

# The Goals of Anti-bias Education: Clearing Up Some Key Misconceptions

by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards

It is 27 years since the first book about anti-bias education appeared (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989), building on a long history of efforts to address diversity, inclusion, and equity in early education. Since then, the ideas and goals of anti-bias education have come to be an established component of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) thinking in the United States, and have traveled to many countries around the world. Anti-bias education meets the vital need for early childhood programs where all children and families feel they belong, and where each new generation of children successfully

## Anti-bias Education Goals

*(Identity)* Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social/group identities.

*(Diversity)* Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections.

*(Justice)* Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

*(Activism)* Each child will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions

Derman-Sparks & Edwards (2010)



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Co-author with Louise of *Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Julie began in ECCE as a Family Child Care Home Provider as a way to be at home with her young children. She has taught in and directed programs for infants, toddler, play years and Elementary School children and was the founding director of the Children's Center at Cabrillo College where she has taught for over 45 years. A writer and activist for children, families and teachers, Julie also served on the Governing Board of NAEYC.

learns the tools they need to thrive in and challenge an inequitable world.

Over time, certain questions, issues, and misunderstandings have come up as early childhood educators have put Anti-bias work into practice. To deepen understanding and strengthen anti-bias education practice in early childhood settings, *Exchange* is putting forward a new 10-part series, authored by a diverse group of practicing educators. Each article will focus on a specific topic related to anti-bias education issues. In this first article, we put the spotlight on the four core goals of anti-

bias education, and significant misconceptions some have had about their implementation.

These four goals rest on a body of research about the harmful impact of institutionalized prejudice and discrimination upon children's construction of a strong sense of self and positive attitudes towards others. From birth onward, all children are on a developmental journey, actively forming both their individual, personal identities and their social group identities (racial, gender, family structure, culture, and so on). These two sides of identity reflect both external societal

impositions and internal construction. Overt and covert negative messages and treatment act like micro-contaminants (Pierce, 1980), which gradually accumulate and undermine children's healthy development. Anti-bias education offers children the tools for countering the toxins of racism, sexism, classism, and all the other '-isms' on themselves and on their behavior towards others.

The four anti-bias goals are interdependent and essential for all children. They come as a package, each goal building on and strengthening the others. An effective anti-bias education program actively and daily practices all four goals. However, one of the most common implementation mistakes is educators choosing to work on only some ABE goals, instead of all of them.

### Goal One or Two?

Teachers sometimes bypass goal one to focus on goal two, especially when working with white children. This choice usually rests on the incorrect assumption that white children do not need guidance in developing a positive racial identity because "They don't really have a racial identity. They are just individuals." However, like all children, white children are actively constructing their racial identity (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). Ignoring goal one does not help white children resist internalizing the racist messages of white superiority. Nor does it foster a healthy identity about who they are within the diversity of family structure, gender, economic class or physical self.

In contrast, some teachers, working primarily with children of color, focus solely on goal one. Bypassing goal two often rests on the idea that children of color have enough to do to develop a positive identity, which racism denies them. We agree that goal one is crucial and must be a curriculum thread throughout the year. However, children of color also

absorb prejudices against other groups of color, as well as other social identities, and need skills to constructively interact with all people.

As a fundamental survival tool in a diverse world, everyone needs to accomplish both goals one and two. Through this learning, they come to understand how people share basic human needs, yet meet those needs in diverse ways. They come to understand the layers of human differences (family structure, gender) and find language to talk appropriately about difference. Silence about children's social group identities or about human diversity, leaves children vulnerable to the most pernicious, divisive messages, with no way to ask questions or to get help in making sense of what they absorb from the world around them.

In this regard, it is important to clarify another incorrect assumption about goal two: that learning about ways people are different from each other opens the doors for prejudice, while keeping silent about diversity prevents children from learning prejudice. In fact, it is not differences that result in children learning prejudice, but silence in the face of prevailing societal prejudice and discrimination. As considerable research illustrates, children absorb prevailing negative beliefs about different identities and ways of being in the world — even when adults do not recognize that this is happening. All children need guidance if they are to grow strong in the four anti-bias education goals.

### Skipping Goals Three and Four?

Goals three and four provide children with the critical thinking skills, the emotional convictions, and the strength to internalize goals one and two and to live strongly and bravely in a diverse and complex world. However, too many teachers trying to implement ABE bypass these essential goals. Several

dynamics seem to be at play in this choice. First, teachers report freezing when they hear children make negative comments about people's backgrounds, or observe them engaging in discriminatory play. In these situations, they also relate feelings of discomfort, helplessness, fear of offending, or of 'making it worse'; these reactions result in skimming over or ignoring what is happening. A second reason for skipping goals three and four is a belief that they are not developmentally appropriate for young children. Connected to this belief is the notion that exploring unfairness based on people's identity and learning ways to stand up against unfairness will upset or frighten young children. Such thinking reflects a lack of knowledge about how institutionalized '-isms' negatively affect young children's development and the dangers of silence. It also reflects lack of personal experience with how addressing injustice creates safety and protection for everyone. Another anxiety that stops some teachers from implementing goals three and four is the worry about potential hostile reactions from children's families.

Teachers, program directors, and teacher educators can take steps to develop their knowledge, comfort, and skills with goals three and four — and help others to do so as well. Engaging in personal reflection with colleagues leads to self-awareness and knowledge that supports adults in feeling comfortable engaging in critical thinking and taking action against injustice (see "Stop & Think" questions in *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). The objectives of personal work are to uncover and examine our own learned attitudes and behaviors, to build up anti-bias understanding of the many ways people live, and to initiate new behaviors in our work with children and families. This leads to more clarity, comfort, and skill in doing anti-bias work in developmen-

tally appropriate ways with children and creates an environment in which teachers feel understood and supported while doing this work.

A second strategy is to have a clear picture of what learning experiences goals three and four look like with young children. Here is an example of a teacher-instigated learning experience, which comes out of the children's own experiences (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989):

A preschool teacher decided to use a box of band-aids labeled 'flesh-colored' to introduce an activity based on goals three and four. She read aloud and explained what the term 'flesh-colored' meant. She suggested an experiment: children putting band-aids on their arms and checking to see if it matched their skin colors. The children made a chart about the results, and then expanded their sample to other classes in the center. This gave them even more data about the false claim of the band-aids being flesh-colored. The children, agreeing that the term was not fair, dictated a letter to the band-aid company and went on a walk to the Post Office. After a while, the company sent the center coupons for transparent band-aids, which the children felt were much fairer!

'teachable moment,' and helping them formulate their questions and thoughts about diversity, fairness, and unfairness. Then we reflect, analyze the children's ideas, and build curriculum that fosters the further development of accurate knowledge and understanding. We also pay attention to young children's exposure to prevailing hurtful stereotypes and misinformation (e.g. "Muslims are our enemy"). Then, we create curriculum to counter such prejudice and discrimination.



### Child- or Teacher-initiated Activities?

One of the most frequently asked questions about anti-bias education is, "Should we wait until children bring up specific issues or should we initiate activities?" The short answer is: We do both. We do not wait until children bring up the idea of washing hands, or initial sounds of words, or ask how to count. We know young children need these skills so we build learning them into our curriculum. Anti-bias goals are just as important. The teacher in the band-aid example did not wait. She used an item of interest to the children, and provided them with opportunities to gather information, think critically, and experience turning 'unfair' into 'fair.'

As with all curriculum subjects, it is essential to observe and listen to the children we teach, watching for the

Waiting until you hear something from the children to do anti-bias education promotes silence — and abdicates teacher responsibility. It means allowing children to figure out some of the most difficult issues in our society on their own. Doing this runs much more risk than initiating an activity that might make you uneasy or might not go over well with the children. Like every other aspect of teaching, you are also the learner; and if one approach does not work you try another.

It is immensely satisfying to teachers to see the impact they can have in supporting children in this important work. Weaving the four anti-bias education core goals into the daily curriculum — as a teacher or program director — takes commitment, persistence, time, and critical reflection about yourself, the children, and your work. It is worth the effort.

To help you, future articles will explore the following topics and more:

- Anti-bias Education in a time of change
- Do you do holidays in Anti-bias Education?
- Getting started with Anti-bias Education in your classroom and program
- Planning strategies for incorporating Anti-bias Education into the daily, regular program
- Solving personal and program challenges: Being an Anti-bias Education activist

### References

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