

How Do I Respond to Children's Bias?

Early Childhood Question Corner

In responding to children's bias, keep the following tips in mind:

- Young children may say or do things that appear biased. These words and actions stem from children's natural curiosity and bluntness. Try to be prepared with the appropriate responses to use at these times so that you can react in a calm manner. Children take their cues from you—if you seem flustered or uncomfortable, children may feel ashamed and embarrassed.
- Bias situations can occur that are not always obvious. You need to be a careful observer of what is happening between children and the changing dynamics between and among them. Be on the lookout for a change in children's behavior, such as a child who is uncharacteristically quiet (someone might have hurt her or him with name-calling), or something subtle that may not strike you, such as a change in who or what a child plays with.
- Address any biased comments children make, such as, "I don't want to play with her. She walks funny." or "Alex talks funny." Respond with simple, factual answers, such as "Alex is learning to speak English. That is why he sounds a little different than you. You shouldn't say he talks funny. That could hurt his feelings." And, of course, make sure to reflect on what you are saying and check your own comments.
- Teach children that words can hurt. Children need to know that hurtful words are unacceptable. Let them know that it is valid to feel hurt when

called names; don't say things such as "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never harm me."

- Give children time to grow. This is a life-long learning process.
- Don't forget the child who was hurt. It's easy to spend time talking to the children who initiated the situation, while the targeted or hurt child is left alone with powerful emotions. Be sure that the hurt child's feelings are addressed in a timely manner, too.
- When problems arise or feelings are hurt, ask children to brainstorm ways to make sure that these things don't happen again. Post these suggestions, along with children's illustrations.
- Be sure children see you respond to insensitivity when it occurs. If they know you will not tolerate such behavior, they will feel safe and respected.
- Don't gloss over differences by saying things such as, "We're all the same inside." Children can see that people are different. Teach them to learn to live and work with a variety of people and to appreciate and respect their differences.
- Be a role model. When you treat everyone with respect and consideration, children will start to model your behavior.

Excerpted from *Bias-Free Foundations: Early Childhood Guidebook for Educators* (2001, 21) and *Bias-Free Foundations: Early Childhood Activities for Families* (2001, 7).