

# Bringing Diversity Into Your Center

by Thomas Moore

**N***o matter where your child care center is located, chances are it fits the following description: If you're white, virtually everyone else in your center is white, too. If you're African-American, you have mostly an African-American clientele and staff.*

You're not alone. Most child care centers in the United States have teachers and administrators who look the same and come from similar backgrounds. Anyone who has tried it knows it's a challenge to develop a multiracial staff and attract children from all racial and religious groups.

But I believe it can be done. And it's worth the effort. With many kinds of people involved, a child care center becomes appealing to a wider range of people, leading to new marketing opportunities and greater financial stability. A diverse staff is more likely to help families of every hue feel welcome in your facility and, ultimately, choose to

pay for your services. Families who are uncomfortable with diversity might latch onto a staff member with a similar background. The person who connects with those parents can ease their way into a new and ultimately rewarding setting.

Children learn more and have more fun with the opportunity to explore different cultures. Teachers and administrators do, too. Our differences can be jumping-off points for learning, growth, and development for all of us. It's harder to discuss the mountains when everyone in the group grew up at the beach. It's harder to convey the taste of tortillas if everyone was born in Maine.

A diverse child care center is the ultimate expression of the motto "Think globally, act locally." It is a vital first step to bringing people together to talk about who we are and what we can create together. It's one means for creating "a world that holds their children dear and loves them as they are" (from "A Dream for Children," a song by Drs. Jan McCarthy and Thomas Moore).

## Getting Started

Even after a center has made the choice to seek a diverse staff and clientele, it still can be difficult to *practice what you preach.*



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Consider the experiences of Anne Jones, director of the Avondale Children's Center in Charlotte, North Carolina. When Jones joined Avondale three years ago, she came from a center that had been diverse for several decades, thanks to its location, scholarship monies, and other factors. At Avondale, though three out of 11 teachers are African-American and the center has made diversity a priority, all but one of the children served are white.

"It's a puzzle that bothers me, the board, and the church we're affiliated with," Jones says. "We've looked at it inside and out. We're just not getting a diverse group of applicants."

## Broadening Your Appeal

Whether you haven't consciously sought out a diverse population before, or you've been frustrated by limited success or outright failure, these strategies can help broaden your center's appeal.

**What do they see?** Remember that at all times we are either inviting people to join us or turning them away. Do prospects see a variety of faces in the pictures on your walls? What about the illustrations in books? Images can be a powerful way to communicate, "We want you here."

**Diversity goes beyond race.** A friend tells the story of her search for child care. She and her husband were touring a well-regarded secular child care center affiliated with a community college. She was impressed until she came to the classroom where children were gathered in a circle, listening to a recording.

"On Sunday, we all go to church, go to church, go to church. On Sunday, we all go the church, early in the

morning," sang the voice on the recording. My friend is Jewish. The center's director seemed utterly oblivious to how that recording would be perceived by non-Christians. My friend didn't say anything — and she never went back.

**Think diverse personalities.** Hire some teachers who are low key, some who are upbeat, some very organized, some very creative. They bring different styles and perspectives to your classrooms, meetings,

*Dream, dream, this is my dream  
for the children of the world.  
Peace, joy, and happiness  
for every boy and girl.  
A world where they can play  
all in their own way.  
A world where they can laugh and cry  
and think and wonder why.  
A world where there is food to eat,  
a home for everyone,  
with health and safety a major concern  
and schools for them to learn.  
A world that holds their children dear  
and loves them as they are.  
Where children have the chance to grow  
and reach a shining star.*

— "A Dream for Children"  
by Drs. Jan McCarthy and Thomas Moore,  
from the recording "Songs for the Whole Day"

and interactions with parents. They also serve as diverse role models for children. Kids who are very active, for instance, will benefit by seeing a quieter teacher.

**Cultivate hidden diversity.** Even if you have families who look alike, there can be diversity in ethnicity, faith, economic class, and interests. Consider asking parents to do short projects or games with children at

the center to share the special things they know or do.

An example: one major industry in my community is banking, so children are accustomed to parents who work in an office. To show children that "the office" isn't the only place people work, one center invited a father to give a simple talk about his job with the symphony orchestra and play child-friendly tunes on his trombone.

**Small or at-home centers can be diverse, too.** What if you are a staff of one or just a few? Encourage diversity in your visuals, recordings, and volunteers. Contact a variety of organizations and religious institutions about volunteering at your center. Some major corporations give employees time off from work for volunteer pursuits.

## Hiring a Diverse Staff

Making the commitment to a diverse staff is easier than finding and hiring one. It's common not to know many people outside your own group. That makes it challenging to know how to find qualified teachers and assistants who are different from you. Here are some resources you may not have tapped before:

**Houses of worship or other religious institutions** can be a great place to recruit loving, consistent people who enjoy young children. Call the minister or other religious leader, or meet people on their turf by going to a service. Let them know the qualifications of the staff you seek. Word will spread of your interest, and people will appreciate that you took time to get to know their culture a little bit.

When you visit an institution that isn't part of your culture, you'll

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probably be uncomfortable. Go into the experience looking for things you can connect with — food, music, clothing, love of family, or anything else that's important to you. Take along a friend.

**Ask community leaders for help.** Determine who the leaders are in your target group — be it Hispanic, African-American, Jewish, or something else — and seek out their recommendations for potential staff members. In my town, for instance, I would call the Spanish storyteller at the public library to see if she knows others from her culture who enjoy working with children.

**Contact community colleges.** Talk with teachers or department heads about promising students in their early childhood programs.

**Contact high schools.** Ask about successful graduates from home economics and related classes.

**Contact senior groups.** Don't forget retired people as a rich source of either staff or volunteers. They'll bring a new dimension of experience to your program.

**Ask current staff** for ideas on finding diverse colleagues.

**Advertise** jobs in specialty newspapers that your target group reads. You might also research costs for advertising on Spanish-language or other radio stations. Though radio advertising costs might be prohibitive for your center alone, perhaps you can share costs for one ad with several other centers.

In some communities, **transportation** may be a problem. If you want a highly desirable staff member who lacks reliable transportation, look into whether government agencies provide special bus services, or help arrange a car pool.

## Retaining Diverse Staff

**Open and honest communication** between the director and staff is essential for retaining high-quality personnel. Let staff members know you are committed to supporting them in their work. Make yourself aware of diverse perspectives. Your supportive attitude will make all staff members less likely to leave for other jobs.

**Involve staff members in creating the curriculum.** Use their cultures as jumping-off points for fun themes. Avoid one-time "named" celebrations such as Black History Month, which inadvertently communicate that the topic isn't worth studying the rest of the year. Instead, do weekly themes or other small units, weaving diversity into your curriculum all year long. Be creative with holidays. On Presidents' Day, for example, you might bring in several presidents from diverse local organizations. They can tell children what they do and be honored at a party.

**Encourage the staff to get to know each other.** Have an open house a half hour before each staff meeting, with refreshments. Invite staffers to come early to relax and talk before the meeting begins.

**Consider age-level meetings for teachers.** If your center is big, consider paying for a simple dinner mid-year for teachers of twos, then threes, then fours. Teachers could talk about what's been particularly successful for them in activities and themes, and analyze what hasn't worked.

**Take your grievance policy seriously.** Your grievance policy should be discussed with staff and acted upon when necessary so teachers know it isn't there just for show. It's important that you estab-

lish yourself as someone who will listen to grievances. If you follow all the points we've discussed earlier, staff members will trust you and feel free to share information they might not otherwise.

**Remember your board.** If your center is non-profit, a diverse board can provide a plethora of ideas. It will also demonstrate to staffers that you take diversity seriously.

**Banish jokes that are demeaning (based on race, religion, or personal characteristics).** It's not political correctness. It's just courtesy.

The more you and your board know about diverse cultures, the easier it will be to retain not only diverse staff members but diverse families. Talk with your board and staff about the ideas in this article, and identify methods that would work for you.

Realize that it's okay to take it slow, a step at a time. At Anne Jones' center, for instance, the board has realized that its small size — 65 families — and fine reputation means there's always a waiting list, filled with the friends of children already at the center. To increase diversity, the center is looking at funding possibilities so that certain slots could be reserved for minority children, possibly on scholarship. The center also plans to advertise in its local African-American newspaper.

"We want to make the effort, because our children are missing an important life experience," Jones says. "Children are very receptive to accepting people for who they are. If they grow up with people who are different from themselves, their neighborhood, or their community, they learn to make decisions about people based on qualities that matter, rather than appearances."