

Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias

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The early years are the time to begin helping children form strong, positive self-images and grow up to respect and get along with people who are different from themselves. We know from research that children between 2 and 5 start becoming aware of gender, race, ethnicity, and disabilities. They also begin to absorb both the positive attitudes and negative biases attached to these aspects of identity by family members and other significant adults in their lives. If we want children to like themselves and value diversity, we must learn how to help them resist the biases and prejudices that are still far too prevalent in our society.

Bias based on gender, race, disability, or social class creates serious obstacles to all young children's healthy development. In order to develop healthy self-esteem, they must learn how to interact fairly and productively with different types of people. Naturally, children's curiosity will lead them to ask questions: "Why is her skin so dark?" "Why does he speak funny?" We may hide our own negative feelings, or hope that children simply won't notice, but our avoidance actually teaches children that some differences are not acceptable. We must face our own biased attitudes and change them in order to help foster all children's growth.

What parents and teachers can do:

- Recognize that because we live in a society where many biases exist, we must counteract them -- or else we will support them through our silence.
- At home or at school, give children messages that deliberately contrast stereotypes by providing books, dolls, toys, wall decorations, TV programs, and records that show: men and women in nontraditional roles, people of color in leadership positions, people with disabilities doing activities familiar to children, and various types of families and family activities.
- Show no bias in the friends, doctors, teachers, and other service providers that you choose, nor in the stores where you shop.

- Remember what you do is as important as what you say.
- Make it a firm rule that a person's appearance is never an acceptable reason for teasing or rejecting them. Immediately step in if you hear or see your child behave in such a way.
- Talk positively about each child's physical characteristics and cultural heritage. And, help children learn the differences between feelings of superiority and those of self-esteem and pride in their own heritage.
- Provide opportunities for children to interact with other children who are racially/culturally different from themselves and with people who have various disabilities.
- Respectfully listen to and answer children's questions about themselves and others. Don't ignore, change the subject, or in any way make the child think she is bad for asking such a question.
- Teach children how to challenge biases about who they are. Give them tools to confront those who act biased against them.
- Use accurate and fair images in contrast to stereotypes, and encourage children to talk about the differences. Help them to think critically about what they see in books, movies, greeting cards, comics, and on TV.
- Let children know that unjust things can be changed. Encourage children to challenge bias, and involve children in taking action on issues relevant to their lives.

Building a healthy self-identity is a process that continues all our lives. Help children get a head start by teaching them to resist bias, and to value the differences between people as much as the similarities.

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