

Leadership Matters

Creating Anti-Bias Change in Early Childhood Programs

by Louise Derman-Sparks, John Nimmo, and Debbie LeeKeenan



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Anti-bias endeavors are part of a proud and long educational tradition — one that continues to seek and to make the dream of justice and equality a reality.

It happens day by day, and calls on our best teaching, relationships, and leadership skills.

— Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo (2015, p. 164)

An anti-bias approach puts diversity and equity aspirations at the center of all aspects of a program's organization and daily life. This is an activist approach in which children's developing identity, and their questions, observations, and ideas about diversity and bias, shape the education we provide (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). The program's vision, mission, policies, procedures, learning environment, and curriculum all come into play. In sum, it is a "process, not an event" (Kugelmass, 2004, p. 6), which happens in stages over time.

The leader of an early childhood care and education program plays a central role in cultivating anti-bias education change. She must be intentional and strategic, planning for the long haul — as well as the steps that get a program to its goals. An anti-bias perspective informs everything the

leader does. She also must understand the risks of change, as well as be aware of her own fears, yet not let either the risks or her fears stop one from taking action (Espinosa, 1997). An anti-bias leader must also be willing to deal with complexity. There are no simple answers or quick solutions; there *are* strategies for dealing with the complexities that emerge when building anti-bias programs.

In this article, we describe some of the key components of effective anti-bias education (ABE) leadership, as well as both the challenges and possibilities.

Create a Culture that Cultivates Staff and Family Commitment, Risk-Taking, and Ownership

This work begins with the program leader's first contacts with staff and families and continues on every day of the program. Consider the following strategies:

- Create a welcoming environment where staff and families feel respected and trusted, free to take risks, and express their feelings and perspectives. Everyone feels supported in their learning, and understands that

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disequilibrium and discomfort can lead to real growth.

- Provide multiple opportunities for staff and families to regularly, informally and formally, learn about ABE, ask questions, and provide input (e.g. at staff meetings, open houses, parent meetings, informal conversations, and advisory board meetings).
- Generate an ABE mission statement with the staff and with input from families. Begin with visioning: "What would your center look like if it were an excellent anti-bias program?" The mission statement eventually becomes a core theme of a program's operational framework.
- Engage staff in devising, collecting, and analyzing accountability documentation that shows what change is happening and provides the information for planning.

- Model the experience of making changes. Share your challenges, discomforts, and mistakes with your community. Make clear that you also have questions and that you do not know all the answers.

Reading Your Program: A Place to Start

An early childhood program is a complex system of people, relationships, resources, barriers, possibilities, and power dynamics. In order to embark on a strategic process of change, you need to know where the program stands now and what, specifically you need to shift.

The metaphor of 'reading' the program, adapted from Paulo Freire (1985), stands for the process of gathering and analyzing information related to the changes you want to foster. An initial baseline portrait of the people and various components of your program provides a framework for developing

specific strategies to begin working toward your ABE goals. Consider the following questions (Nimmo, 2011):

- What are the significant contextual factors you need to consider in your center and local community with regard to diversity work (e.g. demographics, politics, history, values, resources)?
- Who are the *allies* (people who will support you and understand your purpose) you have already identified (e.g. administration, teachers, parents, community members)?
- Who are some *potential allies* you could reach out to next?
- What *resources* do you have for your diversity work (e.g. materials for children, classroom arrangements, time for teachers to learn and reflect, commitment from staff, administrators, access to community experts)?

- Who are the *gatekeepers* in the community? (Who or what can deny or provide access to resources?)
- What *barriers* do you see to your diversity work (e.g. financial, demographic, education)?
- What *fears or concerns* do you have about shifting your program to an anti-bias approach?
- What are the three most important long-term goals you have for diversity work at your center?

Considering the assessment above, where do you want to start? What are the specific *strategies/actions* you can commit to this year (e.g. focus on family inclusion)?

These questions for initially ‘reading’ your program can also be adapted for documenting and periodically assessing a program’s progress in implementing anti-bias education over time.

Foster Anti-bias Educators and Partnerships with Families

The early childhood field recognizes the central importance of professional development and nurturing family partnerships in building quality programs (see Carter & Curtis, 2010). Here we offer a brief summary of specific ABE strategies for this work.

Anti-bias leaders provide the necessary time, space, resources, support, and facilitation for teachers and other staff to be participants in the process of change. They recognize that staff will be on different places in their own anti-bias journeys (Derman-Sparks, & Ramsey, 2011; Tatum, 1992, 1994; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2012). Some may deny noticing differences or having bias themselves or that children have ideas about diversity. Others may be more open to exploring anti-bias issues related to themselves,

the children, and the program. Yet others are ready to begin actively implementing ABE. Finally, when a majority of staff makes ABE a part of everything they do, a program reaches the part of the journey where consistent, effective work happens.

The program leader finds ways to provide opportunities that scaffold the learning for all staff. He engages staff in setting objectives for individual, classroom team, and school-wide anti-bias work, makes ABE part of ongoing professional development, supervises, and coaches staff integrating ABE into the daily curriculum, and facilitates staff members’ work with families.

Anti-bias efforts also build on families feeling that they belong, the starting point for forming strong, staff/family relationships. These require having an inclusive definition of families and believing in the value of all program members learning from others. The leader works with staff to put into practice a range of anti-bias strategies for family involvement. This includes making sure anti-bias values and goals are transparent to the community, creating family visibility and connection with each other and with staff, and two-way education and dialogue among families and between family and staff. The leader also facilitates problem solving when there is disagreement over anti-bias issues.

Negotiating Conflict

Anti-bias work inevitably generates some disagreement, disequilibrium, and conflicts. These occur when there is cognitive and emotional dissonance between two or more perspectives — whether they are from staff or from families. However, resolving differences in ABE work is not about winners and losers. It is about managing conflict in a way that creates greater equity and inclusion.

If the leader embraces conflict as a key opportunity for creative problem solving, then the outcomes are new insights, perspectives, and behaviors for colleagues, staff, families, and herself. However, fear of conflict can be an obstacle to even embarking on the anti-bias education journey.

Productive handling of differences in a program does *not begin* when an actual conflict occurs. From the beginning, it is about working intentionally and proactively to create a culture and a climate in which disagreement is acceptable, and problem solving supports positive outcomes. It is also essential to recognize that there are no abstract or perfect solutions. Experiencing some ambiguity and uncertainty is inevitable in this process. Rather, look for specific solutions for specific conflict episodes, which make sense in terms of your program’s values and context.

We suggest using an approach that we call “Finding the Third Space.” The *third space* is the intellectual and emotional place where people in conflict come to a mutually decided agreement that goes beyond their initial viewpoints. Three tactical steps enable people to find the third space in most conflict situations. These are *Acknowledge*, *Ask*, and *Adapt* (Derman-Sparks, 2013). The objectives of this sequential process are to devise a solution that works for everyone — at least as much as possible.

For a more detailed discussion of the components of anti-bias leadership, as well as the many related issues and strategies, we suggest looking at our book *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change* (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan & Nimmo, 2015) and other resources listed at the end of this article.

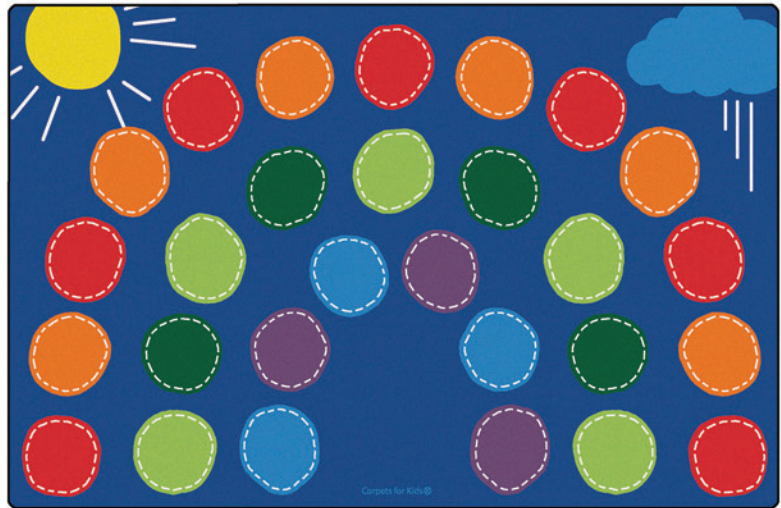
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Here is an example of using these steps based on a real situation: A child care center serving children from a culture where the infants and toddlers are used to sleeping in hammocks, find that the children will not take naps in the cribs provided by the center (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo, 2015).

Step 1, Acknowledge:

Staff openly recognizes together that a problem exists, as the children are tired, consequently cranky, and easily upset. This problem reflects a clash between the children's home culture and practices with: a) the practices and regulations of centers in the United States, and b) the cultural practices and experiences of the center.

Step 2, Ask:

The center director talks with the families about their children's sleeping habits. She facilitates conversations with the staff, with the objective of gaining clarity about where each person stands on the issues and their desired outcome, and also clarifies her own beliefs and priorities in this particular situation.

Step 3, Adapt:

This is the solution step. The program leader informs staff about what she learned from talking with families and reviews licensing and accreditation requirements. Then she helps them find common ground with the practices of the center, the families, external requirements, and considers alternative ways to solve the problem. Ultimately, the staff agrees to hang hammocks diagonally inside the cribs. They see this solution as satisfying licensing criteria, while also meeting the needs of the infants and toddlers. The solution works with the children.

Leadership Matters

Anti-bias change takes persistence, discipline, energy, and time. An effective leader is intentional and strategic. Everything counts. It is not just what you do, but how you do it.

This work is not without its real challenges. Periods of stagnation, frustration, or feeling out of one's depth do occur. As past directors of early childhood programs, we also understand that you juggle multiple everyday demands. Leaders of anti-bias change need ways to sustain themselves, as well as the people with whom they work. Periodically revisit your vision and hopes for a better world, to remind yourself why you are doing anti-bias work. Regularly acknowledge the program's 'small changes' — the specific anti-bias steps that you, staff, families, and the children have taken, and the resulting growth. Most especially, have a group of supportive colleagues with whom you frequently talk, email, and meet.

Ultimately, it is our lifetime commitment to equity, voice, and social justice that will build early childhood care and education programs where all children and families are visible and thrive.

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