



Why Is It Important to Teach Young Children to Appreciate Diversity?

Early Childhood Question Corner

Although children are not born with prejudice, by early childhood they have already acquired stereotypes or negative attitudes toward those that they perceive as “others.” An article in *The Buffalo News* reports that about 85 percent of the brain develops between ages 3 and 5, and that impressions and ideas formed between ages 2 and 4 are lasting (Lessons in Respect, 2003). Researchers tracking the development of racial attitudes in children found that almost half of the 200 children they studied had racial biases by age six (Parents Magazine, 2001). This study illustrates that the foundations for hatred are formed at a very early age and that diversity and anti-bias training are critical when children are young.

Children can distinguish different skin colors, hair textures and facial features from as early as six months of age. At this age they begin to understand they are a separate person and begin to see the differences and separateness of others. As children develop from infants to toddlers, around eighteen months of age, they begin to recognize their own features and if given a choice, will often choose the doll of their own color (Stern-LaRosa; Hofheimer Bettmann, 2000, 18–19).

In early childhood settings, name-calling and acts of social exclusion are the most common examples of discriminatory behavior and prejudicial thinking. Predispositions acquired at early developmental levels can often lay the foundation for these manifestations of prejudice, which left unexamined, have the

potential to escalate into violent acts of hate as children grow older (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Katz, 1982).

These findings suggest that it is important for parents and teachers to respond openly and honestly to young children's questions and misperceptions about skin color, gender, ethnic differences, various family structures, disabilities and other forms of difference. In *How to Talk to Your Children about Bias and Prejudice* (<http://www.partnersagainsthate.org/families/children.html>), Dr. Susan Linn adds that "It's best if children's early experience of the similarities and differences among groups of people is positive rather than negative. What's most important is to fill their lives with as many positive experiences with diversity as possible."