

Do You See What I See? Appreciating Diversity in Early Childhood Settings

By Barbara Kupetz, Ed.D.

"She can't play trucks...she's a girl!"

"Why are Ming's eyes funny?"

"My daddy says we don't like _____ people."

"My gram is too old. She can't do stuff!"

These are all examples of statements made by young children about differences—differences they have not yet learned to understand, value, and respect. Yet, these young children are not unlike the children we guide, support, and observe each day in our classrooms. Unaware that they are trying to grow up unbiased in a world that is hardly free of prejudice, children can be influenced by adults who do not easily acknowledge and accept differences. So what's an early childhood professional to do? In a world that often disregards the value of diversity, can you expect children to transcend prejudice?

As an adult who spends time each day with young children, you can be a leader in highlighting diversity in a positive way. It takes no special training or materials, and it isn't something you must squeeze into an already "bursting at the seams" schedule. If you are willing to accept the challenge; believe you can make a difference; and consider your personal biases and way in which you can change what you do and say, roll up your sleeves and get ready to begin!

Do Children See Differences?

Children are around two or three when they begin to notice physical differences among people—some are short and others tall, some have blue eyes and others have brown, and some have dark skin while others have light skin. They notice hair—some straight, some short, some long, and some have none at all. (A few years ago, my three-year-old neighbor asked my balding father, "Where is all your hair, anyway?")

The way in which children deal with and interpret what they observe as different is affected by a variety of influences. These influences include what they see and hear in their homes, at school, and in their neighborhoods; what they view in the media; and what they are told by friends, relatives, neighbors, and teachers. We have all heard comments similar to the following: "Chaz is in a wheelchair so he can't play with us." "Let's pick a book for Becky about cooking, not about camping." "All Native Americans live in tepees." "You eat rice all the time if you are Chinese." "She's poor and wears funny clothes."

For some adults, biased statements are unintentional. However, such statements do feed the intolerances our children adopt. By simply rethinking our own biases and prejudices (which are easy to have), teachers and caregivers can be careful not to label others. We need to encourage children to see people as individuals, not as groups. Think of the things you may say which place people in categories, and remember none of us behave like any particular group all of the time. The things we say can be the catalyst for children's intolerance for certain groups of people or the underlying cause of children's acceptance of individuals. Listen to yourself. Have you made any inaccurate generalizations?

Listen With Your Eyes and Heart

As adults, we view the world through our mature eyes—not those of children. Consequently, we do not always recognize the concerns of children or see them as being as critical as a child sees them. How have you responded to the child who runs up to you in tears and says, "Look, I hurt my..." Most of us give it a quick glance and say, "You're okay, now go on and play." Few adults give much thought to our own listening skills, although we expect good listening skills from the children in our care. A good listener actively processes information and asks relevant questions. Are you an early childhood professional who actively listens when a child shares concerns regarding differences? If a child in your care were to ask, "Why does that man talk like that?" would you listen carefully and offer an honest answer or choose to dismiss the question because you are uncomfortable discussing it yourself?

In *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen* and *How to Listen so Kids Will Talk* (1991), authors Faber and Mazlish encourage adults to be effective listeners. To listen effectively, they suggest you stop what you are doing and look a child in the eye. When you do not acknowledge a child's questions or feelings, or do not respond to a child's needs or concerns in an interested, caring, and honest manner, a child may begin to feel ignored and confused.

Make Explanations Simple and Concrete

Early childhood teachers and caregivers might wonder how to counter the negative stereotypes children see and hear on television, in the movies, or with their friends or family. There are a number of things you can incorporate into your daily activities.

When talking to children, keep their age and developmental stage in mind. Use words and descriptions they can understand. For instance, if a child were to say, "Why are Ming's eyes funny?" you could respond by saying, "Ming's eyes look different because different people have different shapes of eyes. Her parents are Chinese and most people who are Chinese have eyes shaped like hers. It's not okay to say her eyes look funny because they aren't funny. That would hurt her feelings. Her eyes are shaped that way and your eyes are shaped a different way. Eyes can have many different shapes and can look different." This type of adult response acknowledges the difference and clearly explains it to the child.

Recently, a mother shared a story about her daughter Jenna. The mother took Jenna to a doctor she had never seen before. When the child went into the office, she noticed a sharp contrast in their skin color – the parent and child were white and the doctor was black. She asked in the piercing voice of a four-year-old, "Mommy, what color is he?" Before the mother could respond, the doctor answered the child's question in a way he felt she could understand. "My skin," he said, "is the color of a dark chocolate bar and your skin is the color of a light piece of toast." This simple and concrete answer satisfied the child. By not attempting to quiet her child or ignore her question, this parent helped her daughter realize that differences exist.

Whatever the age of the children in your care, be certain not to dismiss their inquisitiveness. If a child senses an open climate in the child care setting, he or she will be more able to share concerns with you. By immediately taking the time to discuss questions and concerns with young children in an age-appropriate manner you send several messages. First, your interest says that what concerns you concerns me. Second, your response helps clear up inaccuracies and erroneous generalizations. Third, talking with children helps to make them more comfortable with the differences they see. In addition, your dialogue gives them the vocabulary needed to talk positively about differences themselves.

Both parents and teachers can be embarrassed by the questions children ask. These embarrassed adults may tell children, "Don't say that" or "That isn't very nice." Others may think it best to deny differences, believing that to ignore them is to raise a color-blind or bias-free child. This is the teacher or caregiver who may simply ignore a child's questions about observed differences or the adult who may respond, "Oh, we all know that everybody's really the same." The problem is that we all recognize that everybody is not the same. Although in making such a statement you may mean well, you in fact, confuse the child who already clearly recognizes that we are all quite different.

Speak Up When You Encounter Bias and Prejudice

We have all heard the adage, "Don't do what I do, do what I say." As role models for children, teachers and caregivers must say and do what we hope to see the children say and do. We must respond to differences in a positive way and speak up when we encounter bias and prejudice. Children take their lead from the behavior of the adults around them. If someone makes a disparaging remark in form of you and you say nothing, the child assumes that you agree with that person's comment. If you disagree, make a point of saying so. A simple statement of disagreement with those who may make unkind, negative, or disparaging comments will give the children in your care a true sense of what you believe. If you respond to a comment that labels Brandon as a problems child by saying, "Oh, I think Brandon tires very hard. I think he will do a good job on this activity," you tell the other children that none of us has to agree with the prejudice that may come from others.

Give Children Opportunities for Exposure

Of course, not every child or family has the same opportunities and positive experiences with diversity. However, there are many ways to broaden and enrich children's experiences. Why not organize a cultural fair in your center or invite parents to share their personal heritage and family customs with the children? Encourage the parents at your center to get their children involved in activities such as sporting events, school events, or camps that bring together different kinds of people. When children work and play together, they have opportunities to see not only differences, but also the similarities among us. They are on the same team, in the same class, at the same camp. They develop a mutual respect for each other. Don't be surprised if a child who becomes involved in such opportunities begins to feel excitement and curiosity about differences. He or she may ask about Yom Kippur or Kwanzaa, want to teach you how to say "I love you" using sign language, or learn to count to ten in Spanish.

Use Books to Experience New Cultures

Although books cannot substitute for firsthand contact with persons of diverse groups, they can certainly deepen and broaden one's understanding. Early childhood professionals may find children's books to be one more avenue to seeing, understanding, and accepting the rich variety and uniqueness of persons. Rather than pretending that the differences among us do not exist, books help children discover what is similar and different among persons and groups of persons.

Today, many wonderful books showing all kinds of diversity are readily available at local libraries and bookstores.

Today many wonderful books showing all kinds of diversity are readily available at local libraries and bookstores. Remember to share books, which show diversity of culture and race, but also other types of diversity including gender, age, and special needs. Such books can demonstrate that the sweeping generalizations children hear about certain groups of people may be inaccurate. We can see an older grandfather actively singing and dancing in Ackerman's *Song and Dance Man* (1989), a rough and tough pirate who cries during a sad time in Mem Fox's *Tough Boris* (1994), and a young girl's inspiration confidence in herself as a basketball player in *Allie's Basketball Dream* (1996) by Barbara Barber. Having fun, feeling sadness, and pursuing dreams are universal qualities regardless of age and gender. We can also meet children and adults with special needs who live full lives in Nancy Carlson's *Amie and the New Kid* (1992) and in Cohen's *See You Tomorrow, Charles* (1997).

As we explore culture and race through picture books for our youngest of readers and listeners, we should be sure to include not only those which show specialized cultural celebrations and costumes, but also those books which show children of all backgrounds engaging in the everyday things children do. In *Clap Hands* (1987), Oxenbury tells of babies of different racial backgrounds playing happily; Jossee's *Mama, Do You Love Me?* (1991) speaks of a mother's unconditional love; and Minfong Ho's, *Hush! A Thai Lullaby* (1996) tells the wonderful story of a mother who wants her baby to have a quiet bedtime in spite of noisy animals.

Leaders in Acceptance

Young children do see and wonder about differences. As a member of that all-important group of adults who cares for and teaches young children, early childhood professionals are in a position to lead the way in supporting and highlighting diversity in the classroom. It is each person's hope and our nation's need to have future generations that can demonstrate an understanding of and appreciation for the richness and variety this world offers. It can happen only if the adults, who guide and shape today's youth and tomorrow's leaders, take an active role. It can happen only if you model for, listen to, talk with, and encourage young children to see the beauty in the similarities and differences among us.

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