge is

- to increase materials that reflect children and adults who are of color, who are differently abled, and who are engaged in nonstereotypic gender activities; and
- to eliminate stereotypic and inaccurate materials from daily use. (They do have a use as teaching tools in specific activities.)

The Visual/Aesthetic Environment

There should be:

1. Images in abundance of *all* the children, families, and staff in your program. Photos and other pictures reflecting the various backgrounds of the children and staff should be attractively displayed.
2. If the classroom population is racially/ethnically homogeneous, images of children and adults from the major racial/ethnic groups in your community and in U.S. society.
3. Images that accurately reflect people's current daily lives in the United States working and with their families during recreational activities.
4. A numerical balance among different groups. Make sure people of color are not represented as "tokens"—only one or two.
5. A fair balance of images of women and men, shown doing "jobs in the home" and "jobs outside the home." Show women and men doing blue-collar work (e.g., factory worker, repair person) and pink-collar work (e.g., beautician, salesperson), as well as white-collar work (e.g., teacher, doctor).
6. Images of elderly people of various backgrounds doing different activities.
7. Images of differently abled people of various backgrounds shown doing work and with their families in recreational activities. Be careful not to use images that depict differently abled people as dependent and passive.

8. Images of diversity in family styles: single mothers or fathers, extended families, gay or lesbian families (families with two mothers or fathers), families in which one parent and a grandmother are the parents, interracial and multiethnic families, adopted families, differently abled families (the atypical person may be either a child or a parent).

9. Images of important individuals—past and present. They should reflect racial/ethnic, gender,

and abledness diversity and they should include people who participated in important struggles for social justice.

10. Artwork—prints, sculpture, textiles by artists of various backgrounds that reflect the aesthetic environment and the culture of the families represented in your classroom, and of groups in your community and in the United States (Neugebauer, 1987).

Toys and Materials

Every center should contain regularly available materials representing the backgrounds of the families in your classroom and then extending beyond to the major groups in your community and in the nation.

Books

All children's books reflect social values and attitudes, some more obviously than others. Many, including books that are considered classics, reflect bias of some kind. Since books are a significant part of young children's lives in school and child care, much care must be given to their selection and use. Books should:

- Reflect diversity of gender roles, racial and cultural backgrounds, special needs and abilities; a range of occupations; a range of ages.
- Present accurate images and information (watch out for the "I is for Indian" stereotypic image in many alphabet books).
- Show people from all groups living their daily lives—working, being with family, solving issues relevant to young children, as well as having celebrations. Most books should be about contemporary life in the United States.
- Depict a variety of children and families within a group. This means having at least a few books about a culture.
- Depict various family lifestyles and incomes (beware of using only the large number of children's books picturing only families with two parents, and always with one parent of each sex; beware of using the large number of books that assume readers are Christian).
- Reflect different languages: alphabet books and

stories in Braille, sign, different spoken languages.

When choosing books to read to children, consciously pay attention to fostering their awareness of diversity. Choose books that depict different ways of living and books that show various groups solving similar problems (e.g., having a new baby).

Dramatic play

The equipment, objects, and spatial organization of the dramatic play area should include and encourage:

- Diversity of gender play: tools and spaces for working in and out of the house, rooms in the home other than the kitchen, male and female work and play clothes.
- Cultural diversity: cooking, eating, objects, work tools and clothes, personal objects like different kinds of combs and brushes, objects used for holiday celebrations all reflecting a variety of cultures. Begin with the variation in your children's homes, then add other groups.
- Accessibility and exploration of the tools used by people with various special needs: wheelchairs, crutches, braces, canes, heavy glasses, hearing aids.
- Child-size mirrors.

Language

The environment should provide numerous opportunities for children to see and hear various languages, including sign and Braille. Opportunities include labeling materials (e.g., blocks, puzzles), alphabet and number posters, books, story tapes, songs, finger games.

Music

Regularly heard music should reflect the various cultural styles of the children and staff as well as other groups in the United States. Opportunities include singing, background music, music for movement and dancing, lullabies at naptime.

Art materials

- Tan, brown, and black paint, paper, collage materials and play dough, and skin-tone crayons, along with other colors
- Mirrors for children to check out their physical features
- Artwork (paintings, drawings, sculpture) by artists of diverse backgrounds depicting women and men from various racial and ethnic backgrounds

Dolls

- Bought and homemade dolls that represent a fair balance of all the major groups in the United States—Black, Latino, Asian-Pacific, Native American, as well as White. Black and Latino dolls should reflect the range of skin tones within these groups, by supplementing commercial dolls with homemade dolls. (See "Making

New Materials," p. 15.) All dolls should be reasonably authentic-looking.

- A fair balance of male and female dolls with a variety of clothes. Girl dolls need dresses and pants. Some of the dolls should be anatomically correct.
- A selection of bought and homemade dolls with different kinds of disabilities. They should reflect various racial and ethnic backgrounds and include both boys and girls.
- Persona dolls. (See "Using Old Materials In New Ways," p. 16.)

Manipulatives

Regularly available manipulative materials should depict diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, and occupations. These include puzzles, Playmate[®] and Playskool[®] sets of people, family and community helper figures, lotto games, and card games. Avoid stereotypic images such as the Playmate's "Cowboys and Indians" set.

Cameras

A Polaroid[®] and regular color camera are invaluable tools for creating anti-bias materials of your own.

ADAPTATION

If the population of the class is predominately

- **children of color**, more than half, although not all, of the images and materials in the environment should reflect their backgrounds in order to counter the predominance of White, dominant cultural images in the general society.
- **poor children** (White and children of color), a large number of images and materials should depict working-class life in all its variety in order to counter the dominant cultural image of middle- and upper-class life.
- **White children**, at least one-half of the images should introduce diversity in order to counter the White-centered images of the dominant culture.
- **differently abled children**, they deserve learning about gender and cultural diversity as well as about the capabilities of people with special needs. A large number of images should depict children and adults with disabilities doing a range of activities.

If there are a few children who are different from the rest of the group, then take care to ensure that those children's background is amply represented along with representations of the majority groups in the class.