

it's never too early to begin

Multicultural/anti-bias education with infants and toddlers

by Shannon Wood

Part of our responsibility as early childhood educators is to help the children in our care develop into thoughtful, kind, contributing members of society. This includes being accepting and welcoming of those who are 'different.' Staff needs to be prepared to answer questions from young children regarding differences in race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, family structure, religion, and physical abilities. It is never too early to begin this work, and there is much that teachers and caregivers of our youngest children can do to provide children with a good start in this area. As is true for all age groups, multicultural/anti-bias education must be approached in a developmentally appropriate manner for infants and toddlers. This article explores:

- developmentally and culturally appropriate multicultural/anti-bias goals



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for infants, toddlers, and their caregivers

- suggestions for setting up the learning environment to meet these goals, and
- ideas for initiating your own professional and personal development in this area.

It is important to realize that every group is a *multicultural* group. Even when a group is racially or ethnically homogenous, there are sure to be differences in family structure, socioeconomic class, religion, family values, caregiving practices, and many other aspects of culture, which each family develops for itself. Even a study of how dietary preferences are similar and different among families could illustrate how multicultural your group of children is!

Getting started

As teachers set multicultural/anti-bias goals for infants and toddlers, they need to take into account what they know about child development, the cultures represented by the children in their group, and their own biases. Child development theory helps us to understand what concepts may be developmentally appropriate for this age group. However, these theories are not free of bias. Child development theorists work within their

own cultural framework, and child development models vary among different cultures. For example, while goals about pride in one's accomplishments may be appropriate for Western children, some families from Middle Eastern cultures value interdependence and contributions to the group more highly, and may discourage their children from showing pride in individual accomplishments (Sharifzadeh, 2004).

Teachers' own history, culture, and biases will impact their goals for the children in their care. For this reason, teachers need to work towards understanding these aspects of their identity and how they influence their work with children. In the section on professional and personal development (see page 100), there are specific ideas for beginning this self reflection.

The goals highlighted on the following page are a compilation of multicultural/anti-bias goals for infants, toddlers, and their caregivers, described by Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force (1989) and Hall (1999). They are just a sampling of goals that have been established for this age group. They are intended to get you thinking about what goals would be developmentally and culturally appropriate for the children

in your care. What additions to your environment and routines would help the children you work with move towards these goals?

Multicultural and anti-bias goals for infants, toddlers, and their caregivers

- To promote a sense of self in relation to family
- To value the uniqueness of the child's own and others' families
- To promote a sense of family belonging
- To promote self esteem and positive self concept
- To expose children to different textures, patterns, smells, skin tones, rhythms, and music
- To expose children to differences in family composition, language, ability, age, appearance, race, and gender roles
- To promote positive association with the color brown
- To label feelings and emotions
- To build awareness of others' feelings and empathy
- To encourage children to participate in non-stereotypic activities (i.e., girls pushing trucks or boys caring for dolls)
- To notice and appreciate similarities and differences

The learning environment

Teacher-child interactions about anti-bias issues should arise out of the children's play, comments, and questions (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989). This is especially true when working with infants and toddlers, where teacher-led lessons are not usually developmentally appropriate. Teachers set the stage for these interactions by making multiculturalism part of the environment and everyday activities. The idea is not to take the 'tourist approach' to studying a culture, but to have a

variety of cultures represented throughout and integrated into your early education program. Developing specific multicultural activities may not be necessary. These topics will emerge from the children as a result of a thoughtfully prepared environment.

Infants and toddlers learn best when their subject of study is immediately relevant to their lives and physically present for exploration. Therefore, it makes sense to begin multicultural/anti-bias education for this age group by integrating the cultures represented by the children into their learning environment.

Integrating children's cultures into your infant/toddler environment

- Ask families to contribute or lend items that represent their family, such as:
 - Kitchen items (utensils, frying pans, coffee makers, tea pot, grain mill)
 - Reading material (children's books, adult books, magazines, and newspapers)
 - Clothing and accessories (work clothes, fancy clothes, pajamas, casual clothes, hats, and shoes)
 - Household tools/equipment and a demonstration of how to use them (sewing, woodworking, gardening, camera, auto repair, housekeeping, child care), and
 - Items representing family traditions (photos or physical items).
- Display photographs of the children's homes, families, and neighborhoods. Talk about these using rich descriptive language and acknowledging similarities and differences between the photos.
- Invite family members to visit the classroom to share stories of their lives (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005).
- Represent children's cultural groups in the books, dolls, and posters in the learning environment.
- Implement caregiving practices of the children's families. For example, try to

replicate the way they prepare their child to rest, or how they feed her (Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). Talk with the child about how you are trying to care for her like her family does at home.

This positive reinforcement can encourage her to feel pride in her family and culture. It is also important to include representations of races, ethnicities, languages, levels of physical ability, and family structures that may not be represented by the children you serve. You can do this by:

- Inviting individuals from various ethnic/racial groups to interact with the children on a regular basis,
- Ensuring that the dramatic play materials represent a variety of possibilities from many categories of difference,
- Providing art materials in many skin tone shades,
- Ensuring that children's literature includes characters from a variety of cultural groups,
- Inspecting materials for stereotypic images and remove them from the classroom (or provide additional materials to challenge the stereotype),
- Encouraging and supporting children as they notice differences, and
- Incorporating the "current, daily, real lives of unfamiliar people as an ongoing part of your program, not as an add-on" (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005).

Teachable moments

Once the learning environment is set up to reflect multiculturalism, teachers and caregivers need to be prepared to respond to children's observations and questions. Infants and toddlers are famously observant. Children in these age groups will notice differences among the children and teachers in the group, as well as in the materials the teachers have provided in the classroom.

An exciting teachable moment occurs when children notice similarities and differences. Seize this opportunity by acknowledging the child's observation and providing additional relevant information. For example, when an infant alternates touching her hair with the hair of a classmate, she may be noticing that the texture is different from her own. You can put that into words for the child, and show her even more possibilities for hair texture, using other children and adults in the room, dolls, or books with textures for illustration.

With this age group, our main goals as educators and caregivers are to expose children to differences in a positive manner and to challenge pre-prejudice in young children as we see it emerging. It is important to note that there is no malice in young children's actions of pre-prejudice. They may express a reluctance to play with other children or dolls that have different skin tones from theirs, or something as seemingly innocuous as distaste for the color brown. It is our job to challenge these actions by presenting alternative perspectives. For example, the teacher may make a point of playing with the dolls that the child has been avoiding, or may make a study of the color brown, highlighting brown items with positive connotations.

Professional and personal development

Abt-Perkins and Gomes believe that an awareness of one's own cultural identity is necessary before one can look meaningfully at the cultural identity of others (as cited in Barta & Winn, 1996). Our own culture affects the way we furnish and set up our classrooms, our goals and expectations for children, and the way we interact with children. In order to recognize the stereotypes and biases we hold, we must reflect on our own history, culture, and experiences. This reflection must be conscious and ongoing. Some suggestions for professional

and personal development include:

- Continuous self reflection. Keep a journal. Prompt your writing with questions such as "Who am I?" "What was the culture of my parents and grandparents?" "What are the characteristics of my culture?" (Hyun, 2001).
- Develop a supportive community of colleagues in which you can discuss the self reflection of individual members. Invite families to join you as well. This community can work together to challenge the inequities and racism that affect all children and families (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005).
- Facilitate a book or video-viewing group in which members gain new perspectives by reading memoirs or viewing videos representing a variety of cultures.
- Complete a critical inventory of your learning environment. Why have you chosen these materials? Are any stereotypes perpetuated? Are multiple cultural groups represented? What materials are you missing in order to provide children with a "rich, accurate, nonstereotypic 'database' about gender, race, cultural, and physical abilities" (Derman-Sparks, 1989, p. 21).

Again, this list is intended to provide a place to start. There are many resources for this area of professional development.

Conclusion

Multicultural/anti-bias education for infants and toddlers need not be complicated. However, it does require thoughtful preparation and constant reflection. It is immeasurably helpful to have a supportive group of colleagues and families to help teachers critique their efforts. I encourage you to work with your colleagues and seek out additional resources to make your early

learning environment one in which all of the children and families you serve feel represented and valued. Infants and toddlers who feel valued and who are encouraged to value differences today will grow into strong, caring, anti-racist citizens of tomorrow.

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