

TEACHING YOUNG CHILDREN TO RESIST BIAS: WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

*Louise Derman-Sparks, María Gutiérrez, Carol Brunson Phillips
National Association for the Education of Young Children*

Building self-identity and skills for social interaction are two major tasks in early childhood. Gradually, young children begin to figure out how they are the same and different from other people, and how they feel about the differences. What children learn in the preschool years greatly influences whether they will grow up to value, accept, and comfortably interact with diverse people or whether they will succumb to the biases that result in, or help to justify, unfair treatment of an individual because of her or his identity.

Research tells us that between ages 2 and 5, children become aware of gender, race, ethnicity, and disabilities. They also become sensitive to both the positive attitudes and negative biases attached to these four key aspects of identity by their family and by society in general. Young children develop “pre-prejudice”: misconceptions, discomfort, fear, and rejection of differences that may develop into real prejudice if parents and teachers do not intervene.

“Girls aren’t strong.” “Boys can’t play house.”

“You’re a baby in that wheelchair; you can’t walk.”

“You can’t play with us, only light-skinned kids can.”

Many adults find it hard to accept that 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds actually make these kinds of comments. They would prefer to believe that young children are blissfully unaware of the differences between people upon which prejudice and discrimination are based. But young children not only recognize differences, they also absorb values about which differences are positive and which are not. How we as parents and teachers react to the ideas that young children express will greatly affect the feelings they will form. If we want children to like themselves and to value diversity, then we must learn how to help them resist the biases and prejudice that are still far too prevalent in our society.

How Bias Influences Children’s Development

Bias based on gender, race, handicap, or social class creates serious obstacles to all young children’s healthy development. When areas of experience are gender stereotyped and closed to children simply because of their sex, neither boys nor girls are fully prepared to deal intellectually or emotionally with the realities and demands of everyday life. “Handicapism” severely harms children with disabilities by limiting access to the educational experiences necessary for well-rounded development. It also prevents non-disabled children from knowing and comfortably interacting with different types of people and teaches a false and anxiety-inducing sense of superiority based on their not being disabled.

Racism attacks the very sense of self for children of color. It creates serious obstacles to their obtaining the best education, health care, and employment. Racism also teaches White children a false identity of superiority and distorts their perceptions of reality. Thus they are not equipped to fairly and productively interact with more than half of the world’s humanity.

The “isms” interfere as well with our ability as adults to effectively teach children about themselves and others. All of us have learned the negative values attached to gender, race, class, and handicapping conditions. And, to varying degrees, they affect our personal attitudes and behavior. At times, we hide such negative feelings from ourselves by denying the reality or significance of differences. We may hope to sidestep the impact of prejudice by saying, “People are all the same,” or teaching children it is impolite

to notice or ask about differences. However, avoidance doesn't give children the information they need. By selectively ignoring children's natural curiosity, we actually teach them that some differences are not acceptable. And by failing to attach positive value to certain specific differences, we leave children to absorb the biases of society. The more that we face our own prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes toward diversity and, where necessary, change them, the better prepared we will be to foster children's growth.

What Parents and Teachers Can Do

Recognize that, because we live in a racist and biased society, we must actively foster children's anti-bias development. Remember that in such an environment, we are all constantly and repeatedly exposed to messages that subtly reinforce biases. If we do nothing to counteract them, then we silently support these biases by virtue of our inaction.

Create an environment at home or at school that deliberately contrasts the prevailing biased messages of the wider society.

Provide books, dolls, toys, wall decorations (paintings, drawings, photographs), TV programs, and records that reflect diverse images that children may not likely see elsewhere in

- Gender roles (including men and women in nontraditional roles)
- Racial and cultural backgrounds (eg, people of color in leadership positions)
- Capabilities (people with disabilities doing activities familiar to children)
- Family lifestyles (varieties of family composition and activities)

Show that you value diversity in the friends you choose and in the people and firms you choose for various services (eg, doctor, dentist, car mechanic, teachers, stores). Remember that what you do is as important as what you say.

Make it a firm rule that a person's identity is never an acceptable reason for teasing or rejecting them. Immediately step in if you hear or see your child engage in such behavior. Make it clear that you disapprove, but do not make your child feel rejected. Support the child who has been hurt. Try to find out what underlies the biased behavior. If the reason is a conflict about another issue, help your child understand the real reason for the conflict and find a way to resolve it. If the underlying reason is discomfort with or fear or ignorance about the other child's differences, plan to initiate activities to help overcome negative feelings.

Initiate activities and discussions to build positive self-identity and to teach the value of differences among people. Educate yourself about common stereotypes in our society so that you can evaluate your selection of children's materials and experiences. Whenever possible, either remove those containing biased messages, or learn to use such material to teach children about the difference between "fair" and "true" images and those that are "unfair" and "untrue" and that hurt people's feelings.

Talk positively about each child's physical characteristics and cultural heritage. Tell stories about people from your ethnic group of whom you are especially proud. Include people who have stood up against bias and injustice. Encourage children to explore different kinds of materials and activities that go beyond traditional gender behaviors.

Help children learn the differences between feelings of superiority and feelings of self-esteem and pride in their heritage.

Provide opportunities for children to interact with other children who are racially/culturally different from themselves and with people who have various disabilities. If your neighborhood does not provide these opportunities, search for them in school, after-school activities, weekend programs, places of worship, and day camps. Visit museums and attend concerts and cultural events that reflect diverse heritages as well as your own.

Respectfully listen to and answer children's questions about themselves and others. Do not ignore questions, change the subject, sidestep, or admonish the child for asking a question. These responses suggest that what a child is asking is bad. However, do not over-respond. Answer all questions in a direct, matter-of-fact, and brief manner. Listen carefully to what children want to know and what they are feeling.

Teach children how to challenge biases about who they are. By the time children are 4 years old, they become aware of biases directed against aspects of their identity. This is especially true for children of color, children with disabilities, and children who don't fit stereotypic gender norms. Be sensitive to children's feelings about themselves and immediately respond when they indicate any signs of being affected by biases. Give your children tools to confront those who act biased against them.

Teach children to recognize stereotypes and caricatures of different groups. Young children can become adept at spotting "unfair" images of themselves and others if they are helped to think critically about what they see in books, movies, greeting cards, and comics and on TV.

Use accurate and fair images in contrast to stereotypic ones, and encourage children to talk about the differences. For example, at Thanksgiving time greeting cards that show animals dressed up as "Indians" and a stereotypic image of an "Indian" child with buckskins and feather headdress abound. Talk about how it is hurtful to people's feelings to show them looking like animals, or to show them portrayed inaccurately. Read good children's books to show the reality and the variety of Native American peoples. As children get older, you can also help them learn about how stereotypes are used to justify injustice, such as lower wages, poor housing, and education, etc.

Let children know that unjust things can be changed. Encourage children to challenge bias, and give them skills appropriate to their age level. First set an example by your own actions. Intervene when children engage in discriminatory behavior, support your children when they challenge bias directed against themselves and others, encourage children to identify and think critically about stereotypic images, and challenge adult-biased remarks and jokes - all methods of modeling anti-bias behavior.

Involve children in taking action on issues relevant to their lives.

- Talk to a toy store manager or owner about adding more toys that reflect diversity, such as dolls, books, and puzzles.
- Ask your local stationary store to sell greeting cards that show children of color.
- Take your child to a rally about getting more funding for child care centers.

As you involve children in this type of activity, be sure to discuss the issues with them, and talk about the reasons for taking action.

Summary

Keep in mind that developing a healthy identity and understanding of others is a long-term process. While the early years lay an essential foundation, learning continues throughout childhood and into adulthood and will take many different forms. Children will change their thinking and feelings many times. *Questions That Parents and Teachers Ask*

Q. My child never asks questions about race, disabilities, or gender. If I raise it myself, will I introduce her to ideas she wouldn't have thought of on her own?

A. Yes, you may, thereby expanding your child's awareness and knowledge. Your child may have had questions for which she didn't have words or didn't feel comfortable raising until you brought up the subject. Remember that children do not learn prejudice from poen, honest discussion of differences and the unfairness of bias. Rather, it is through these methods that children develop anti-bias sensitivity and behavior.

Q. I don't feel competent enough to deal with these issues; I don't know enough. What if I say the wrong thing?

A. Silence "speaks" louder than we realize, sending messages that are counter to the development of anti-bias attitudes. It is far better to respond, even if, upon hindsight, you wish you had handled the incident differently. You can always go back to your child and say, "Yesterday, when you asked me about why Susie uses a wheelchair, I didn't give you enough of an answer. I've thought about your question some more, and today I want to tell you..." If you really do not have the information to answer a questions, you can say, "That's a good question, but I don't know the answer right now. Let me think about it a little and I will tell you later." Or, "Let's go find some books to help us answer your question." Then be sure to follow through. Examine your own feelings about the subject raised by your child's questions or behaviors. Feelings of incompetence often come from discomfort rather than from a lack of knowledge. Talk over your feelings with a sympathetic family member or friend in order to be prepared the next time.

Q. I don't want my children to know about prejudice and discrimination until they have to. Won't it upset them to know about injustices?

A. It is natural to want to protect our children from painful subjects and situations. Moreover, adults may mask their own pain by choosing not to address issues of bias with their children. Avoiding issues that may be painful doesn't help children. Being unprepared to deal effectively with life's realities only leaves them more vulnerable and exposed to hurt. Silence about children's misconceptions and discriminatory behavior gives them permission to inflict pain on others. It is all right for children to sometimes feel sad or upset as long as they know that you are there to comfort and support them.

Common Questions Children Ask and Ways to Respond

1. "Why is that girl in a wheelchair?"

Inappropriate

"Shh, it's not nice to ask." (admonishing)

"I'll tell you another time." (sidestepping)

Acting as though you didn't hear the question (avoiding)

Appropriate "She is using a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her move around."

2. "Why is Jamal's skin so dark?"

Inappropriate

"His skin color doesn't matter. We are all the same underneath." (This response denies the child's question, changing the subject to one of similarity when the child is asking about a difference.)

Appropriate

“Jamal’s skin is dark brown because his mom and dad have dark brown skin.” (This is enough for 2- or 3-year-olds. As children get older you can add an explanation of melanin.) “We all have a special chemical in our skin called melanin. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is dark. If you have only a little, your skin is light. How much melanin you have in your skin depends on how much your parents have in theirs.”

3. “Why am I called Black? I’m brown!”

Inappropriate “You are too Black!” (This response is not enough. It doesn’t address the child’s confusion between actual skin color and the name of the racial and/or ethnic group.)

Appropriate

“You’re right; your skin color is brown. We use the name Black to mean the group of people of whom our family is a part. Black people can have different skin colors. We are all one people because our great-great-grandparents once came from a place called Africa. That’s why many people call themselves Afro-Americans.”

4. “Will the brown wash off in the tub?”

(This is fairly common question because children are influenced by the racist equation of dirtiness and dark skin in our society.)

Inappropriate

Taking this as an example of “kids say the darndest things” and treating it as not serious.

Appropriate

“The color of José’s skin will never wash off. When he takes a bath the dirt on his skin washes off, just like when you take a bath. Whether we have light or dark skin, we all get dirty but our skin stays the same color after we wash it. Our skin is clean after we wash, no matter what color it is.”

5. “Why does Miyoko speak funny?”

Inappropriate

“Miyoko can’t help how she speaks. Let’s not say anything about it.” (This response implies agreement with the child’s comment that Miyoko’s speech is unacceptable, while also telling the child to “not notice,” and be polite.)

Appropriate

“Miyoko doesn’t speak funny, she speaks differently than you do. She speaks Japanese because that’s what her mom and dad speak. You speak English like your mom and dad. It’s okay to ask questions about what Miyoko is saying, but it is not okay to say that her speech sounds funny because that can hurt her feelings.”

6. “Why I do have to try out that dumb wheelchair?” (asks Julio who refuses to sit in a child-sized wheelchair in the children’s museum)

Inappropriate

“It is not dumb. All the children are trying it and I want you to.” (This response does not help uncover the feelings underlying Julio’s resistance and demands that he do something that is clearly uncomfortable for him.)

Appropriate

Putting his arm around Julio, his dad gently asks, “Why is it dumb?” Julio: “It will hurt my feet, just like Maria’s feet.” Dad: “Maria can’t walk because she was born with a condition called cerebral palsy. The wheelchair helps her move around. Nothing will happen to your legs if you try sitting and moving around in the wheelchair. It’s okay if you don’t want to, but if you do try it you’ll find that your legs will still be fine.”

From REACH Fall 1999