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## **Nipping bias in the bud**

**Some preschools are using a special program to teach their students, before prejudices take hold, to respect cultural, racial and religious diversity.**

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**By Carla Rivera, Times Staff Writer**

As soon as Violet Feldman laid eyes on her cousin's short haircut, she wanted one too. The 5-year-old begged her parents to trim her dark-brown locks just like his and once at the salon, she wanted to go shorter and shorter.

She loved her hairdo until the morning she walked into her preschool class at Temple Israel of Hollywood. "You look like a boy!" a few of the children blurted out. Violet was devastated. She couldn't wait for her hair to grow, and made sure to wear a pink headband every day.

It was the kind of painful lesson that many young children endure day in and day out, be it for having darker skin than other classmates, an accent that sounds different or a disability that provokes taunting. But in Violet's case, teachers confronted the incident head on, speaking with students about understanding and respecting differences and pointing out that some girls in the class have short hair and some boys have long hair.

Similar lessons on cultural, racial and religious diversity have been incorporated into Temple Israel's curriculum on an ongoing basis as part of the A World of Difference Institute, a program recently adopted by the school.

Sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League's Miller Early Childhood Initiative, it is one of the few anti-bias programs specifically for preschoolers, drawing on research showing that children begin to perceive differences and attach negative or positive values to them as early as age 3.

Now operating in 14 cities, the program trains teachers in strategies to confront prejudice and uses specially designed materials developed with the characters from "Sesame Street." The goal is to teach tolerance, respect and inclusion in a way that is geared to young minds.

"We really wanted to focus on building the right foundations," said Lindsay Friedman of A World of Difference Institute. "We know that biases and stereotyping are seeping in even at this age, but this is meant to be a preventive approach, not as much countering negative messages as building positive ones."

The program already has had an effect at Temple Israel, said nursery school principal Sherry Fredman.

"We used to devote the entire month of January to Martin Luther King, but this program has expanded our focus," she said. "We've broadened our curriculum and now it's an everyday part of life."

After Violet's classmates realized that they had hurt her feelings, several apologized to her, and a parent of one of the students who had made a remark wrote her a note.

On another occasion, a parent recalled being mortified when her daughter pointed to a Latina shopper while at the supermarket and said, "Look, Mom, a nanny," which prompted another classroom discussion, said Beth Weisman, assistant principal of the nursery school.

The children are developing a growing consciousness of how their behavior can affect others, said teacher Esther Posin. A recent morning's lesson about the rain forest and nocturnal creatures led to a discussion on what vision loss means.

The children were challenged to use their tactile sense instead of eyesight to guess what fruits were in a covered box, and Posin demonstrated how a walking stick could be used as an aid.

"Sometimes out in the schoolyard I'll hear, 'teacher Esther said we're not supposed to do this,' " Posin said. "Society is very 'me' centered, and my hope with this program is that they'll start focusing less on 'me' and more on 'us.' "

The program gives educators the resources to combat prejudice in all forms, but at the fairly homogenous Temple Israel, many of the issues that crop up normally involve gender roles, Weisman said. One boy left a jewelry-making class that he enjoyed because all his other classmates were girls. After getting reassurances from teachers, the boy eventually returned to the class and made a present for his mother.

In the Santa Ana Unified School District, where the program is operating in 11 schools and community centers as part of the Kinder Readiness Program, 4-year-olds learn about their own heritage and to appreciate others, said readiness coordinator Marjorie Cardenas. Roughly 97% of the students are Latino, with smaller numbers of Cambodians, whites and blacks.

The center at the Warwick Square Apartments used the arrival of a teacher from Sri Lanka for real-life lessons in intercultural exchange. Teachers had noticed that the children avoided dolls with Asian or black features. They decided to introduce the dolls to the children as a group and talked about how, although they were different, they wanted to be loved like the others.

"One of the girls later told me, 'teacher, I'm going to play with her because it looks like she really needs me,' " said Irene Carpio.

"Hopefully, if these kids go to the park with parents and they see an Asian child or an African American child, they're not going to be afraid to approach them," she said.

One of the strongest aspects of the program, Carpio said, is the outreach to parents, who also are encouraged to attend workshops and use the curriculum at home.

Studies have shown that children learn social cues at an early age from their environment, the media, and especially from the behavior and words of caregivers and family members.

About 85% of the brain develops during ages 3 to 5, and impressions formed after age 2 are lasting, said Linda A. Santora of the Anti-Defamation League. One study found that 50% of children formed racial biases by age 6, she said.

Temple Israel educators said they have become more comfortable dealing with potentially thorny issues, including a 4-year-old girl who said she wanted to be a boy and told her parents, "I think I made the wrong decision in your tummy," and the father who became infuriated when his son wanted to put on a princess dress during a play period.

For Cara Gelfand, the Temple Israel program is teaching invaluable lessons to her 4-year-old daughter, Esme.

"Even though our kids are in a somewhat sheltered community, we live in a vibrant city that behooves us to take advantage of that and respect all the differences that make up Los Angeles and the world."

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