

## Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change

reviewed by Amy Noelle Parks — May 20, 2015

**Title:** Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change  
**Author(s):** Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan, & John Nimmo  
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In *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs*, Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, and Nimmo offer guidance for administrators of early childhood centers who want to support their teachers in creating educational spaces where all families feel welcome. This work is critically important because early childhood centers are frequently sites where children first encounter those who differ from themselves in terms of family structure, religion, race, language, ethnicity, and dis/ability. Finding ways to ensure that these first encounters are open, empathetic, and educative ought to be a central concern for educators at all levels.

As the authors of the book point out, a number of resources are available for classroom teachers who want to use anti-bias pedagogy in their classrooms (e.g., Allen, 2007; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Mallory & New, 1994). However, there is much less available for administrators seeking to change the climate of their centers through interactions with teachers and families.

Although the arguments and suggestions in the book are supported through the citation of scholarly work, the book is much less a summary of research than a practical handbook, drawing heavily on the experiences of the authors as administrators and stories shared by others. As such, it is most likely to be useful to practitioners currently engaged with the work of running childcare centers and preschools and those who may be working with these leaders in professional development contexts.

Framing the practical suggestions that run through the text is a recognition that the adults working as early childhood educators need to be treated as learners in relation to anti-bias education and need support from center directors in increasing their understanding of their own social identities, of their experiences with power relationships across lines of difference, and of their orientations toward activism. Chapters in the book offer guidance in helping administrators to assess the readiness of their staff to engage in anti-bias work, to identify and engage diverse stakeholders in the program, and to evaluate the current quality of anti-bias work in their centers. Specific questions, such as “Who are the people who tend to speak up, attend events, and participate in committees and other decision-making bodies?” and “What are the implicit rules and language that the community has passed down orally over time?” (p. 39), have the potential to guide administrators toward critical analyses of their own communities.

In addition, several chapters offer specific activities for engaging adults in conversations around anti-bias work. In particular, Chapter Four describes a variety of activities that could be used during staff meetings and professional development to engage teachers in conversations around power and identity, beginning with fun, low-risk activities and moving toward those that require more serious engagement. For example, the authors suggest beginning conversations with the “potato activity,” which asks teachers to choose a potato from a box, to get to know it, and then to be able to identify their potato once it has been returned to the box.

The authors explain that this is a low-stress way to begin to talk about how we draw lines of difference and similarity and how knowing someone or something can bring both differences and similarities into focus. Throughout the chapter, the suggested activities move deeper from asking teachers to share artifacts of their culture, to discuss their experiences interacting across lines of racial, gender, or family difference, and to consider how they might react to specific scenarios when young children articulate difference in the classroom. This chapter in particular might be useful for broader audiences, including teacher educators and professional developers seeking to engage teachers in conversations about anti-bias education across the developmental continuum.

Chapter Five, “Engaging Families and Growing Anti-Bias Partnerships,” follows a similar format, with a focus on activities that will help families enter into conversations around anti-bias education. This chapter—offering strategies for addressing inclusion of students with disabilities, students with diverse religions and holiday traditions, and students who speak different languages—is one of few resources available that directly address how to engage parents in these kinds of conversations. A major strength is that the authors go beyond strategies to simply make parents feel welcome—such as creating family collages or providing materials

in multiple languages—and include strategies for actually engaging adult family members in what it means to create an anti-bias environment for young children.

The authors' open approach to discussing conflict is likely to be comforting and useful to many early childhood administrators who are attempting to guide their centers toward anti-bias orientations. The authors explicitly discuss the conflicts likely to emerge with staff, parents, and other stakeholders through the telling of stories and provide strategies and possible scripts for others to use.

For example, in discussing a meeting with parents (who object to the inclusion of literature portraying families with same-sex parents or open discussions of incarcerated parents) the authors suggest saying, "Here at the center, we believe strongly that we have to be inclusive of every family. That makes it tough for us to resolve your concern. Tell me more about why you feel so strongly. What might make it more comfortable for you, even though we cannot do what you are asking because it discriminates against other children?" (p. 120). Having scripts like this in their repertoire is likely to make having difficult conversations easier for administrators who commit to doing anti-bias work.

Overall, this practical book, grounded in three early childhood educators' stories of practice and commitment to equity work, provides administrators in early childhood centers with a repertoire of strategies for doing anti-bias education that would otherwise take years to develop in practice. It may also provide an incentive to administrators who have not consciously committed to anti-bias work a way of beginning the journey toward building more inclusive educational environments.

### References

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