

CHAPTER 4

Building an Anti-Bias Education Program: Clarifying and Brave Conversations with Children

Everything teachers do—setting up the learning environment; planning the curriculum; observing, assessing, and thinking about individual children; and so much more—rests upon establishing strong, caring, and trusting relationships with children and families. Without such relationships with their teachers, children find it hard to open up, to learn, to grow, to feel safe. These relationships are built on

- Seeing each individual child as a member of a unique family with many, often complex, social identities that shape their learning and ways of being
- Respecting each child's individual way of learning and being rather than imposing an expected behavior
- Knowing how children learn to think and how they are, and are not yet, able to discern what is happening around them
- Understanding that children are in the process of learning at all times and that it takes many experiences before they master an idea or a behavior
- Listening carefully to each child to understand how each is making sense of experiences and/or behavior



An essential element in building strong relationships is your willingness to engage in conversations that support children's sense of self, that let them know they are safe and honored exactly as who they are. Children live in a world that sends multiple, stereotype-laden messages about their comparative value, their right to be visible, and how they are expected to behave based on their economic class, ethnicity, gender, abilities, racial identity, and religion. These overt and covert messages affect their own sense of self-worth and how they think about people who are different. Avoiding conversations about identity and fairness is a disservice to children who are developmentally dependent upon adults to help them make sense of the complex and contradictory societal messages they receive.

When programs do not demonstrate respect for and acknowledgement of human diversity, children and families cannot feel truly seen or honored. When

a teacher avoids directly addressing comments or behaviors that can hurt another child, no child feels safe. Keeping silent not only does *not* help children, it actively hurts them. Learning how to break this silence, how to talk about anti-bias issues with clarity, courage, and caring, is an essential skill not only in the world of early childhood education but in the world at large. This chapter explores ways to build trusting relationships with children by directly talking about identity, diversity, injustice, and activism, which correspond to the four goals of ABE.

The Hurtful Power of Silence

It is hoped that children will turn to their trusted adults when they are confused or are hurt by their experiences. But to do so, children need a vocabulary to describe what they are thinking. Too often, adults ignore children's attempts to understand how people can be different from one another and yet the same. A White child asking about skin color is likely to hear something like "We are all the same. We are all friends here!" That child is left to figure out for herself why the people around her look different from one another and, with insufficient information, may

well decide that dark skin means dirty skin or that different skin colors mean different kinds of blood or different personalities.

Equally significant, *if adults go silent about things that children are seeing and trying to understand, children absorb the emotional message that the subject is dangerous and should not be talked about.* This leaves children with an undercurrent of anxiety and unease, which are the earliest lessons about bias and fear. Silence is a powerful teacher. What you don't say carries messages that are as strong as what you do say. Regardless of your intent, your unwillingness to openly talk with a child about the world sends serious, strong, and potentially hurtful messages. Consider:

- **Silence robs children** of a vocabulary to talk about or to ask questions about what is confusing or troubling to them.
- **Silence requires children** to figure things out on their own using their limited understanding of the world.
- **Silence teaches fear**—the subject is so unsafe the adults won't even talk about it.
- **Silence forces children** to rely on sources such as other children (another 4-year-old in the carpool, the 6-year-old next door, a 10-year-old cousin) and the media (TV, advertising, videos) for information, including how they should feel and think about what is happening in their world. These are major sources of inaccurate and often stereotyped information.

Talking about anti-bias issues can be challenging, especially if a person has not experienced the particular bias. If this is true for you, you may be reluctant to talk about sensitive subjects out of fear that you will offend someone or that the conversation will worsen a situation. You may have been explicitly or implicitly taught that nice people don't mention human differences or that noticing differences is the same as being biased.

If you experience prejudice and discrimination yourself, comments or behaviors from children that reflect society's biases may stir up painful experiences or anger. Your own experiences may hinder you from being available to children to help them understand

Applying Anti-Bias Education Core Goals to Conversations with Children

- Teachers will regularly have clarifying and brave conversations with children on anti-bias issues. These may be initiated by either children or teachers. **(Goal 2)**
- Conversations will support children's social identities and families. **(Goal 1)**
- Conversations will provide accurate information and appreciation of diversity. **(Goal 2)**
- Conversations will teach children to think critically about fairness and have vocabulary to talk about it. **(Goals 3 and 4)**

A Mother's Story

by Nadiyah F. Taylor, director of
the Department of Early Childhood
Department at Las Positas College

Anti-bias education is personal for me and for the well-being of my child. I am a Black woman in an interracial relationship and have a beautiful biracial son who is 4 years old. He has dark brown hair with rich red and golden-brown highlights. It is big, bouncy, and full of curls that spring this way and that and seem to move with a wind that comes from within. He wears his hair in braids, twists, ponytails, and cornrows, and his favorite style is “my curls, Mom.”

One Sunday night I braided my son's hair in loose cornrows. He ran to the mirror to admire the hairdo and expressed excitement about the way it looked and that it would keep his hair from falling into his face while he practiced his new skills on the high bar at school. However, sometime between arriving at school with his father at 7:30 a.m. and his classmates' arrival at 9:00 a.m., my son concluded that “Even though it made me sad, Mommy, I needed to take out my braids so (one of his classmates) wouldn't tease me.” One child teased him saying that he had “puffy” hair and was a “barnacle head.” Other children thought

he looked like a girl. And, as we learned later, the teacher said and did nothing. My husband, who saw him later that morning, described to me the devastated and shamed look on my son's face as he explained to his dad what had happened.

During the following week, my son decided that it was safe to wear his hair in curls, but that he could add no other adornments and definitely could not have braids or ponytails. During the same period, he also started to talk to me about how he thought my hair was puffy and looked a little weird.

Can you imagine what it felt like for me to see some of my son's sparkle diminish that day and what might have been different had his teacher and his school followed through on a real anti-bias program?

We talked to his sweet, honest, overwhelmed teacher who, despite the school's written anti-bias statement, said she had no idea how to intervene or where to start or what resources might be available to her. As a result, all the children lost out. My son's sense of himself was injured, and all the children missed out on an opportunity to appreciate human differences and to recognize hurtful behavior.

the confusing messages they receive in the world in which they live. Whatever the reason, remaining silent in the face of bias helps keep it alive.

In Nadiyah Taylor's case (see “A Mother's Story”), what a difference it would have made for her son if the teacher and staff at his school had had the knowledge, skills, and courage to address that experience with him and the other children! How useful it would have been if the teacher had recognized that, even if the teasing was based on simple curiosity, it replicated a painful social attitude about African American hair and about boys' hair and girls' hair. What a gift it could have been if the teacher had used that moment to protect Nadiyah's son and to support all the children in learning about the wonder of the many ways hair grows, the beauty of



different kinds of hair, and the joy for boys *and* girls of wearing their hair the way they like! In addition, *if the teaching staff had been prepared to respond, the incident could have been an important moment of building trust and safety between the child and teacher and between the child's family and the school.* It could have reinforced for *all* the children the message that they would be accepted and honored for exactly who they were.

Stop & Think: What Did You Learn About Speaking Up or Keeping Silent?

- What do you remember from childhood about how you made sense out of the great range of human differences? Did you ask questions? If not, what stopped you? If you did, who did you ask?
- What are your earliest memories of noticing differences such as skin color or economic class? What words did you have to describe what you noticed? What feelings did you absorb from adults about those differences?
- What topics did you learn were not for children to discuss? How did you feel about those subjects?
- What keeps you silent today when you hear or see evidence of bias or prejudice?

Holding Clarifying Conversations About Anti-Bias Issues

What children ask, say, or do about any aspect of their own or others' identities and differences offers rich teachable moments for ABE, including their comments or behaviors that reflect discomfort, stereotypes, or rejection of an aspect of diversity. How you respond to these opportunities is a central part of effective teaching.

Anti-bias conversations begin in many ways. Sometimes a child is simply curious about human differences and wants information. Sometimes the behavior or questions indicate a child is struggling with pre-prejudicial thinking. Sometimes there is intent to hurt emotionally or physically. Sometimes there are indicators that a child feels shame or fear about a social identity. And sometimes,

world issues from the news or from terrible events in the community intrude into the life of the classroom. In each case, you can respond in developmentally appropriate ways, always directly acknowledging what is going on for an individual child or a group of children.

Fit Your Conversation to the Child's Understanding

Young children often do not have words to describe what is on their minds. They are just beginning to develop vocabulary to describe how they feel. Observing their body language and behavior for cues about what they are feeling and what they understand provides you with more accurate information than their words. When you talk with young children, do the following:

- Listen carefully.
- Ask questions.
- Respond with simple, straightforward answers.
- Check to see what the child has understood and is feeling.
- Proceed in small steps.

Here's an example:

Three-year-old Tobin, who wears a brace on one leg, is watching three other children near the sandbox load wagons with small pumpkins that are near the sandbox and pull them around the yard to a table market they have set up.

Teacher: Hey, Tobin. Looks like you're interested in the pumpkins.

Tobin: (*Shakes his head.*)

Teacher: Do you want to play with the other kids?

Tobin: (*Nods.*)

Teacher: Would you like me to come with you to ask them?

Tobin: Too fast.

Teacher: Too fast?

Tobin: (*Nods.*) Too fast.

Teacher: Are the kids moving too fast for you to play?

Tobin: (*Nods.*)

Teacher: We could ask them to go slower, or you could load the pumpkins for them to take to the market table.

Tobin: I could load the pumpkins?

Teacher: Yes, you could offer to load the pumpkins.

Tobin: (*Suddenly seems determined, pushes the teacher away, and walks over to the children.*) I can load the pumpkins. You can take them to the market.

This is a pretty straightforward conversation. The teacher pays attention, asks questions, checks in with the child, and offers small amounts of information. If there had been more than one child involved, the teacher would have helped the children hear and understand each other. If it was a situation where a child was being hurt, or potentially could be hurt, the teacher would stop the action and then continue with the conversation.

Respond to Children's Curiosity or Puzzlement

Children rely on adults to help them figure out what things mean. Their questions create teachable moments, unexpected opportunities to respond to their attempts to understand what they observe. Your response is to give accurate, developmentally appropriate, matter-of-fact information that helps children develop their understanding of diversity and also to communicate the feeling that differences are interesting and wonderful, something to be appreciated and celebrated. Here are some examples of such responses:

Child: Why does Anil's grandma wear that costume?

Teacher: That's not a costume. Anil's grandmother is visiting from India. She is wearing a dress called a *sari*. It's her everyday kind of dress—it has so many beautiful colors, doesn't it?

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Child: Why does Jeremiah have braces on his feet?

Teacher: Jeremiah's feet and legs need help to work together. So the doctors gave him braces to help him walk and stand.

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Child: How come Olivia has two mommies?

Teacher: Some families have one mommy or one daddy, some have a mommy and a daddy, some families have grandparents who raise the children. Olivia's family has two mommies. Our families have different people in them, and they love us and take care of us. Each family is special!

Although questions like these appear to be uncomplicated requests for information, an anti-bias teacher files the question away and waits to see if there are bigger, more complex issues behind the questions. If so, those may need to be addressed through the curriculum, with classroom visitors, and/or with special activities.

Guidelines for Clarifying Conversations

1. Find out what the children think. Listen, ask questions, pay attention to the ideas and feelings expressed. Think about the issues of fairness and unfairness (justice and injustice) that are part of this moment.
2. Tell the truth. In simple sentences that children can understand, give them accurate information about the issue. And, of course, check to see what they understand, how they feel, and what they think about this information.
3. State the justice issues. What is fair or unfair, kind or hurtful about this situation? How do they know?
4. Speak your values. "In our program, we . . ." or "This is what we believe . . ." or "Here's how we treat people in our school . . ."