

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

by Lisa A. Sparks and Julie A. Wars

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



Julie A. Wars is a professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is also a past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and a past president of the American Psychological Association (APA). She has co-authored several books on anti-bias education, including *Anti-Bias Education: Helping Children Develop a Sense of Belonging and Empowerment* (2015) and *Anti-Bias Education: The Role of Teachers* (2015).



Lisa A. Sparks

A - E

(Identity) a child's sense of self, including their physical, social, and cultural characteristics.

(Diversity) a condition in which all people are valued and respected for their differences.

(Justice) a state of fairness and equity, where everyone has the same opportunities and resources.

(Activism) a state of being active in promoting social change and challenging injustice.

— Lisa A. Sparks & Julie A. Wars (2010)

Certain questions, issues, and misinterpretations come up regularly as early childhood educators engage with anti-bias work. 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 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

three and four is the worry about potential hostile reactions from children’s families.

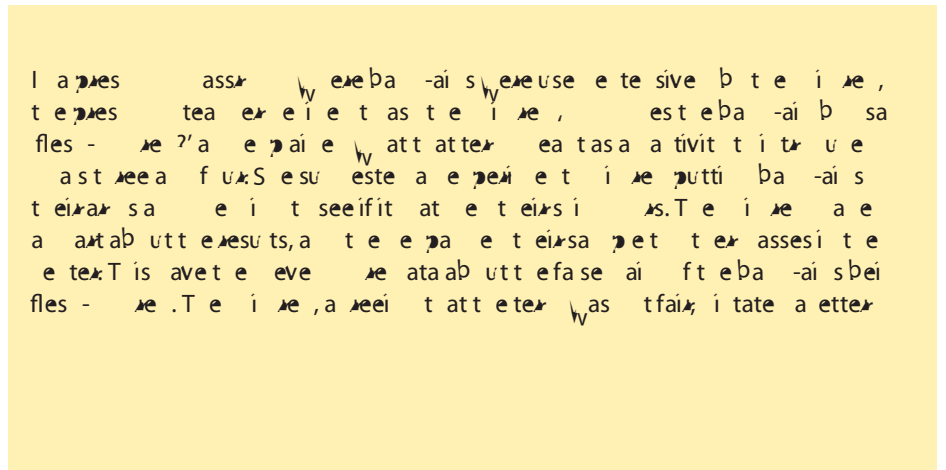
Teachers, program directors, and teacher educators can take steps to develop their knowledge, comfort, and skills with goals three and four — and help others to do so as well. Engaging in personal reflection with colleagues leads to self-awareness and knowledge that supports adults in feeling comfortable 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 developmentally 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):

C - -
A ?

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 ‘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. “All Muslims are our enemy”). Then, we create curriculum to counter such prejudice and discrimination.



Learning Naturally
FP 4c

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:

- 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

Derman-Sparks, L., & ABC Task Force. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: Tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC

Derman-Sparks, L., & Olsen Edwards, J. (.T.44 2585ebi7(u) Tm76g cbi