Understanding Anti-Bias Education: Bringing the Four Core Goals to Every Facet of Your Curriculum

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS, JULIE OLSEN EDWARDS

Anti-bias education is not just doing occasional activities about diversity and fairness topics (although that may be how new anti-bias educators begin). To be effective, anti-bias education works as an underpinning perspective, which permeates everything that happens in an early childhood program—including your interactions with children, families and coworkers—and shapes how you put curriculum together each day.

This article is an excerpt of the second edition of *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards. An NAEYC bestseller, this book helps early childhood educators fulfill their mission of helping all children reach their full potential. The new edition—with major updates to all chapters, including gender identity—will be available early in 2020.

The four core goals of anti-bias education

Four core goals provide a framework for the practice of anti-bias education with children. Grounded in what we know about how children construct identity and attitudes, the goals help you create a safe, supportive learning community for every child. They support children's development of a confident sense of identity without needing to feel superior to others; an ease with human diversity; a sense of fairness and justice; the skills of empowerment; and the ability to stand up for themselves or for others.

Goal 1: Identity

- **Teachers will nurture each child's construction of knowledgeable, confident, individual personal and social identities.**
- **Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.**

This goal means supporting children to feel strong and proud of who they are without needing to feel superior to anyone else. It means children will learn accurate, respectful language to describe who they and others are. Teachers will support children to develop and be comfortable within their home culture and within the school culture. Goal 1 is the starting place for all children, in all settings.

Adding to early childhood education's long-term commitment to nurturing each child's individual, personal identity, anti-bias education emphasizes the important idea of nurturing children's social (or group) identities. Social identities relate to the significant group categorizations of the society in which we grow up and live and which individuals share with many others. Social identities include (but are not limited to) gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and economic class groups. (In the forthcoming book, social identity is described in detail in Chapter 2.) A strong sense of both individual and group identities is the foundation for the three other core anti-bias goals.

Goal 2: Diversity

- **Teachers will promote each child's comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.**
- **Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.**

This goal means guiding children to be able to think about and have words for how people are the same and how they are different. It includes helping children feel and behave respectfully, warmly, and confidently with people who are different from themselves. It includes encouraging children to learn both about how they are different from other children and about how they are similar. These are never either/or realities because people are *simultaneously* the same and different from one another. This goal is the heart of learning how to treat all people caringly and fairly.

Some teachers and parents are not sure they should encourage children to "notice" and learn about differences among people. They may think it is best to teach only about how people are the same, worrying that talking about differences causes prejudice. While well intentioned, this concern arises from a mistaken notion about the sources of bias. Differences do not create bias. *Children learn prejudice from prejudice*—not from learning about human diversity. It is how people respond to differences that teaches bias and fear.

Another misconception about Goal 2 is that exploring differences among people ignores appreciating the similarities. Goal 2 calls for creating a balance between exploring people's differences and similarities. All human beings share similar biological attributes, needs, and rights (e.g., the needs for food, shelter, and love; the commonalities of language, families, and feelings) and people live and meet these shared needs and rights in many different ways. A basic premise in anti-bias education is "*We are all the same. We are all different. Isn't that wonderful!*"

Goal 3: Justice

- **Teachers will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and will nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes.**

- **Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.**

This goal is about building children's innate, budding capacities for empathy and fairness, as well as their cognitive skills for thinking critically about what is happening around them. It is about building a sense of safety, the sense that everyone can and will be treated fairly.

Learning experiences include opportunities for children to understand and practice skills for identifying unfair and untrue images (stereotypes), comments (teasing, name-calling), and behaviors (isolation, discrimination) directed at themselves or at others. This includes issues of gender, race, ethnicity, language, disability, economic class, age, body shape, and more. These are early lessons in critical thinking for children, figuring out what they see and hear and testing it against the notions of kindness and fairness.

These lessons build on young children's implicit interest in what is "fair" and "not fair."

As children come to identify unfair experiences and as they learn that unfair can be made fair, children gain an increased sense of their own power in the world. Children cannot construct a strong self-concept, or develop respect for others, if they do not know how to identify and resist hurtful, stereotypical, and inaccurate messages or actions directed toward themselves or others. Developing the ability to think critically strengthens children's sense of self, as well as their capacity to form caring relationships with others.

Goal 4: Activism

- **Teachers will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for others in the face of bias.**
- **Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.**

Goal 4 is about giving children tools for learning how to stand up to hurtful and unfair biased behavior based on any aspect of social identity. Biased behavior may be directed at oneself or another. It may come from another child or adult or from children's books,

television, and films. This goal strengthens children's development in perspective taking, positive interactions with others, and conflict-resolution education.

Actions of teasing, rejection, and exclusion because of some aspect of a child's social identities are a form of aggressive behavior. They are just as serious as physical aggression. The old saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" is false. Children's developing sense of self is hurt by name-calling, teasing, and exclusion based on identity. And children who engage in such hurtful behaviors are learning it is acceptable to hurt others, the earliest form of bullying. An anti-bias approach calls on teachers to intervene gently but firmly, support the child who is the target of the biased behavior, and help both children learn other ways of interacting.

Children's growth on Goal 4 strengthens their growth on the other three goals. If a child is the target of prejudice or discrimination, she needs tools to resist and to know that she has worth (Goal 1). When a child speaks up for another child, it reinforces his understanding of other people's unique feelings (Goal 2). When children are helped to act, it broadens their understanding of "unfairness" and "fairness" (Goal 3).

Guidelines for your curriculum

Just about every subject area in the typical early childhood program has possibilities for anti-bias education themes and activities. For instance, early childhood education themes of self-discovery, family, and community are deeper, and more meaningful, when they include explorations of ability, culture, economic class, gender identity, and racialized identity. So, too, issues of fairness (Goal 3) and acting for fairness (Goal 4) arise as children explore various curriculum topics.

> *Differences do not create bias. Children learn prejudice from prejudice—not from learning about human diversity. It is how people respond to differences that teaches bias and fear.*

The ideas for specific anti-bias education content and activities come from three major sources. One is from children's questions, interests, or interactions with each other that classroom teachers see as important to respond to and develop. Teacher-initiated activities are a second source of anti-bias activities, based on what classroom teachers and families think is important for children to learn. A third source is significant events that occur in the children's communities and the larger world that classroom teachers think need to be explored with children.

Here is an example of an anti-bias education topic at snack time.

It is snack time in the 4-year-old room. The teacher sets a small pitcher of water on the table for children to pour and drink. Lupe, whose home language is Spanish, looks up and asks, "Agua?" Casey, sitting next to her, says with annoyance, "No! It's water—not ahhgwa" (exaggerating the pronunciation). The teacher stops what she is doing and turns to Casey and says, "Lupe is right. What you call 'water' her family calls 'agua.' There are many words for water, for crackers, for oranges, for everything! We all have words. We have different words. It's pretty wonderful!"

At group time, the teacher follows up by asking children about the different words they have for people in their family. As the children call out Grandma, Oma, Pops, Daddy, Papa, Abuelita, and more, she writes them on a chart. She assures them that none of the words are wrong. They are just different. And they all mean someone who loves them.

Meet anti-bias goals in every corner of the classroom

The ongoing examination of how people are simultaneously the same and different provides children with a conceptual framework for thinking about the world they live in. For example, children playing with blocks can learn that although some children like to build tall towers and some like to build long, flat structures on the floor, all the children like to build. Art projects can show enthusiasm and admiration for blacks and browns along with all the other wonderful colors of the spectrum. The common curriculum topic of harvest time can include respecting and making visible the people who grow, pick, and transport our food.

Everyday activities offer opportunities for Goals 3 and 4 as well. Arguments over toys can include discussion of fairness and kindness. Exclusionary play, stereotypes in books, or teasing are experiences open to critical thinking about hurtful behavior and for problem solving toward just solutions.

Planning Anti-Bias Education Activities for Your Program's Curriculum

An anti-bias education approach is not a recipe. Rather, teachers include anti-bias issues in their planning by considering the children and families they serve and the curriculum approach their program uses. Here are key questions to ask yourself as you and your colleagues plan learning activities and environments. Begin by asking yourself these questions for one or two activities a week, and see how they change what you do and how the children respond.

- Where do I best fit anti-bias goals and issues into my curriculum plans for the day and the week?
- Who might be left out of this curriculum? How will I use the topic to include each child, connecting to the diversity of their social identities and to their individual needs? How can I be sure no one is invisible or unnoticed?
- What ideas, misconceptions, and stereotypes might children have about this topic? How can I learn what these are and provide accurate information and counter misinformation and stereotypes?
- How can I use this topic to support and strengthen children's innate sense of justice and their capacity to change unfair situations to fair ones?

- What learning materials do I need to gather to incorporate an anti-bias perspective into this curriculum topic?

Use child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities

Children's questions, comments, and behaviors are a vital source of anti-bias curriculum. They spark teachable moments as well as longer-term projects. However, it is not sufficient to do anti-bias activities only when a child brings up a relevant issue. Teacher-initiated activities are also necessary—be they intentionally putting out materials and books to broaden children's awareness or planning specific learning experiences around issues that matter to families and the community.

You do not wait for children to open up the topic of reading or numbers before making literacy and numeracy part of the daily early childhood curriculum. Because you have decided that these understandings and skills are essential for children, you provide literacy and numeracy discussions and activities in your classroom. A balance between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities is as vital in anti-bias education as in any other part of the early childhood curriculum.

Here's an example of how a teacher begins with a children-generated teachable moment and follows up with teacher-initiated activities:

After a windstorm broke dozens of small branches off of the trees surrounding their preschool, several 4- and 5-year-old boys begin building a "club house" by dragging branches and bunches of leaves to a corner in the playground fence. Valeria (4 years old) starts dragging a branch to join them and the boys shout, "No girls allowed! No girls allowed!"

The teacher considers encouraging the boys to welcome their classmate into their play—but then she hesitates. There are larger societal issues embedded in this interaction. As an anti-bias educator, she decides she needs to address the underlying ideas, especially that girls can't or shouldn't engage in play that emphasizes physical strength or that "real boys" don't include girls in their play.

Deciding to find out what the children are thinking, the teacher asks, "Why do you think no girls are allowed?" She listens carefully to the boys' responses: "Girls can't move the big branches." "And they can't build high!" "We're going to be superheroes! Girls can't be heroes." And, finally, "We don't like girls." All these statements reflect commonly held stereotypes about girls. Additionally, she thinks, not seriously addressing the situation reinforces the additional stereotype that boys don't have to pay attention to the feelings of others.

Seeing an opportunity to expand their thinking, the teacher suggests testing these claims. She says, "Well, let's find out if girls can move the big branches and build high or not." Since many of the children are now gathering around, she invites everyone to join in the challenge. "What do you think is going to happen?" she asks. With much laughter the children run and gather branches. Some girls are faster than some boys, some boys are faster than some girls. Everyone is able to add branches to the club house, which is suddenly much higher!

Bringing the children back together, the teacher says, "It looks like both girls and boys can lift big branches and build high. Thinking that boys would be better at these things than girls was a stereotype." Several children repeat the word stereotype (preschoolers love big words!). Still holding their attention, the teacher clarifies and gives words to the program's values: "Stereotypes are unfair. In our school we

want everyone to be treated fairly. What can we do so that we can be sure that we play together fairly?" The next steps are suggested by the children. One suggestion is a sign that says "Everyone can play here." "How about," says one of the boys who began this episode, "how about if we want to play alone, we just say 'you can have a turn in a few minutes'?"

Knowing that one interaction is never enough to help children think in new ways, the teacher plans and carries out further activities. She adds to the classroom library books in which female athletes and firefighters are strong and fast. At circle time, she reads books in which girls and boys play together in big muscle games. She invites a female carpenter in to help the children build with real tools. And she begins a curriculum on "Being a hero," about all the ways boys and girls can be powerful helpers.

In the next staff meeting, the teacher relates what she has done and is planning to do, and why. She asks her colleagues to consider the frequency of gendered exclusionary play in the program and they agree to take the important step of identifying how (explicitly and implicitly) they may be supporting a binary view of gender (see Chapter 9 in the forthcoming book) in their classroom. For example, how often do they call out "boys and girls" rather than "children"? Do they ask "strong boys" to help move furniture and big blocks? Do they comment on girls' clothing or hair instead of asking about their interests and accomplishments?
Do they support boys' tender, sharing, inclusive behaviors or mainly comment on their noisy, power-focused play? The teachers agree to observe each other as well as the children and see what changes they can make to avoid the damage that gender stereotypes have on children's sense of themselves and of others.

Using a combination of child-initiated, teachable moments and teacher-initiated, pre-planned activities is the most effective way to expand children's ability to grow in the four anti-bias education goals and to talk about, think about, and understand the world around them.

Pay attention to the realities of children's lives

While the four core anti-bias education goals are the same for all children, specific activities should be relevant to the children's backgrounds and their lives. Some children need support to resist messages of racial or cultural inferiority; others need guidance to develop a positive self-concept without absorbing social messages that they are the "normal" ones and other children are less than, strange, or negatively different. Children of wealthy families need help resisting the message that material accumulation defines their worth and that of others; children of families with fewer resources need support to resist messages that undercut their families' worth. Some girls may need extra support to develop confidence and interest in experiences that are math and science related; some boys may require help to develop skills for having nurturing, cooperative interactions with their peers
and to engage in play that reflects these attitudes.

Closing thoughts

As in all other areas of the curriculum, teachers tailor and scaffold anti-bias education materials and activities to each child's cognitive, social, and emotional developmental capacities. They plan and choose learning experiences that stimulate children to explore the next step of new ideas and skills and allow each child to apply new understandings and behaviors in his or her daily life.

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Audience: *Administrator (director or principal)*, *Faculty*, *Student (higher education)*, *Teacher*, *Trainer*

Age: *Early Primary*, *Infant/Toddler*, *Kindergarten*, *Preschool*

Topics: *Other Topics*, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, *Equity*, *Anti Bias*

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS

Louise Derman-Sparks, MA, has worked with children and adults in early childhood education for more than 50 years and is a faculty emerita of Pacific Oaks College. She is coauthor of several books, including *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change*, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, and *Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism: A Developmental Approach*.

JULIE OLSEN EDWARDS

Julie Olsen Edwards, coauthor of *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, was on the faculty of Cabrillo College's early childhood education department for 45 years. A lifetime activist for children and families, she continues to write, teach, and consult on issues of equity, diversity, and anti-bias.