INTEGRATING MULTICULTURAL AND ANTI-BIASED EDUCATION INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

While on a field trip, four year old Ruth observes a man wearing a turban. She points and says, “Why is that man wearing a funny hat?”

While playing with blocks, Joshua says to five-year-old Lior, “Why do you talk so funny?” Lior doesn’t respond and says little for the rest of the day.

Children look to adults to model appropriate behavior. If adults do not interrupt acts of unfairness or if such acts are only interrupted occasionally, children have no sense of urgency to counter injustice, nor do they have models of effective methods to begin doing so themselves. Children need the adults in their lives to take responsibility to prevent and counter the damage caused by sexism, heterosexism, racism, ableism, ageism, anti-Semitism and classism by providing fair and accurate message about people from all cultural groups and by actively challenging the negative messages they witness.

In each of the scenarios cited here, a teacher could have intervened to model appropriate behavior. For example, a teacher could have told Ruth that the funny hat was called a turban and could have explained why the man was wearing it. Similarly, Joshua’s teachers could have explained that Lior is from a different country and is just learning English. Further, the teacher could emphasize that calling attention to difficulties in a negative way is apt to hurt Lior’s feelings.

A MODEL PROGRAM

Educators who attend anti-bias workshops provided by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) come away with the skills and tools to address scenarios such as the ones here as well as others relating to gender issues, diversity of family composition, physical/mental abilities and economic status. The workshops help participants explore their own biases and the ways they may affect the children in their
care. Through interactive, facilitator-led activities, participants come to recognize that they may unintentionally harbor stereotypes about the aptitudes or behavior of children. Although unsettling, that recognition helps them understand that they need to unlearn their own prejudices in order to teach inclusively and fairly.

Intertwining multicultural and anti-bias lessons into the existing curriculum, instead of teaching isolated multicultural units, makes an anti-bias approach part of everyday thinking. To assist educators in this integration and to help them ensure that their program environment reflects the diversity of the world and acts as a mirror in which children see themselves reflected, ADL provides all workshop participants with print resources created in collaboration with Sesame Workshop.

Because ADL recognizes that family members play a crucial role in shaping young children's thinking about the world around them, ADL also offers family workshops and provides participants with materials that include Bias-Free Foundations: Early Childhood Activities for Families. This book contains simple activities to use with children to reinforce the concepts of fairness and acceptance of differences.

**PROGRAMMATIC SUCCESS**

Positive evaluation findings indicate an increase in these behaviors among workshop participants:

- Talking with children about bias and discrimination
- Encouraging children to reflect on their own biases and discriminatory behavior
- Modeling techniques for children to use when they experience bias or discrimination
- Intervening when teasing, name calling and bias-related incidents occur in the classroom, among family members and among colleagues

For more information, please visit www.adl.org/education/miller.