

# Stopping Bias In Its Tracks

by Laurie Olsen & Nina Mullen

*An intensive course equips child-care workers for a crucial mission: to teach a new generation to combat prejudice.*

A little girl runs toward the swings, braids flying, but stops short. Two boys perched on the structure taunt, "No girls on the tire swing! You can't play here."

Two young friends in the play corner prepare to play house. The taller girl, standing sturdily with her hands on her hips, insists to the one in the wheelchair, "You'll have to be the baby because you can't walk."

A four-year-old boy, new to the day care center, shrinks against the blonde, rosy-faced teacher leading him on a grand tour. A Latina teacher who has just greeted him spoke with a Spanish accent. "I don't like her," the boy says, "She talks funny. Tell her to go away."

Three preschoolers race around making war whoops and pretending to scalp the other children. They insist to their inquiring teacher that this is how real Indians behave. They know, because they just saw "Peter Pan."

These kinds of incidences occur every day in early childhood programs. They are examples of "pre-prejudice," the seed that for young children, in the context of societal reinforcement, may bloom into real racism and sexism - or become internalized by children in the form of shame and self-hatred as they grow, says Julie Olsen Edwards, a Santa Cruz, California educator.

Edwards is among a vanguard of teachers dedicated to helping transform children's budding prejudices into appreciation for humankind's differences. The curriculum, pioneered by Louise Derman-Sparks and described in the book, *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*, has sold tens of thousands of copies since its publication in 1989 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

The Anti-Bias course's basic premise is that even very young children absorb society's spoken and unspoken biases against people of different skin tones, cultures and lifestyles. An essential role of early childhood education should be to help children talk about and understand the differences among people, to develop the skills for naming prejudice when it occurs, and to gain the strength to stand up for oneself and others in the face of injustice.

## Identifying Our Own Cultures First

The course begins in a highly personal manner - focusing on the participants rather than the children. All class members identify their own cultures - their individual ethnicities, religions, socioeconomic classes, etc. Such an exercise is crucial, Edwards said, because an anti-bias curriculum for children must begin with an anti-bias curriculum for adults. "When an adult works with a young child, in many ways the adult is the curriculum."

## The Nature of Systemic Oppression

Systemic oppression, according to Edwards, is how one power group dominates another through direct control and pervasive misinformation about race, ethnicity or other aspects of the target group. Edwards tried to distinguish between systemic oppression and the kind of human hurts that occur between any two people. She contrasted an African American child, teased because her hair is nappy, to a blond child, teased because her hair is colorless. Both children feel hurt by the ridicule. But for the African American child, the whole world echoes the message that her hair, her person, is unacceptable. The books she sees in the library, the billboards, the television commercials, seldom show girls with nappy hair. Rather, they extol the virtues of loose, long and light-colored hair. The African American child "internalizes" those messages and begs her mother to spend hours trying to straighten her "ugly" hair.

To further illuminate the concept of systemic oppression, Edwards introduced Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development, which teaches, essentially, that children are raised by society as well as by their parents. This is an important message - that parents are not wholly responsible for what their children learn and how they develop. Cultural socialization is strong, and one of its key components is the attachment of meaning and position to specific racial, gender, class or cultural groups. And everyone, she stresses, has been on both the oppressor and target sides of systemic oppression.

Edwards attempts to shed light on the methods of systemic oppression by breaking classes into groups. "You are being sent to Mars with 10,000 other Earthlings. There are 200,000 Martians. They are green, although they look generally like us (two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two legs, etc.) The groups can interbreed. You, as Earthlings, are outnumbered 20 to 1,

but your job is to maintain control of the Martians and of their planet. You have to get the Martians to capitulate, because force alone clearly won't do it."

She asks the groups to select one area - education, housing, health care, justice, economics, the media - and to design the system so that Earthlings would be able to maintain control.

For fifteen minutes, the groups write plans on large sheets of paper mounted around the room. Silence fills the room as students read one plan after another. A housing system advertised as available to everyone, but priced so that only those with Earthling salaries can buy houses; a school system that teaches only the history of Earth that ignores Mars; an educational hierarchy that selects a few Martians who look and act the most like Earthlings and gives them rewards, but punishes the other Martians for speaking their own language. One student said, "I feel so terrible. I don't like to know that we all knew how to design this kind of system." "How do you know?" "Because that's the way the world really is." Edwards sympathizes: "It is frightening and painful to realize how deep in all of us runs the knowledge of how oppression works." People learn to feel ashamed of their accents, hair, or other signs of belonging to a target group - or many become blinded to the reality of their own privilege and to the pain of the target groups to which they don't belong.

"We become distanced from people and live with fear about them," Edwards says. Fear can rage into overt hatred, violence and attempts to control other groups. But none of us were born with that knowledge and misinformation. It is learned behavior and we can take responsibility for changing it."

### What Children See in Their World

1. Watch three hours of children's television. Tally how many males, females, people of color, and people with disabilities you see. Note the status and character assigned to each type.
2. Look through the children's section at a local video store. Tally the main characters according to sex, race and disabilities.
3. See any movie advertised as a children's film. Evaluate the covert and overt messages about males and females, people of color, and people with disabilities.
4. Go to the children's section of a library or bookstore. List all the books you can find with Hispanic-American children in them.
5. Analyze your own classroom's physical environment - the dolls, books, pictures on the walls. Remember, absence is also a message. What does your classroom teach children?

### Four Steps for Fighting Bias

In talking about bias and diversity, students also share their strategies for dealing with children. Edwards pulls out a book, *Irene's Idea*, about a young girl who doesn't want to go to school; it is Father's Day and everyone will make cards, but Irene doesn't have a father. She decides to go to school and make a card that says how happy she is to have a mother and

a sister and a cat. Edwards asked her students to construct the four steps of an anti-bias curriculum as relates to this problem.

**Step 1:** Help children develop a solid sense of self-esteem and self-awareness. Help each child make a card appropriate to his or her own family situation.

**Step 2:** Help children recognize and name the diversity in human experience, the differences that exist. Read a book such as *Irene's Idea*.

**Step 3:** Develop the ability to recognize injustice, both overt and covert. Show children a collection of Hallmark "Father's Day" cards. Ask them "What is wrong with these cards? Are they for all families?" Bring out multicultural dolls and imagine the different kinds of families they might have.

**Step 4:** Develop a sense of empowerment and the skills to act alone or with others against injustice. Brainstorm with children for a new name for Father's Day which might be more appropriate to all families - for example, "People Who Love Us Day." Assist the children in writing a letter to a card company with their suggestions.

Often, appropriate teaching materials for an Anti-Bias approach don't already exist; if so, it becomes each teacher's responsibility to make them.

Effective early childhood education pedagogy includes really listening to children, encouraging them to speak up, giving them language that allows them to describe their feelings, and helping them to analyze issues and solve problems. "It is important we help children think about what they hear and not just accept everything as fact," Edwards says. "We need to give them tools for asking questions and provide a lot of adult support when they take stands on issues of fairness and accuracy."

An elementary school teacher's aide, Sue Kissell, described her reaction to the course on the anti-bias curriculum. One day, she overheard a fourth-grade teacher planning a lesson on inventions. When Kissell suggested a book on Black inventors, the teacher said she did not need it. "I was upset," Kissell says. "I realized that this was an example of misinformation by omission. So I went down to the library and got the book out for her, and showed her what a neat book it was and all the wonderful inventions in it.

"This is something I wouldn't have done before, to get involved that way, to see it as so important that there be images of Black inventors," she adds. But her new perspective - and the impact it will have on children - is really what the course is all about. "I'm not a political person, and I never thought of myself as an activist, or at least I didn't used to be," Kissell says. "But I find myself changing. It's clearer to me that I need to do certain things."

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