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Ideas for Training Staff

Anti-Bias Work: Taking Up the Challenge

by Margie Carter

Every time a program requests my help with some anti-bias training, I find myself both pleased and nervous. It's always heartening to learn of another early childhood program seeking to address issues of inclusiveness, cultural sensitivity, or practices reflecting prejudice. This may be the result of going through the accreditation self-study or doing a training needs survey. Sometimes there has been an incident where the program was confused or didn't know how to handle an expression of bias. Whatever the impetus for a program seeking anti-bias training, I always explore with them the scope of the challenges before us when we earnestly take up anti-bias work. This is where I tend to get nervous. Are they really eager to pursue an anti-bias approach or is this just another training topic to check on their list? What signs can I find that a program is prepared to invest the time and effort required to get below the surface and limitations of an initial workshop for the staff?

Many people use the term *anti-bias* loosely because it has become one of our professional buzz words. To understand how this approach differs from what one typically finds in a multicultural workshop, I think it's helpful to look at the goals Louise Derman-Sparks establishes from *The Anti-Bias Curriculum* book:

- Nurture each child's construction of a knowledgeable, confident self-identity and group identity
- Promote each child's comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds
- Foster each child's critical thinking about bias
- Cultivate each child's ability to stand up for her/himself and for others in the face of bias

As a program begins to focus on these goals for children, it becomes clear that they apply to the adults as well. And, typically, adults are more comfortable taking up bias expressed by children than with other adults. Strong emotions and conflicting points of view often come into play with adults, just as they do with children. As my colleague Theressa Lenear puts it: "We've all been so damaged by these biases that we tend to just go numb. When we awaken to the pain, anger, and guilt, the emotions can get very powerful. It can frighten and discourage people, but I always tell them that the path from numbness to action has to go through some really deep feelings." Theressa and I recently collaborated to develop an anti-bias training; here are some of the strategies we used in our workshop.

Understanding the Influences on Identity Development

The young children in our programs are rapidly developing their self-concepts, under the strong influences of their family and cultural values, our settings and interactions, and the culture at large with its high-impact media. The common saying that "children are color blind" doesn't reflect child development research and knowledge. As children strive to figure out who they are, we know that they begin to notice differences as early as six months of age.

This noticing, sorting, and classifying very quickly becomes intertwined with subtle messages of bias that suggest that *different is bad* and to be *normal* means to be just like everyone else. Children who fit into the prevailing images classified as normal can more easily develop a positive sense of identity, while those who do not may acquire a feeling of inadequacy, failure, or undesirability about themselves.

As children begin to shape an identity for themselves, self-love or self-deprecation is shaped by prevailing biases and inequities. Continual encounters with prejudice, upheld by systems

of power, leads to despair or self-defeat for those without the unspoken privilege of white skin, able bodies, or ample resources. For those who have these privileges, fear, blame, or denial can easily win out over empathy, an eagerness to find common ground, and a desire to live with equity. This is one of the imperatives for our anti-bias work in early childhood as these early patterns and emotions are being formed.

Our staff training efforts need to begin with the concrete and familiar, not a litany of abstractions which keep us numb. What do we know from our own lives? What are we seeing in the children with whom we work?

STRATEGY: Tell us about you

A simple way to get teachers talking about these issues is to explore some areas of influence on their identity development. Ask people to stand and move to one side of the room or the other according to their answers to the following:

- If you were raised with a strong religious identity, OR religion was not a strong factor in your upbringing
- If you grew up with clear family messages about how boys and girls should think and behave differently than each other, OR you grew up with messages that your gender didn't define how you should think or behave
- If you grew up with a strong racial identity, OR racial identity was not stressed in your family
- If you grew up with someone in your family working as domestic help, migrant workers, or day laborers, OR if you grew up with your family employing domestic help, migrant workers, or day laborers

Once on a side of the room, have them turn to a partner to share something about their experience. Have a brief whole group discussion between each of the rounds, acknowledging the ways these different experiences have shaped us and the pride, ambition, shame, defeat, rebellion, or numbness that may have resulted. Consider impressions or messages you may have received about people on the other side of the room.

STRATEGY: Think back to your earliest memory of difference

Ask your staff to spend a few minutes thinking back to their childhoods to try to capture the story of an early memory of noticing someone who was different from them. What was the setting? Who was there? What happened? How did you feel? What messages did you get from people around you, directly or indirectly?

The discussion which follows can explore how innocent the curiosity about differences can start out, yet how quickly young children absorb the negative prejudice around them. In their surroundings and through the media, children begin to assume fears, misconceptions, stereotypes, and negative bias. Conclude this discussion with considerations of what countered this negative direction for some of us.

Recognizing Different Forms of Bias

It's fairly obvious that name-calling, stereotyping, and exclusionary behaviors are forms of bias that need immediate attention in our programs. When bias is overtly expressed, we will often rally to address it. However, day after day, more insidious, covert forms of bias roam our programs, and these are less often attended to. Bias may be expressed in the form of different expectations, language, policies, tokenizing, discounting, marginalizing, or the prevailing way of doing business. To help raise the antenna of everyone wanting to eliminate unfair bias, try analyzing different aspects of your program: classroom environments and activities; interactions between staff and the children's families; and your program policies, paper work, and organizational culture.

STRATEGY: Analyze with a group thinking process

Gather some examples of incidents, classroom materials, or handbooks to collaboratively analyze. (A good resource for incidents to analyze is *Multicultural Issues in Child Care*, by Janet Gonzalez-Mena, or the video *Essential Connections: Ten Keys to Culturally Sensitive Child Care*, produced by Far West Laboratories in California.) Put each example along side a piece of chart paper which has been divided into three columns with these headings:

- Uncovering the Issues
- Immediate Response
- Plans for Further Action

Have people gather in small groups around each example and ask them to work on writing their thoughts under the first column, naming what they see as the possible issues of bias in the material. After ten minutes or so, ask each group to move to the next paper, read what is written in the first column, and then discuss what they would do as an *Immediate Response*, writing these thoughts under the second column.

After another period of time, ask the group to move again to the next set of material and paper, and after reading what has been put in the first two columns, begin discussing the third

consideration, *Plans for Further Action*. Then allow time for everyone to circulate and read all of the papers before having a whole group discussion. This strategy teaches a method for thinking about bias we encounter, as well as practice in using it with different materials and situations.

Meeting the Challenge

I find that just as we learn methods for tying our shoes, using a new computer program, or reducing stress, it's helpful to practice responding to bias by applying a methodology over and over until it becomes second nature to us. Helping teachers respond to bias in children, I've found the following guidelines useful to practice with a variety of scenarios or stories that typically unfold in our programs.

STRATEGY: Develop guidelines for responding when bias occurs

Do a pulse, heart, and head check:

- How is this situation making you feel?
- What is your bias in this situation?
- What do you want to have happen?

Do an environmental check:

- What societal images and messages are influencing the children in this situation?
- Is this setting conducive for discussion?
- How will onlookers be impacted?

Do a developmental check:

- What developmental task is at work for the children here?
- What can I say to affirm the identity of each person involved and acknowledge what might be true for each person?

Model empathy and empowerment:

- How can I investigate rather than interrogate?
- What will acknowledge the feelings of each?
- What understandings of *fairness* can I build on here?
- Can I relate this to any model for activism?
- What will empower the victim of this bias?

Make a mental note for follow-up plans:

- What images, materials, or activities can I insert into our classroom environment to counter this bias?
- Are there policies or practices our program needs to re-examine?

If we're serious about addressing both the expressions and sources of bias in our programs, one workshop or staff meeting isn't enough. This work is really an extended journey of continual discovery and taking action. We need to address the various forms of bias that arise in our classrooms and learn ways to be proactive in heading off bias that typically cements itself into children's identity formation. And, simultaneously, our task is to chip away at the bias we carry as adults, uncovering it at both the personal and institution levels, and committing ourselves to a more equitable way of living together in the world.

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