

# Anti-bias Education in Challenging Times

by Debbie LeeKeenan and John Nimmo

Anti-bias education is inherently about change. This means embracing some level of uncertainty while holding tight to the vision of a more just world. Demographic changes, shifts in social views and polarizing political issues, widely disseminated during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, present



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challenges and complexities as we seek to be more inclusive and equitable in our early childhood programs. The pervasive and easy access to media daily brings issues and current events into our lives. Children are aware of and influenced — sometimes harmfully — by media messages as well as adults' reactions to them (Costello, 2016).

Some of the more contentious issues we are hearing from teachers, families, and the media include: changing gender dynamics, transgender rights, systemic racism and violence, terrorism, religious intolerance, and immigration. The list is long and yours may differ. In addition, the shift towards greater visibility and inclusion of people previously marginalized in our society also leads to more explicit opposition from people already in the mainstream. For instance, the visibility that came when same-sex marriage was finally legalized or the recent debate about the needs of transgender students, may mean having to deal with pushback from some colleagues, families, and members of the larger community. We also see this dynamic in the antagonism towards the Black Lives Matter movement, which is seeking to draw attention to institutional racism in the justice system (Cohen,

2016), and in the harmful and blanket association of terrorism with people who are refugees and immigrants. These issues of marginalization are not new if you are the target of these biases — even if they may seem unfamiliar to some of us.

Colleagues, families, and children are asking questions. Depending on their backgrounds, they may experience confusion and fear about unfamiliar aspects of diversity, or feel the sting of the backlash to increased recognition and civil rights. An anti-bias perspective is a guide for dealing with the complexity posed by challenging times. It offers a way to view change, differences, and disequilibrium as opportunities for learning. In this article, we explore some of the dynamics involved in current challenges and share strategies to use with children and adults consistent with anti-bias values.

## Beginning with Self-Reflection

Careful self-reflection is key. Being aware of how our responses to specific changes reflect our experiences, knowledge base, and social identity frees us to think and use helpful strategies. For

instance, John shares a story of a teacher struggling with how to best partner with a parent who advocated a non-binary gender identity for her preschooler. This included asking the teacher to not use gender-specific pronouns (e.g. she/he).

My colleague felt uncertain about how to respond to the questions coming from the preschoolers about the child's gender and sexual identity. My advice was to do two things: first, look at your own reactions and realize that the issue is probably more unsettling for you than for the children, and second, to get some resources about gender identity (e.g. Blaise & Taylor, 2012). I was surprised to realize that I also knew little about the specific issues. As a cisgender,\* heterosexual man, I needed to heed my own advice and step outside of what I already knew.

\*Cisgender is when your cultural gender identity matches your biological sex

It is an unsettling feeling (intellectually and emotionally) to acknowledge your own lack of knowledge and discomfort about an area of identity. Maybe it is as simple as not knowing appropriate language, or as difficult as facing your discomfort with an unfamiliar human difference. In anti-bias work it is critical to understand that how people define themselves and see themselves in society changes over time and in different contexts.

## Creating a Climate for Dialogue and Inquiry

Having an anti-bias inclusive community that supports each child and family's background sets the stage for productively handling new challenges. Embracing the four goals of anti-bias education — building positive social identities, welcoming human diversity,

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recognizing unfairness, and developing skills to act against discrimination (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) — creates a learning environment in which children and adults know they can ask questions, share thoughts and feelings, and have courageous conversations (Aarau & Clemens, 2013).

Children actively try to make sense of the messages and emotions they pick up from the media and the adults around them. Teachers can help children understand what is happening around them. Guidelines for supporting this exploration include:

- encouraging children to ask questions.
- supporting children to communicate their ideas and emotions through conversations, drawings, writing, dramatic play, creative arts, music and movement.
- being a good listener; paying attention to words *and* feelings; looking for the underlying meaning.
- answering children's questions immediately and directly, with information that is appropriate to their developmental level and experience.
- recognizing that there may not be simple answers, but that there are answers that can help children.
- avoiding responding to current events and issues in highly emotional or dramatic ways.
- separating adults' feelings and views from what children are feeling and thinking.
- keeping informed. If you need to know more about an issue, let children know the conversation will continue later on.

- keeping family communication open and responsive by sharing children's comments and how you responded in the classroom.
- providing resources to help children manage fears or uncertainty they might feel or express, e.g. [www.naeyc.org/content/coping-violence](http://www.naeyc.org/content/coping-violence).
- using children's literature and persona dolls to discuss sensitive topics. These strategies allow for discussion of topics without targeting particular children, families, or events.
- exposing children to stories about children and adults engaged in human rights activism or models that break the stereotypes saturating the media.

## Moving Beyond either/or Thinking

Multiple perspectives, viewpoints, and solutions live within the space of anti-bias values. Going beyond dichotomous (either/or) thinking is critical — within yourself, with colleagues, and with the children. Developmentally, young children use either/or categories to make sense of a new and complex world. This way of thinking, when applied to human diversity, can easily lead to stereotypes, misconceptions, and broad generalizations, by children *and* adults.

Instead, an anti-bias approach embraces complexity with children and with your colleagues. For example, recognizing that the police are both caring, courageous community protectors *and* are also part of a criminal justice system that enables violence against people of color. Or, understanding that Islam is both a caring religion that values human dignity *and* that there are terrorists who claim their identity as Muslim.

Adults can access information they need to address current issues through a variety of sources and engage in thoughtful conversations. Conflict, if handled respectfully, can also be a positive driving force in greater understanding that does not have to lead to damaged relationships (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo, 2015). Even as adults wrestle with the specifics of these issues, the anti-bias values of seeking inclusion and respect for each other can guide our interactions.

## Unpacking Classroom Scenarios

Now, let's turn to thinking about how to work with children on challenging issues. Teachers find it helpful to discuss scenarios based on classroom observations as a way to unpack these complex issues. Consider the following examples from early childhood classrooms:



### Example 1:

During a class discussion on community helpers in a kindergarten classroom, one child says, "My mom said, 'The police are not our friends.'" Other children comment, "Yes they are! They keep us safe. That's what my mom says."



What do we learn about young children and how they see their world in Example 1? First, they are sharing ideas from a trusted source (mom), which may or may not be accurate. Depending on the children's context and social identities, the parent's point-of-view may or may not reflect direct experience. In fact, both of the children's statements hold truth. The challenge for the teacher is to listen and support the sharing of perspectives. What is the child trying to say? What feelings or conceptions are being expressed? The underlying ideas

may not be evident at first. Maybe the first child is looking for confirmation or expressing a fear. You might ask, "How does it make you feel if the police are not your friend?" "What do we know about what police officers do?" "What happens if a police officer makes a mistake?"

Next, the teacher implements strategies that encourage the children to go beyond either/or thinking. This involves accessing trustworthy sources of information, including talking to advocacy groups focused on the particular issue or area of identity. Many types of activities can stretch children's thinking and counter biased ideas and feelings, including the use of quality children's literature and persona dolls. Trips into the community and inviting people to visit enable children to meet and dialogue with real people from places like cultural centers, police stations, mosques, and activist organizations.



### Example 2:

A child asks his classmate: Ahmad, "Why does your mom wear that scarf on her head? Is she a terrorist?"



Example 2 reveals the child's direct observations, limited information, and misconceptions that are the beginnings of ethnic and religious intolerance. In the context of media reporting of terrorist attacks and the sometimes racist political rhetoric about them, there has been a documented increase in Islamophobia — an unfounded fear of an entire religion. As educators, we have a responsibility to learn more about religious communities and eliminate biases about them from our own thinking (Moore, 2007). We would immediately clarify that Ahmad's mother is not a terrorist. We would explain that wearing a scarf is

part of how she chooses to dress, and that many people all over the world choose to dress with a scarf, which they call an *Hijab*. We would also check out with the first child what he thinks terrorists are, and depending on what he says, provide some accurate information. An incident like this could spark follow-up activities with all the children about different religions. For example, a kindergarten teacher at the Eliot-Pearson Children's School in Massachusetts lead a two-month curriculum study about 'beliefs' (Mardell & Abo-Zena, 2010). As a part of the curriculum, the children interviewed a priest, a Muslim chaplain, a rabbi, and an atheist on their beliefs. The teachers asked for families' input before starting a potentially controversial curriculum unit, and kept them informed about classroom activities. Most importantly, the teachers provided safe spaces for children to explore spiritual beliefs and differences.

While we suggest strategies in these examples, there is no script for anti-bias work. We need to carefully analyze the situation from the child's perspective and context, respond appropriately in the short term, and then develop deeper curricula responses and strategies based on the children's comments and the anti-bias goals. Finally, be proactive in your planning regarding 'hot' issues and events. Don't just wait for children to ask questions. Otherwise, the loudest and most biased voices that children hear in the media and elsewhere might be the ones that have the greatest impact on their ideas and behavior.

## Concluding Thought

We continue to hear from teachers who report young children asking questions such as, "Will I have to leave when they build the wall?" and "How come the police officers want to hurt people like me?" These are times when our personal and professional resolve to seek a socially just classroom and society seem under threat. However, the challenges of our

times can be a source of self-awareness about our own biases, as well as an opportunity to expand our understanding of human diversity. Being lifelong learners is a critical part of why we persevere as social justice educators even in times that seem particularly troubling and contentious.

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*study of religion in secondary education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

## Resources

Anti-Defamation League:  
[www.adl.org/](http://www.adl.org/)

NAEYC:  
[www.naeyc.org/content/coping-violence](http://www.naeyc.org/content/coping-violence)

Tannenbaum Center Combatting Religious Prejudice:  
<https://tanenbaum.org/>

Teaching Tolerance:  
[www.tolerance.org/](http://www.tolerance.org/)

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