

HOW CAN YOU CREATE A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THAT RESPECTS DIVERSITY?

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The early childhood program environment should look and feel welcoming for all children and should reflect the diverse world in which we live. In addition to being bright, colorful, safe and clean, it should include children's artwork and show the diversity of the world through the program's abundant supply of age-appropriate toys, dolls, books, magazines, pictures and musical instruments. Because what is in the environment, as well as what is absent, provides children with essential information about who and what is important, every effort should be made to create a setting that is rich in possibilities for exploring diversity. (See "[Take a Look at Your Program](#)")

Creating a learning environment that respects diversity sets the scene for fostering children's positive self-concept and attitudes. Such an environment assists children in developing positive ideas about themselves and others, creates the conditions under which children initiate conversations about differences, and provides the setting for introducing activities about differences and creating fair and inclusive communities.

Environments that provide opportunities to explore cultural diversity include baskets, pillows, jewelry made from a variety of materials, puppets, rugs, wall hangings, eating and cooking utensils, recordings of music in many languages and other objects that reflect the world's cultures. Children can explore diversity in family structure, gender roles, and abilities if their environment contains materials such as dolls, books, dress-up clothes, puzzles, manipulatives, and dramatic play materials that depict a

variety of family structures, gender roles, and people with a variety of disabilities. The following guidelines suggest the types of images that are desirable in an early childhood environment in order to create an inclusive, diverse setting:

- images of the children and their families and/or caregivers as well as images of staff
- images that accurately reflect people's current daily lives in the United States, including home, work and recreation
- images of children and adults that represent all groups in the children's community
- images of all the cultural groups across the United States and in the world
- images that show people of various cultural groups and ages engaged in both similar and different activities
- images that reflect diversity in gender roles
- images that show diversity in family styles and configurations
- images that depict diversity of abilities and body types
- images that counter stereotypes

When deciding which materials to include in the early childhood programs, it is important not to inadvertently display pictures, books or objects that reinforce stereotypes; for example, seek out an image that shows a male, Mexican physician instead of a Mexican man in a sombrero taking a siesta. Show people within cultural groups enjoying a range of customs and activities, living in a variety of settings and belonging to various socioeconomic groups as well as single-parent, two-parent or extended family homes. In addition, it is important not to confuse images of past ways of life of a group with their contemporary life, or confuse images of people's ceremonial/holiday lives with their daily lives. This confusion exists in early childhood materials that focus almost exclusively on "minority" group holidays; to avoid such confusion, for example, show a Native American woman in a business suit working at a computer, instead of in ceremonial feathers.

Finding effective anti-bias materials that reflect many cultural groups in a nonstereotypical manner can be difficult, even for schools with adequate budgets and access to educational materials. Consider having parents, family members and other members of the community donate or make materials that can be used in the classroom, program or center. Make sure that the materials are good matches for what

children already know, correspond to their age, need for concrete, hands-on learning, and that cultural groups are represented equally. Taking the time to create such environments will help convey to children that all people are valuable.

As part of creating an inclusive learning environment, consider this tip from Marian, a pre-K–8th grade school psychologist in Haledon, NJ: “I think that the language teachers use in their classrooms and in other interactions with students is very important. For example, I use terms such as people of color, people with disabilities as opposed to disabled people, and wheelchair-users as opposed to wheelchair-bound. My school has many students who come from single-parent homes, live with guardians, grandparents and same-sex parents. I use language such as caregiver, a grown-up in your home, or the person in charge, rather than just using the term parents. I use inclusive language not only to promote diversity, but also as an educational tool.”

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TAKE A LOOK AT YOUR PROGRAM

Children need to see themselves, and people who represent the diversity of their families, their communities, and their world, in the environment in which they live, work, and play. Use the following questions to guide you in ensuring that you have created a bias-free inclusive environment.

Does the environment reflect diversity in family styles, configurations, and socioeconomic class? Does your program have:

- Books that contain diversity in family styles, configurations, and socioeconomic class?
- Images of diverse family styles, configurations, and socioeconomic class?

Do you have materials for children to explore their physical selves? Does your program have:

- Mirrors and/or cameras for self-examination?
- Paper, paint, clay, play dough, markers, crayons, pencils, and collage materials reflecting the full range of skin, eye, and hair colors and tones?
- A magnifying glass to investigate similarities and differences?

Does the environment accurately reflect a diverse group of people's current daily lives, including home, work, traditions, and recreation? Does the environment have:

- Magazines with pictures representing different ethnic groups, religions, ages, and backgrounds in every day dress, engaged in many different activities?
- A variety of types of cooking and eating utensils for dramatic play: chopsticks, forks, spoons, spatulas, rice bowls, wooden bowls, plates, woks, tortilla presses, etc.?
- Labels in other languages, especially in the languages of the families of the children in the program?
- Different types of blocks and building materials to build the various types of homes seen in current life?
- Images of children and their families and/or caregivers as well as images of staff?
- Images of people from diverse backgrounds interacting with one another?
- Images that demonstrate the geographic diversity of family dwellings, neighborhoods, and communities such as urban, rural and suburban?

Does the environment represent all the cultural groups within the community, across the United States, and in the world? Does your environment have:

- Multiethnic dolls reflecting all different skin colors, hair textures, and clothing styles?
- Artwork and music by male and female artists and musicians from around the world and from various religious and cultural groups?
- Play and work clothes ranging from suits to uniforms: pants, dresses, uniforms, hard hats, batik, saris, kimonos, serapes, kente cloth, ponchos, tunics, scarves, moccasins, sandals, etc.?
- Musical instruments from around the world: castanets, conch shells, brass bells, rattles, wooden flutes, maracas, gourds, bongo drums, guitars, etc.?

Does the environment reflect diversity in gender roles? Does your environment have:

- Alternatives to the pretend kitchen, such as a workbench, home office, store, office, hospital, etc.?
- Gender neutral career puzzles?
- Images of men and women in non-stereotypical roles, such as male dancers, female doctors, women demonstrating physical strength and men performing domestic tasks and caring for children?

Does your environment include the full ranges of abilities and body types? Does your environment have:

- Materials for children with disabilities such as painting alternatives for children who physically can't hold a paintbrush, cutting alternatives for children who physically can't use scissors and pillows for story time to prop up children with disabilities?
- Images of people with a range of abilities and body types engaged in a variety of activities?

Do you use inclusive language throughout your environment? Do you use:

- People first language that puts the person before the disability ex. the person who is blind, instead of the blind person?
- Terms that include non-traditional families such as caregiver and guardian?
- Language that avoids perpetuating stereotypes, for example, avoiding phrases such as "sitting Indian style?"
- Gender neutral language?