

# It Can Be Done!

## Strategies for Embedding Anti-bias Education into Daily Programming

by Debbie LeeKeenan and Betty Allen

*If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way.*

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sometimes teachers embrace the need for and goals of anti-bias education, yet are not sure how to make them part of their daily program. If we think of the classroom as a laboratory for children learning about themselves, the world around them, and for developing their interactions with children and adults, then incorporating anti-bias themes into



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daily curriculum becomes natural. In this article, we focus on short-term and long-term strategies that enable you to bring the four goals of anti-bias education to life in your daily program.

### Groundwork

#### ABE Core Learning Goals

The four core goals of anti-bias education are the framework for planning learning opportunities, which may be embedded in existing curriculum activities or are the primary focus.

Anti-bias learning opportunities enable children to think and talk about their

ideas and feelings about themselves, the differences and similarities among people, and about fairness and unfairness in people's interactions with each other. Through these activities, teachers gather invaluable information about children's thinking. They also learn about the influence that prevailing stereotyping or prejudices in their home, community, and in the larger society have on the children's thinking and behaviors. This information is a major source for planning anti-bias curriculum tailored to the children we teach. By being proactive, teachers create an environment in which children feel comfortable making comments, asking

### Anti-bias Education Goals

**Identity** Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social/group identities.

**Diversity** Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.

**Justice** Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

**Activism** Each child will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions

Derman-Sparks & Edwards (2010)

questions, and being open to new information and ideas.

## Children's Development

Just as understanding children's cognitive, language, and physical development is necessary for quality education, knowing the phases of identity and attitude development helps teachers provide appropriate learning opportunities related to anti-bias education goals. Teachers discover where children are in their development by listening to what they say and observing their interactions with each other and with staff (see chart).

## Staff Preparation, Self-reflection

Doing anti-bias education may evoke some discomfort and anxiety about the issues such work presents. This is not surprising, since many of us were taught as children to avoid controversial topics such as prejudice, or were encouraged to not 'rock the boat' in our jobs. However, when adults are silent or actively steer children away from conversations about human differences, then children are left to draw their own conclusions about diversity and equality. Given that young children are likely to have insufficient or inaccurate information, they often draw inaccurate or biased conclusions. They may decide that there is something 'bad' about differences among people. They also learn that they are not supposed to ask questions.

Effective teacher and staff growth in anti-bias education enables us to overcome feelings of unease or unpreparedness. It begins with self-preparation and self-reflection (Carter & Curtis, 2010; LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 2016). It is difficult to help children feel good about their social identities if adults are not aware of their own social identities and how these influence their work. If teachers do not uncover and undo unexamined misinformation and prejudices, they undermine their ability to help children

## Stages of Identity and Attitude Development

Adapted from: York, S. (2003). *Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs* (revised edition). St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

- Infants:**
- Beginning self-awareness
  - Recognize and explore faces: "what is me" and "what is not me"
  - Develop a sense of trust
  - Show fear and anger
- Adult Tasks:**
- Provide accurate non-stereotypic, current images of children, their families, and diversity in their community
  - Be responsive to family cultural child-rearing practices
- Toddlers:**
- Identify self as an individual
  - Recognize familiar people and show fear of strangers
  - 'Catch' and begin to mimic adult feelings and behavior about diversity
  - Ask, "What's that?"
- Adult Tasks:**
- Foster interactions with a range of people
  - Provide non-stereotypic, current images and messages
  - Model culturally responsive behavior
- Twos:**
- Classify people by gender
  - Learn names of colors and notice skin color
  - May begin to use social identity labels and exhibit early discomfort and/or misconceptions about diversity
- Adult Tasks:**
- Provide accurate non-stereotypic data base and address signs of discomfort about social identities (gender, race, ethnicity, class, physical disabilities) and other children's home culture
  - Continue modeling culturally responsive behavior
- Three to Five:**
- Construct social identities along with individual self-concepts
  - Group people by their physical characteristics
  - Ask 'why' questions about diversity
  - Susceptible to believing misinformation and stereotypes they encounter about self or others
- Adult Tasks:**
- Acknowledge children's observations and questions about racial/cultural identity and other social identities
  - Teach children that physical and cultural characteristics come from their membership in a family and racial/cultural group
  - Sort out and counter incorrect information and stereotypical generalizations and address signs of discomfort
  - Explore fair and unfair
- Five to Eight:**
- Understand cultural identity
  - Identify stereotypes
  - Consolidate social identities and may exhibit rigid thinking and behavior regarding them
  - May show anger through insults and name-calling
- Adult Tasks:**
- Deepen pride in their identity and build authentic, accurate information about others
  - Identify what is fair and unfair stereotyping
  - Develop tools for dealing with discrimination

explore human diversity positively. Understanding the program's anti-bias goals and how to turn them into daily curriculum is equally essential, supported by ongoing opportunities for teachers and staff to talk together about their experiences with anti-bias issues in their classrooms. If possible, it is also helpful to learn from observing other programs and from experts in anti-bias education (e.g. at conferences).

## Short-term and Long-term Planning Strategies

Anti-bias education rests on ongoing interactions between the learning environment, teacher use of one-on-one teachable moments that come from children's spontaneous questions and comments, and from teachers' designed, intentional curriculum. Short-term and long-term teaching strategies are necessary. The adjacent diagram illustrates this dynamic concept.

### Step 1: The Learning Environment

The teacher plans and sets up the environment with a range of materials to provoke children's questions, ideas, and

attitudes about their own social identities and about differences and similarities among people. She listens for children's spontaneous comments and questions, and looks for signs of confusion or discomfort around identity and diversity. She makes notes about these for further consideration. (Check out Resources below for suggestions about creating an anti-bias environment).

### Step 2: Short-term Strategies

The teacher responds to children's comments, questions, and interactions as teachable moments. She may begin by reflecting a child's question back to him to find out more about his thinking and/or feelings. Then she gives simple accurate information appropriate to the child's development level. The teacher may sometimes choose to explain to the child that she needs more information and will talk again with the child. She may also need time to examine her own attitudes and discomfort about the issues raised by the children.

While children's spontaneous comments and questions are inval-

Which of these spontaneous comments overheard in various classrooms would you choose to use as teachable moments and how might you respond?

"Is Devlin a boy or a girl?"

"Why is that man sleeping on the street? Is he dead?"

"Why does Ahmed's mom wear a scarf on her head?"

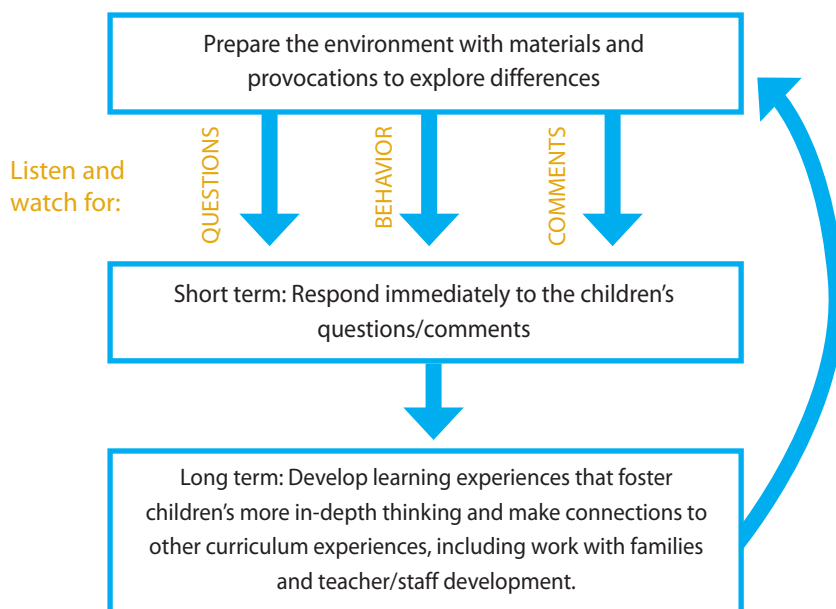
"Your hair is bad. My hair is good."

able, it is not enough to rely solely on them. Intentionally learning more about children's thinking and feelings about specific aspects of identity, diversity, and fairness is also necessary. Proactively using children's books, materials, photographs, and posters to provoke conversations about a range of skin color, gender, and family structures opens up new topics and provides data on topics children have already mentioned. In homogenous settings, where children may not see a fuller range of diversity among themselves, proactive activities may be the major source of learning about children's thinking regarding diversity and fairness. (Although, it is important to remember that every group of children contains various forms of human diversity).

### Step 3: Long-term Strategies

In step three, the teacher plans longer in-depth curriculum, with multiple learning opportunities, to further children's thinking and feeling, and to provide accurate information that counters misperceptions and stereotyping. Considering the stages of children's identity development, and the documented data she has gathered, a teacher chooses a specific topic to

## Anti-bias Curriculum: Short-term and long-term responses



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explore with the children. The topic may arise from teachable moments or from the teacher's knowledge about anti-bias issues in the children's lives (see for example, LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 2016). To begin planning, the teacher first finds out more about the children's thinking about the chosen topic. She then considers:

- What do the children think and feel and want/need to know? What are their misconceptions? What information is lacking? Is there evidence of prejudicial influences?
- What do I want them to know — what misconceptions do I want to correct? How are children's lives connected to the topic?
- What anti-bias goals and specific objectives related to the topic do I want to include?
- How can I connect the children's anti-bias issues to the existing classroom curriculum? (Kuh et al., 2016)

It is vital for teachers to self-reflect about their attitudes and experiences regarding the topic they are exploring with the children, in turn strengthening their own knowledge. So, too is planning ways to work with families, including how to inform them about the children's interest in a specific topic, and objectives for addressing the topic with them. Ask families if they have questions for you, and if they hear questions or comments on the topic from their child. Plan a variety of ways to inform families about what you are doing, and share the children's responses to the activities (e.g. displays, newsletters, family meetings, notes or emails, and parent conferences). Ultimately, activities exploring any specific anti-bias issue open up other issues, and the planning cycle begins again.

### Planning Action: An Example

On a field trip, one child asks, "Why is that man sleeping on the street? Is he dead?"

**T:** "We don't know for sure why he is sleeping on the street. He is not dead, I can see him breathing. He may not have another place to go right now."

**C:** "Why?"

**T:** "Could be he doesn't have a house to live in. He may not have enough money to be in a house because he can't work or couldn't find a job."

**C:** "Is the man cold?"

**T:** "He may be. Let's talk some more when we get back to school."

Back at school, the teacher decides to talk with all the children about their experiences and ideas about homelessness. She tells them about seeing the man sleeping on the street, and asks, "Have you seen other people sleeping on the street?" She tells them that some women and children are also homeless. She asks, "Why do you think people sleep on the street? How do you think

people who sleep on the street feel?" She introduces the term 'homeless,' and asks what more they would like to know about being homeless.

Later, she and her assistant teacher look over their documentation of what the children want to know, and decide what they want to tell children about homelessness. They decide what further information they want to relate, as well as agreeing that they want to focus on fostering the children's empathy and the idea that all people are valuable, regardless of their material possessions and where they live. Finally, they decide they also want to highlight how others can help individuals who are homeless. The teacher gets in touch with the teachers at a community shelter for homeless women and children to talk about the possibilities of the preschool children sharing some of their materials and exchanging drawings/notes with the children. The teacher also tells families about the children's interest, what she plans to do, and asks for their ideas — such as whether they might want to also provide some needed materials to the shelter.

The teacher also decides to extend the topic of homelessness to exploring the topic of work and jobs, since unemployment is often the underlying reason for becoming homeless. She wants to convey that there are many different types of work, and that all are important and have value, even though some jobs pay more money than others. One activity might be making a photo book of all the people who work in the center community, including the janitor, kitchen staff, postal workers, and office staff, and invite the people to come talk to the children about their jobs. Persona doll stories are another useful tool (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). The doll's story might tell about a parent losing a job and how the family copes with the situation. The teacher fosters children's empathy by inviting the children to also discuss "How can we

### Useful Children's Books

*A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams (Greenwillow, 2007)

*Come Home Soon, Baba* by Janie Hampton (Peter Bendorick, 1993)

*Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting (HMH Books for Young Readers, 1993)

*Homes in Many Cultures* by Heather Adamson (Capstone, 2016)

*House and Homes* by Ann Morris (Harper Collins, 1995)

*Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt De La Pena (GP Putnam, 2015)

*My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me* by Maya Angelo and Margaret Courtney-Clarke (Crown, 2003)

*Sam and the Lucky Money* by Karen Chinn (Lee & Low, 1997)

*The Big Orange Split* by Daniel Manus Pinkwater (Scholastic, 1993)

*Too Tall Houses* by Gianna Marino (Viking Books, 2012)

For further thinking about planning anti-bias education, we suggest reading *Moving Beyond Anti-bias Activities: Supporting the Development of Anti-Bias Practices* (Kuh et al., 2016). We can all build a more just and fair world starting with our youngest citizens by incorporating an anti-bias perspective into the daily life of our programs.

help Melanie (the persona doll) and her family?"

Another extension might be the theme of homes and shelters, with the message that there are many different types of homes — apartments, single family houses, trailers, tents, hotels, and huts. People may live together with friends or extended family, and for a long or a short time in a particular place. The usual learning materials and methods of early childhood, starting with the children's experiences, provide many opportunities to explore such issues.

### References and Resources

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