

# Reflection: The First Step for Addressing Bias in Infant and Toddler Programs

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“Why are you still holding Prisha? She’s asleep,” Ms. Talia, an infant caregiver at a large child care center, asks her coworker, Ms. Janae.

“Because she likes being held and I like holding her,” Ms. Janae replies.

Three-year-old George arrives at school with his mother, Ms. Lei. “He wasn’t hungry for breakfast earlier, so I’ll just feed him here before I leave,” Ms. Lei says to George’s teacher. She sits in a small chair next to George and spoon-feeds him from a thermos of warm oatmeal.

Braydon, 20 months old, wears a tutu while playing in the dramatic play area. His dad arrives to pick him up and asks, “Why are you wearing that?”

“I’m playing,” Braydon replies.

“Take that off,” responds his father. Braydon removes the tutu and hangs it on a low hook. His dad picks him up and walks out of the dramatic play area.

**B**efore reading further, assess your reactions to these scenarios. Do you find yourself forming opinions? Do you relate closely to one of the teachers or parents in the scenarios? Does a mom spoon-feeding an older toddler make you pause or feel uncomfortable? Are you inclined to agree or disagree with the dad who reacted strongly to his son's dress-up choice? These are situations that, if we reflect on them, help us identify our own beliefs and biases, and those of others. Awareness of beliefs and biases is important for growing as intentional teachers; both our gut reactions and our carefully considered opinions influence our behaviors, so the more we reflect, the better prepared we will be to respond in supportive ways to situations that regularly present themselves in infant and toddler settings.

In each scenario, the adults do what they genuinely think is best. In early childhood settings, however, a critical first step in implementing an anti-bias approach is recognizing and being attuned to our internal beliefs and reactions. For infant and

toddler teachers, many of the ways we think about and care for babies are quite personal and come from our own upbringings and cultures, at times eliciting strong feelings. How we hold, feed, and nurture comes in part from the ways we were treated as infants and from the ideas our families have about caring for young children.

Self-awareness is vital in our work, as our beliefs and biases influence not only how we care for children but *how we see the care that others provide*. Our belief systems and our seemingly automatic reactions—on the surface so logical and rational—can both result from and fuel unintentional, internalized, and deeply held biases.

The goal of an anti-bias approach in early childhood education is to create a safe, nurturing, and inclusive learning environment; all young children should have a sense of belonging so they are able to explore themselves, their families and communities, and our world in healthy, happy ways. Ideally, educators and children engaged in anti-bias education will

## What Is Anti-Bias Education?

By Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards

Early childhood educators have deep faith in the principle that all people deserve the opportunities and resources to fulfill their complete humanity. Moreover, we have a unique role in making this principle real, in promoting all children's chances to thrive and to succeed in school, in work, and in life. Anti-bias work is essentially optimistic work about the future for our children. It provides teachers a way to examine and transform their understanding of children's lives and also do self-reflective work to more deeply understand their *own* lives.

Anti-bias education has four core goals:

**Goal 1:** Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

**Goal 2:** Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.

**Goal 3:** Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

**Goal 4:** Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

The heart of anti-bias work is a vision of a world in which *all* children are able to blossom, and each child's particular abilities and gifts are able to flourish. In this world:

- All children and families have a sense of belonging and experience affirmation of their identities and cultural ways of being.
- All children have access to and participate in the education they need to become successful, contributing members of society.
- The educational process engages all members of the program or school in joyful learning.
- Children and adults know how to respectfully and easily live, learn, and work together in diverse and inclusive environments.
- All families have the resources they need to fully nurture their children.
- All children and families live in safe, peaceful, healthy, comfortable housing and neighborhoods.

Adapted from *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, published by NAEYC in 2010.

develop awareness and appreciation of diversity—including age, race, ethnicity, nationality, culture, gender, sexual orientation, ability, belief system, and socioeconomic level—in their communities and beyond.

## Our biases influence how we care for children and how we see the care that others provide.

Mitigating bias and creating inclusive curricula in early childhood settings is a complex process—one that involves much more than adding materials that highlight diversity to the classroom walls, toy bins, and bookshelves. “Adults working with infants and toddlers need to be vigilant about the verbal and nonverbal messages they convey. All children need outstanding models of adults who demonstrate effective and equitable interactions even in the face of conflict. Respectful care and thoughtful, loving relationships are the most powerful ways to give infants and toddlers an anti-bias, multicultural education” (Gonzalez-Mena 2010, 151). For educators, engaging in meaningful reflection, exploration, and conversations about issues such as racism, gender bias, and cultural identity are vital parts of creating anti-bias settings.

## Opening our eyes and hearts

In the book *What If All the Kids Are White?*, the authors note, “As you open your eyes and heart to the realities of racism, you may, as do many others, experience a sense of disequilibrium. Many people feel guilty, sad, angry, and overwhelmed” (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, & Edwards 2011, 23). Given the nature of our work as educators—supporting children’s developing identities and beliefs about the world—it is especially important for us to examine our own racial, gender, cultural, and other biases and judgments (Lin, Lake, & Rice 2008).

If our goal as teachers and caregivers is to “provide an ‘inclusive’ educational

environment where all children can succeed” (Derman-Sparks 1989, 40), we must be open to the fact that we have our own hidden biases that need to be explored. The way to find our biases is by paying attention to the small things that cause us discomfort or make us bristle. Following our discomfort can help us uncover these thoughts, many of which tend to be hidden under our good intentions.

People form mental associations and biases from young ages. For example, research indicates that infants have strong, apparently innate preferences for the familiar—the people, objects, sights, and sounds to which they are frequently exposed (Banaji & Greenwald 2016). Many carry these preferences into adulthood. For this reason, becoming and remaining mindful of our biases and associations and the ways they spill over into judgments and prejudices is difficult. It requires ongoing, intentional effort. Awareness of our “trigger” moments—when we have a stronger-than-expected reaction to a person or practice—is a good indicator that there may be bias at work.

## Think about it

- › Have you ever had a strong reaction to an observed adult–child interaction? If so, were you able to reflect on whether your reaction was grounded in bias? Sometimes it is, but other times it is not. The key is taking time to reflect on these puzzling interactions and to discuss them

## Additional Anti-Bias Education Resources

### Anti-Bias Education at NAEYC

[www.naeyc.org/anti-bias-education](http://www.naeyc.org/anti-bias-education)

### Resources for Talking to Kids About Race and Racism

[www.huffingtonpost.com/kristen-howerton/talking-to-kids-race-racism-books\\_b\\_2618305.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kristen-howerton/talking-to-kids-race-racism-books_b_2618305.html)

### Talking to Our Children About Racism and Diversity

[http://archives.civilrights.org/publications/reports/talking\\_to\\_our\\_children/](http://archives.civilrights.org/publications/reports/talking_to_our_children/)

### Teaching for Change

[www.teachingforchange.org/teacher-resources/anti-bias-education](http://www.teachingforchange.org/teacher-resources/anti-bias-education)

to make sense of what was observed. Establishing a nurturing early childhood environment means that it is one with enough flexibility and open-mindedness to allow all children to flourish, and to appreciate that this flourishing happens in different ways.

- › Have you ever noticed a bias you have toward someone because of their race, age, orientation, ethnicity, style of dress, or some other factor? Why do you think that is? Has your awareness caused any changes in your behavior?
- › How would you feel if a coworker pointed out a bias in your behavior? Would you feel initial discomfort? When confronted with a potential bias (whether from self-reflection or a colleague's observation), could you ask yourself, "Might it be true?," and be open to ways of addressing that bias?

### Try it

- › Commit to reflecting on your feelings and actions regularly in an attempt to identify beliefs and biases.
- › Do not become discouraged when you discover your biases. Noticing is the first step toward changing your beliefs and behaviors.
- › Invite your colleagues to help you create a culture of noticing, questioning, and giving peer feedback at your workplace. Explore a variety of ways to do this collaboratively, such as peer mentoring, joint observations of one another's work, and brown bag lunch discussions focused on issues of culture and bias.
- › When you experience discomfort with someone's behavior, acknowledge that feeling to yourself and reflect on the potential causes of your discomfort before reacting or responding (notice, wait, think, respond).
- › Start an anti-bias task force at your school or center:
  - Be willing to experience discomfort. Aim for a work culture that embraces conflict resolution.

- Share and discuss books, articles, blogs, and other websites (see "Additional Anti-Bias Education Resources").
- Plan authentic ways to engage families in sharing their diverse cultures—such as sharing stories, lullabies, feeding approaches, comforting techniques, playtime activities, and other meaningful routines.

Teachers of infants and toddlers have frequent opportunities to support young children in forming anti-bias attitudes. But these attitudes must first be modeled by teachers and caregivers themselves. An integral part of anti-bias work is early childhood educators understanding their personal views of the world—hard-won insight that comes with greater awareness and a willingness to work together to effect change.

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