

Won't Discussing Differences Promote Prejudice?

Early Childhood Question Corner

Many adults think that talking with children about our differences teaches prejudice. In *Anti-Bias Curriculum*, Louise Derman-Sparks (1989) debunks that myth and writes that talking about differences does not increase prejudice in children. Whether or not adults discuss differences with children, all children eventually begin to notice differences among people as part of their natural development. It is the messages children receive about differences that shape the development of their attitudes.

Showing awareness of differences does not signify prejudice. "Prejudice does not come from children's awareness of differences in people, but from their perception of negative attitudes about those differences. Children learn biases from important adults in their lives, from the media, from books, from peers and from numerous other sources around them... If parents and [caregivers] give children accurate information and teach them to value differences, children will better be able to resist prejudice" (*Youth Service Activity Guide*, 1999, v).

In *Starting Small*, the authors explain that "perceiving the world through an egocentric lens, young children can respond negatively to individuals who possess unfamiliar traits" (1997, 99).

According to the authors of *Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice*, "noticing differences is biological. Forming attitudes about differences is social. The good news is that we can shape how children value the differences they perceive" (Stern-LaRosa; Hofheimer Bettmann, 2000, 14). Moreover, a 1996

study found that elementary school children with high levels of prejudice who discuss racial evaluations with children who have lower levels of prejudice are likely to be influenced by such discussions, in particular by their partners' expression of more tolerant attitudes and their justifications. These findings provide evidence that arranging opportunities for children that exhibit high levels of prejudice to talk with more open and accepting peers may be an effective way of promoting respect for differences (*Does Talk of Race Foster Prejudice or Tolerance in Children?*, 1996).

The above suggests adults and peers as influential in shaping children's perception of difference. In doing so, "scholars who examine prejudice formation in young children caution that prejudicial behavior must be understood in relation to cognitive, emotional and social development, along with children's particular experiences as members of a dominant or oppressed group" (*Starting Small*, 1997, 100).

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