

INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ON ISSUES OF DIVERSITY AND BIAS

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SECTION III



INTERACTING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ON ISSUES OF DIVERSITY AND BIAS

“As parents, educators, and mentors we should embrace our responsibility and opportunity to engage youth in thinking about their own biases and their experience with diversity and discrimination, and to help them develop essential social skills for living in a diverse society. These skills will serve our youth well in living and working in our country with its increasing diversity and in promoting understanding and respect across differences as members of the world community.”

- Karen McGill Lawson,
Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund

OVERVIEW

This section of the *Program Activity Guide: Helping Youth Resist Bias and Hate*, 2nd edition includes information on how children develop cultural and racial identity and attitudes. Also included in this chapter are ways that significant adults in children’s lives can provide them with positive experiences with respect to diversity. Experiences such as these can serve as a foundation for future attitudes and behaviors that reflect fairness and respect for all people. Frequently asked questions help to identify potential challenges that parents and educators face as they work with youth on issues of diversity and prejudice.

HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP RACIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES

Researchers have discovered important information about how children ages 2 to 12 develop racial and cultural identity and attitudes. Some of the key points are listed below. Findings with respect to younger children are included here in order to illustrate how the development of racial and cultural attitudes progresses from simple awareness to a more critical understanding of the historic, political, and geographic aspects of culture. This information can be used as a framework for observing children and youth at various ages and for selecting and creating appropriate lessons and activities.

Two-Year-Olds become increasingly aware of the physical aspects of identity. The awareness of gender is usually noticed first, followed by a curiosity about skin color, hair color and texture, eye shape and color, and other physical characteristics. Awareness of disabilities tends to come later than the awareness of gender and race; however, some two-year-olds may begin noticing more obvious physical disabilities, such as a person using a wheelchair.

Children between the ages of two and three may begin to be aware of the cultural aspects of gender, noticing that girls play more frequently with dolls while boys play more often with trucks. Children at this age may also be aware of ethnic identity, noticing such things as children eating different cultural foods, celebrating different holidays, or not celebrating or recognizing holidays or birthdays that they view as important.

Children may show signs of pre-prejudice (the ideas and feelings in very young children that may later develop into “real” prejudices when reinforced by biases that exist in society). Pre-prejudice is often manifested by discomfort, fear, or rejection of differences.

Children at this age may take their first steps toward the appreciation of people who are physically and culturally different from themselves if positive interactive experiences are part of the regular home, school, and afterschool program environments and activities.

Three- and Four-Year-Olds begin to expand their observations of differences and seek greater explanation of those differences. They are aware of their own and others’ physical characteristics. Constructing their identity is a primary task. They want to know how they got their skin, hair, and eye color, and may question why racial group “color” names are different from the actual colors.

Preschoolers are curious about variations within their extended family and the reason why two people with different skin colors may be considered part of the same group. They begin to wonder if skin, hair, and eye color will remain constant, as they begin to recognize that getting older brings physical changes. Children at this age may ask questions like, “Will my skin color change when I grow up?” or “Will you always be white?”

Five-Year-Olds begin to build a group ethnic identity, as well as an individual identity. They can more fully explore the range of differences within and between racial and ethnic groups as well as the range of similarities between groups.

Children at this age begin to understand scientific explanations for differences in skin color, hair texture, and eye shape. They are also beginning to understand the concept of family traditions and family history.

Six- to Eight-Year-Olds continue to recognize other group members and begin to realize that their ethnicity is not changeable. They are beginning to become aware of history, local actions, and attitudes for and against cultural groups. Such new knowledge, influenced in part by the media, may foster personal prejudices that may become an integral part of a child’s attitudes and behaviors.

Children at this age are highly influenced by the way they see people interact and resolve conflicts. Many children in this age group learn about culture and race with greater cognitive depth and emotional connection than they did at earlier stages.

They may begin to take pride in their own cultural identities and understand the experiences of others.

Nine- to Twelve-Year-Olds are gaining a greater understanding of the geographic and historical aspects of culture. Although many 9-12-year-olds may still be concrete thinkers primarily focused on their own experiences, many may be moving into more abstract thinking. They may become more aware of the attitudes and behaviors of persons in positions of authority within institutional settings, such as schools, places of worship, and youth agencies. They may also begin to gain an awareness and understanding of the various perspectives that have surrounded historic events.

Children at this age may understand personal and family struggles against bias and are often willing to discuss culture, race, and differences. A more complex understanding of personal, family, and community identity based on cultural values may emerge. Children at this age are becoming increasingly aware of the valuing and devaluing of culture and race by their peers, the media, and the larger community. The advantages and disadvantages of some groups politically, educationally, and economically are becoming evident, and children may informally begin to discuss what they see as unfairness.

Most 9-12-year-olds can understand racial and cultural stereotypes; can speak from dominant and nondominant perspectives; can practice stating the strengths and positive aspects of various cultures; and can discuss how internalizing a negative view about self may affect someone's confidence.

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THE ROLE OF PARENTS AND FAMILIES

“No child is born a bigot. Hate is learned and there is no doubt it can be unlearned. Leading experts on child development argue that the problem begins as early as preschool, where children have already learned stereotypes or acquired negative attitudes toward “others.” The process of countering those negatives with positives begins at an early age.”

- Caryl Stern, Anti-Defamation League

Children are naturally curious about the people and things that they see around them. From the time children begin to talk, they question their parents about their environment and asking questions about people that they perceive as different from themselves and other family members will eventually become a focus of some of those questions. Parents must remember that children will naturally form categories to help them understand the differences they perceive around them; it is the responsibility of parents (and eventually teachers) to help children better understand those differences and to not form value judgments about them. Parents and families have a unique role to play as the first source of information children use to begin building not only their own sense of identity but also their ideas and

beliefs about others.

Both the seeds of respect and the seeds of intolerance are planted when children are very young and nurtured by their experiences and by the attitudes of those around them as they grow. Children do not develop their attitudes about difference in isolation. It is precisely because they are keenly aware of how significant adults respond to the surrounding world, that they must talk to them openly and directly about issues of bias and difference. Establishing a pattern of talking to children about issues of diversity, prejudice, and bias early can help them to develop and maintain an open mind as it relates to these issues, and it will help them learn how to engage in thoughtful discussions about diversity as they move into adolescence. The goal is not just to help prevent bias-motivated behavior and hate crimes, but to help children flourish in a diverse society.

For many parents, discussing issues like diversity and prejudice with their children can be difficult. Some parents, afraid to say the wrong thing, say nothing at all. Other parents do their best to minimize differences. The truth is that while there is no one right way to talk about diversity, minimizing differences or avoiding the topic altogether sends the message that there is something “wrong” with people who are not like them. Giving children of all ages clear, accurate, and age-appropriate information when they ask questions about race, disabilities, sexual orientation, or other diversity-related topics helps them to begin processing the information in nonjudgmental and meaningful ways.

One of the most important things that parents can do is to ensure that their children's lives are filled with as many positive experiences with diversity as possible. Children who live in heterogeneous neighborhoods and who attend integrated schools have the best opportunity to learn first hand the value of getting to know people whose backgrounds and cultures differ from their own. But even children in homogeneous neighborhoods can be exposed to other cultures through books, pictures, music, art, crafts, games, television, and film. Research indirectly supports that creating a home environment where books, toys, and games reflect many racial and ethnic groups reduces the ethnocentric bias that even very young children can demonstrate. Giving children opportunities to interact with people of diverse backgrounds is also desirable, since all children learn best from direct experience.

Even when parents have done the best they can to help their children respect diversity and treat others fairly, they will at some time or another encounter bigotry, prejudice, and even hate. They will most likely witness or be the victim of bullying in school – bullying that may be based on some kind of prejudice. They may, unfortunately, even be the perpetrators of bullying and other forms of unfairness. And, even if their own lives are free from such experiences, hate and extreme acts of bigotry will infiltrate their lives through newspaper headlines, magazines, television, radio, and the Internet. When children encounter any form of bigotry it is essential to identify it as such and to talk about it with them. Parents should share their feelings of outrage at racially motivated attacks, “gay bashing,” or the vandalism of synagogues, churches, mosques, or other places of worship. Children need to know that there are groups who actively combat hate crimes and, as they get older, they need to learn about the laws and policies that protect civil rights and make hate crimes illegal.

What cannot be stressed strongly enough is the need for parents to accept that they, like everyone, harbor their own biases and prejudices – biases and prejudices that

they transmit to their children, often unconsciously. Parents must accept this reality and commit themselves to thinking about the attitudes and behaviors that they expose their children to and decide if these are the kinds of things that they want their children to learn. If children observe their parents working to respect cultures and beliefs different from their own, they will be more likely to internalize these values themselves as they grow and mature.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following questions, submitted by parents, demonstrate the kinds of issues that parents face when working with their children on issues related to diversity and bias. In general, these examples demonstrate the two kinds of questions that parents have, the first, how to educate their children on issues of diversity, and the second, how to create a home environment that allows for healthy communication on difficult topics, even if that communication might result in parents revealing some of their own fears and biases. While these two types of questions may appear distinct, they actually overlap. As parents struggle with a variety of issues, they are creating an environment where life-long learning is seen as valuable and desirable. As parents work with their children to help them critically examine information, offer their opinions, and listen to the viewpoints of others, parents are helping them better respond to the many challenges they will face in adolescence.

“The other day my daughter and I were at the grocery store. While we were checking out I struck up a conversation with the man at the register, who had a thick accent. As we were leaving the store, my daughter started to laugh and mimic the man’s accent. I’m sure that he heard her. I was very embarrassed and angry.”

Instead of being embarrassed or angry by a situation like this one, use it as a “teachable moment.” Ask your daughter to explain why she thinks the man sounds different from her. Help her to understand that people who learn another language first often say words differently from those who learn English first. Help your daughter to consider the advantages of people being able to speak more than one language. Ask her if she thinks she would sound “funny” to people in another country and to consider how she would feel if people laughed at her when she was doing her best to communicate effectively. Remember not to ignore comments like this or trivialize them by encouraging your daughter not to notice the man’s accent. This implies that something is wrong with the way the man is speaking and sends your child negative messages about diversity.

“I work very hard at raising my children to be caring, compassionate people, but whenever some of our extended family members come to visit my young teenagers get a completely different message. They are exposed to blatant homophobia and jokes about people from a variety of racial

and ethnic backgrounds (including their own). Every time I try to confront this kind of behavior, I realize that I don't have a clue what to say or how to say it. What can I do?"

Despite the difficulty of a situation like this one, the consequences of not speaking up are far worse. Children must see that their parents have the courage and conviction to interrupt hateful words. By modeling such behaviors, youth begin to understand that each individual has a role to play in making the world a fairer, more harmonious place. While your words may not change the behavior of those who are making homophobic remarks or telling ethnic or racial jokes, your children will see that you are a person of your convictions and they will undoubtedly learn some strategies for intervening when they are offended by such jokes or remarks.

The following five-step process for responding to situations like the one you describe has been taken from *Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 2000):

- Begin by clarifying for yourself what you want to get out of the situation.
- Try to assume goodwill. Many people who make offensive remarks do so out of ignorance. Because they do not intend to harm, they assume no harm is done.
- Sometimes it helps to talk to the person privately.
- Start the conversation by letting the person who offended you know that he or she is important to you and that is why you want to have this conversation.
- Be honest about your feelings and state them directly. Using the word "I" to start the conversation lets the other person know how you feel without feeling attacked; for example, "I was upset when I heard the remark/joke you made about ..." You have every right to let someone know how you feel; you do not have the right to dictate what others can or cannot say.

"I am concerned about the anti-Arab sentiments that I hear my middle school child expressing since the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, DC. I have tried to raise my children to be fair and caring people, so it is very difficult for me to hear some of the hateful things that he and his friends are saying. What can I do?"

The following information has been excerpted from the U.S. Department of Education's Web site (www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/os/september11/adults.html?exp=0). It provides valuable information for parents trying to help their children understand the events of September 11th.

In addition to the children whose lives have been directly impacted by the terrorist attacks, most children have seen terrifying images of destruction on television and the Internet. They are reading newspapers and they have heard stories on the radio that speak of grave losses of life. They will also take emotional cues from the adults in their lives who have been watching these events closely.

As adults work to address the needs of children in the aftermath of the terrorist

attacks, the following are some points to keep in mind:

- Adults need to consider the impact of their reactions upon their children. By creating a calm and relaxed environment in their homes through their own demeanor, they can help their children feel safe. That may not be possible for all families, particularly those that have been directly impacted. If they have been visibly anxious or upset, adults need to take the time to explain to the children in their lives what they are feeling and why.
- Take the time to listen and talk to children. Many children will have seen images on television that will prompt questions. They will continue to hear about these events and will be reminded by images through media and in their everyday lives, so it is important to keep those lines of communication open.
- In talking to children, adults should try to reinforce that they are doing everything in their power to make sure that their children are safe. Assure them that measures are being taken to ensure that their schools and communities are safe as well.
- Help your children to separate fact from fiction. Adults should try to discuss only known facts with children, and avoid speculation or exaggeration.
- Incidents have occurred since the tragedy where children of Middle Eastern descent have been threatened or taunted. This is an excellent opportunity to help children understand that most individuals who are from other countries are fine and good people who live in and love the United States as much as they do and that one should make judgments on an individual basis.

► ***Suggested Resource***

Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, prejudice and discrimination against people of Middle Eastern descent escalated across the country. Help your children learn accurate information about Islam, Muslims, and Arab Americans so they will not succumb to the stereotypes and biases that they will be exposed to. One source of information – a list of 100 questions about Arab Americans prepared by the Detroit Free Press – is available at www.freep.com/jobspage/arabs/index.htm.

- Adults should talk with children about the senselessness of violence, hate, and terrorism.
- Take extra efforts to limit your children's television, radio, and Internet activity in order to avoid excessive exposure to imagery of damage and destruction. Consider other activities that you and your children can do instead.
- Adults need to make it a priority to watch the children in their lives, and understand their behavior. Children may manifest some behavioral and emotional changes, including misbehavior, sleeplessness, nightmares, and general anxiety. These are signs to parents that reassurance and care are needed.
- Children will have a range of reactions and will display a variety of emotions in response to the events of September 11th. Adults need to be tolerant of that behavior and need to explain to children that

it is okay to be upset or disturbed, but that they must be careful not to stereotype people of Middle Eastern descent.

“I recently learned that my 14-year-old daughter has been talking to her guidance counselor about kids teasing her at school. I was very hurt that she didn’t come to me about this and felt that I’d somehow let her down.”

Your daughter should be congratulated for realizing that it was important to talk about what was happening at school and how she was feeling. Too often youth internalize their hurt and anger, which can lead to other, more serious, problems later. You have obviously instilled in her the belief that there is a community of caring adults that can help her and give her sound advice. It is important that young people navigating the sometimes-turbulent waters of adolescence have trusted confidantes who have more life experience than their peers. Young people, like people of all ages, benefit from thinking out loud and being listened to as they attempt to problem solve situations that are new to them. Often the act of talking through a situation can help them understand that they have the ability to take the needed steps toward solving the problem themselves, which in turn helps them build their self-confidence.

Parents, in their love for their children, often attempt to solve problems for them. Conflicting with this is the developmentally appropriate need for adolescents to work through problems on their own (healthy risk-taking) and expand their cadre of resources. Not developing a network of positive resources can cause youth to feel isolated and alienated, which increases their chances to fall prey to destructive influences.

Remind your daughter that you can and will be a resource for her, and encourage her to always come to you when faced with potentially dangerous situations. At the same time, encourage her to think about other resources that are available to her, including other family members, family friends, teachers, counselors, coaches, club sponsors, as well as others in the community. As the president of the National PTA stated in a *Choices and Consequences* television program, “We know it takes at least five caring adults to make a difference in the life of a child and parents are only one part of that.”

“Recently my son and I saw a man in a wheelchair trying to negotiate a difficult curb at a shopping mall. I noticed that my son kept staring at the man, and I reminded him that it is not polite to stare at people. As we continued on our way, my son said, “I feel so sorry for that man.” I quickly changed the subject but in retrospect I wonder, should I have had a conversation with my son about disabilities?”

It is best not to silence your child without providing information during situations like this one, because that will imply that the topic is taboo. It might also be useful for you to take the lead if you see your child staring at someone, and ask him if has

► ***Suggested Resource***

Raising a Thinking Preteen: The ‘I Can Problem Solve’ Program for 8- To 12-Year-Olds by Myrna B. Shure and Roberta Israeloff (Henry Holt and Company, 2000) is designed to help children think clearly about their actions and emotions by considering different viewpoints, solutions, and possible consequences. This parent-friendly resource focuses on everyday occurrences and real-life examples and gives parents and children the vocabulary to communicate effectively and positively.

questions about the person that you might be able to answer. The key to answering questions at this stage of your child's life is making sure that he has the most exposure possible to diversity so that the questions will be asked naturally as part of everyday life.

People with disabilities do not define themselves by their disabilities and do not, as a rule, look for sympathy. It might be useful in a situation like this one to have a discussion with your son about things that this person might have to do differently than he does because he uses a wheelchair. Add to that a discussion about ways that the man's life is probably not unlike his own. The fact that your son showed concern for the man should not go unnoticed and he should be praised for considering other people's situations and feelings. Ask him if he wanted to help the man, and if so, think together about ways the man might have been approached and offered help. Consider together whether helping people with disabilities robs them of their dignity. Because most people are unsure how to act around people with disabilities, communicating with your son in this way will show him that you are concerned about treating people fairly and learning accurate information about people who have lives different from your own. You may also want to encourage your son to visit Web sites that provide information on disabilities, a few of which are listed below:

Think Quest

www.thinkquest.org

Connecting With Kids

www.connectingwithkids.com

National Information Center for Children and Youth With Disabilities

www.nichcy.org

“Bullying appears to be a rampant in U.S. schools, and I know there is a lot of teasing and bullying in my child's middle school. What kinds of things can parents do to help with this problem?”

The most common experience shared by almost all middle school students is being teased. It is difficult to imagine children at this age escaping the cruelties of being left out or teased about something. Most adolescents learn effective ways to negotiate their way through these encounters and maintain their relationships in spite of disagreements. Bullying, however, is much more serious and usually continues for extended periods of time. Bullying behaviors include not only forms of physical aggression, but also emotional harassment, social alienation, and intimidation. Bullying is not, however, unique to U.S. schools. Scandinavians were the first to actually study bullying; Sweden and Japan the first governments to launch anti-bullying campaigns after a number of youths in those countries committed suicide. The suicides prompted the governments' recognition that bullying can have severe effects on a child's life, and moved to take action to stop the hateful behavior.

Following are some tips for parents who want to help their children address teasing and bullying; they have been excerpted from *Safe Passage: A Resource Guide for*

Schools, Families and Communities:

- Talk with your middle school child about ways to deal with difficult people. Teach your child how to respond in these situations without becoming violent or overly sensitive. Tell your child of similar instances you experienced and how you handled them.
- Learn about conflict resolution classes at your child's school or at local community organizations and help him or her to get involved in such a program.
- Whenever your child shares fears or worries about a difficult person or group of people, listen carefully and then investigate the situation in a calm and discreet manner.
- Avoid using putdowns as an ordinary form of humor. Model ways to be humorous without hurting feelings.
- Be aware of your child's use of violent language and/or involvement with violent games (including video games). Such habits of violence can lead to violent behavior.
- Encourage your child to recognize his or her good qualities and to recite them when being teased.
- Make sure your child's school has strict rules against bullying and other forms of hate behavior and that everyone in the school community is aware of the rules.
- Work with your school and community organizations on issues related to bullying, harassment, and violence. Most schools and youth programs welcome parental input and would appreciate assistance in starting programs that will help young adolescents solve problems and resolve conflicts.

► **Suggested Resource**

Safe Passage: A Resource Guide for Schools, Families, and Communities is a collection of ideas for modifying the school environment, both inside and outside of the classroom, in order to develop and sustain a safe and healthy environment for all students. To obtain a copy, contact Hazelden Publishing and Educational Services at 1-800-328-9000 or visit download a copy at www.nmsa.org/services/safepassage.pdf.

“Has there ever been a lawsuit filed against a school or school district for not stopping bullying behavior?”

Yes, because schools are ultimately responsible for protecting children, and culpable when they don't, courts have handed down decisions awarding monetary damages to students bullied or harassed at school. In many of these cases, teachers and administrators were told of the bullying but did not act to stop the behavior. In Washington State, a high school senior, bullied and harassed daily since junior high and finally physically assaulted in the school, filed suit against the school district for failing to intervene. The suit contended that the school took no action to stop the bullying because the student is gay. His mother repeatedly spoke to administrators, with no result. The case ended in an out-of-court settlement. The results of this case show that it is not enough for school districts to have anti-bullying policies on paper. They must also have a commitment to enforce these policies and must take concrete steps to implement them.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Schools greatly influence children's beliefs about the similarities and differences among people whether the subject of diversity is ever openly discussed or not. Children spend much of the day in school, and, for many, it is their main social milieu. They acquire attitudes from the absence as well as the presence of diversity in the student body and staff, in the curriculum, and in the physical environment. They learn by watching teachers who confront prejudice as it occurs and from those who choose to ignore it. Teachers are role models, and their actions say as much as their words.

Studies have demonstrated a high correlation between teachers' respect for diversity and the learning potential of those students with whom schools have traditionally had the least success. It is critical that teachers have the proper preparation and materials to effectively teach respect for differences. By approaching diversity as an ongoing theme in the classroom, they encourage children to develop a lively interest in cultures, religions, ethnic traditions, and ways of being other than their own. This, in turn, will help young people mature into flexible, well-adjusted adults who are curious about their world rather than fearful of it. Teachers must also be encouraged to learn about their students' needs and cultures and to use that knowledge to enhance their students' self-respect and to encourage their success.

Teachers and youth service professionals must work alongside parents and families to ensure that youth feel comfortable talking about and exploring diversity, prejudice, and bias. It is important that in two of the most important places in their lives – school and home – youth have ample opportunities to get to know themselves and their own feelings and have a chance to talk openly and honestly about difficult topics. In addition, educators, who seek to challenge stereotypes and biases, can provide factual concrete information and positive interpersonal experiences for students as part of learning. Educators can also learn how to effectively counter biased behavior when it occurs.

The ability to work and play successfully in a diverse society is one of the most important skills that educators can give to students. As young people prepare to enter the workforce today, they recognize that communicating, interacting, and cooperating with people from different backgrounds have become as essential as mastering computer skills.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Following are several questions posed by educators and other youth service professionals on topics including teaching about diversity, interrupting prejudice, and considering the importance of one's own experiences and beliefs about diversity when working with youth. Many of the suggested responses, while specific to these questions, can be generalized to other situations.

“Recently our PTA sponsored an international dinner at school. Some of my students started making faces at the food and making nasty comments about the dishes that some of the

parents had prepared. At one point, a group of students began chanting, “We want American food.” How can I help my students learn that making fun of someone else’s food is wrong?”

Sometimes schools use international dinners as a celebration of diversity, but unless these events represent an ongoing commitment to exploring and celebrating similarities and differences they may foster exactly the kind of behavior you describe. Unfortunately, when children are exposed to things or to situations that are outside the realm of their daily experiences they may cope with their discomfort or feelings of inadequacy by making jokes or banding together to make fun of whatever it is they perceive as different. If that happens, they need to be told to stop and also told that what they are doing is hurtful. What’s more important, however, is to think of ways that you can prevent that kind of behavior or use such experiences when they occur as “teachable moments.”

It is crucial to incorporate the similarities and differences among people into your classroom and your school throughout the year. If diversity is an ongoing part of children’s education then they are likely to feel less threatened when they are exposed to new ideas or customs outside of their own experiences. In addition, in a situation like this particular one, you can prepare children for the different kinds of food that they might encounter at an international dinner, and also talk to them about your expectations for how they will behave. They do not have to like everything they are served. They don’t even have to taste everything. But they can’t make fun of it.

“How can I find enough time to teach about diversity when I already have so much required material to cover in the school year?”

Rather than teach “about” diversity, your goal should be to work it seamlessly into the curriculum by taking a multicultural approach to required subjects. One way that middle school students can be introduced to a variety of cultures, perspectives, and values is through young adult literature. Young adult books, at their best, invite children to use their imaginations, expand their vocabularies, develop empathy, and gain a better understanding of themselves and others. And, if the titles reflect the diverse groups of people in the world around them, youth can learn to respect not only their own cultural groups, but also the cultural groups of others. Multicultural literature can provide opportunities for youth to understand that despite our many differences, all people share common feelings and aspirations. Those feelings can include love, sadness, fear, and the desire for fairness and justice. Young adult books can also be a powerful learning and coping tool when young readers connect with characters and what they are going through.

Other kinds of things that teachers can do to provide a more multicultural curriculum include:

- Discussing names, foods, and customs that are mentioned in word math problems.
- Encouraging students to consider diverse perspectives of historic events about which they are learning.

- Including information about people from diverse groups when studying scientific or technological advancements and accomplishments.

“My students and I are from the same race - our community isn’t diverse. What can I do to promote understanding under these circumstances?”

It is easier to help students flourish in a diverse world if they actually live in a heterogeneous community. Still, within the limits of your community, you can help your students celebrate diversity in the curriculum and in their physical environment. Here are a few suggestions:

- Display posters, art, and calendars that portray a wide range of people and cultures on walls and bulletin boards.
- Introduce students to music and books by and about people from many geographic areas and from many cultures.
- Talk about the differences and similarities that exist among people.
- Honor heroes from various backgrounds.
- Have students correspond via mail or computer with students across the U.S. or even around the world.

“One student in my social studies is Cambodian and the rest are Caucasian. I don’t know whether to talk about his similarities to and differences from the other students or downplay them when we are talking about things like diversity and culture.”

Sometimes in a large-group setting it is difficult to be the only person from a particular background or the only person with a visible disability. Many adults who endured this situation when they were children recall diversity discussions with anguish. “I always wanted to hide under my chair” is a common refrain. If you celebrate diversity in the classroom throughout the year with music, books, games, crafts, posters, and other materials, the student will feel less singled out when the topic arises. Try to take your cues about how much to talk about this student’s heritage from the child, but whatever you do, do not make him feel that he is the spokesperson for all Cambodians. Within every cultural group there are similarities, but there are also numerous differences. Use your discretion to decide whether it also might prove useful to talk with the child’s parents. They might be excited about discussing their culture with the class.

Remember that even if all of your students are White, chances are good that their ancestors came to the United States from different countries. By acknowledging and exploring all of the cultures represented, you can help youth accept and embrace the differences between them.

“Sometimes I feel guilty about my own feelings of prejudice, which I try to overcome. How can I help my students become freer from prejudice than I am?”

Because we live in a society that has not yet eliminated racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, heterosexism, and fear of disabilities, all of us have to struggle to quell the prejudices that we have absorbed overtly or inadvertently over the years. Recognizing and identifying your own beliefs as overgeneralizations and prejudices rather than fact is a good first step. By helping your students view the examination of diversity and all isms as a continuous process in their lives, by promoting awareness of the harmful effects of prejudice, and by identifying bias as it occurs in daily life, you will undoubtedly help them grow into adults unfettered by constricted, prejudicial beliefs.

“I am uncomfortable with the idea of Black History Month. Why is it necessary? Isn’t our goal to celebrate diversity all year round?”

Black History Month and other commemorative months were created to ensure that we would hear and celebrate voices historically silenced in mainstream culture. While proponents maintain that one month a year is better than nothing, the goal should always be to integrate diversity throughout the year so that students are constantly learning about the valuable contributions of underrepresented or overlooked groups. You can help by including scientists, mathematicians, artists, writers, and others from diverse backgrounds throughout your curriculum.

Once diversity finds its way into our lives year-round, the impetus for special commemorations is likely to fade. Until such practice is standard, however, celebrations like Black History Month are a necessary means of educating people about the history and contributions of African-Americans.

“One of the teachers in our school is making anti-Semitic remarks. What should I do?”

It is important that each of us debunk bigotry whenever it occurs. However, exactly how to handle situations like this one will depend on many factors, including how comfortable you are with the topic. One possibility for handling this teacher’s remarks is to disagree politely but firmly with what has been said. Admit that you find the remark offensive and label it anti-Semitic. Deciding whether it would be better to say something immediately or arrange a time when you and the teacher can talk privately is a decision that you will have to make. In many cases, when people are confronted publicly they feel the need to rationalize their statements or in some other way “save face” in front of the group. Whenever you decide to say something, make sure that it is clear that you are not attacking the speaker, but rather making your feelings and your position on the topic clear, which you have every right to do. Using “I statements” can be very useful in this regard.

To lay the groundwork for more harmonious dialogue at your school, work with other teachers and staff to institute seminars and lectures that will broaden the faculty’s perspectives about different groups.

“I grew up in a racist family, and I’ve worked hard to cleanse myself of prejudice. When I hear kids make racist remarks I want to share my own past with them. After all, I changed - so can they. Should I reveal my story? Students often ask me if I ever experienced racism. In fact, I have. Should I talk to them about my experiences?”

Sharing personal history with youth – whether from the perspective of the aggressor or the oppressed – can be a powerful teaching tool. By speaking from the heart to students and sharing our journeys and struggles, we can serve as models for coping with complex issues like racism. Bear in mind, however, that your revelations must be carefully thought out. Start by asking yourself some questions: Why do I want to share this information with my students? What will they gain from it? Will anyone be harmed? Can I share this with them in an age-appropriate way? If you believe that by talking to students about your experiences you can help them consider new information or rethink their own prejudices, then integrate that information into class discussions about diversity, prejudice, and bias. The only caution here is to make sure that the discussion does not become about you and your experiences, but that your experiences are used as examples and as part of a larger discussion.

“I don’t see why we should have to teach diversity at all. Schools are for academic learning, not for imparting social values.”

Children learn social values in school whether teachers consciously teach them or not. Both what is taught and what is not taught alters a child’s perceptions of the world. Children who attend a school where the staff routinely neglects or dismisses diversity come away thinking that diversity is not important or that it is somehow bad. In a pluralistic society like ours, omitting the contributions of people from a variety of cultural groups tarnishes those groups and devalues their contributions. Teaching about diversity helps prepare children to live and work successfully in a pluralistic society.

“A biracial student in one of my classes is constantly teased and called names. What should I do?”

It is vital to get all the facts so you understand as clearly as possible what is going on with this student and the children doing the teasing. Whatever the situation, spell out the rules about hurtful remarks or actions in your classroom and the thinking behind those rules. Speak to the target of the teasing, allowing her an opportunity to share her feelings about the situation. Also speak with those who are doing the teasing to find out why they are engaging in such actions. Encourage them to think about how they have felt when they have been the target of teasing and to consider better ways of interacting with their classmates or better ways to resolve conflicts, if it is uncovered that some or all of the teasing is a result of a disagreement with the targeted youth.

To improve children’s attitudes, motivate them to explore the mix of races and ethnic ancestries in the United States. Other students probably come from mixed ancestry, too, whether interracial or interethnic. This is also a good opportunity to

help your students acknowledge the rich and varied family constellations in today's society, including biracial, adoptive, extended, single parent, and other configurations.

“When I was growing up, everything was so much simpler. I loved celebrating holidays like Columbus Day in school. It was fun and gave us a chance to learn about the history of our country. Now things seem much more complicated. Should I ignore these holidays in my classroom for fear of offending someone - in this case, Native-Americans?”

It's painful to give up traditions that were fun and held meaning for us as children. It is important to remember, however, that even when you were a child, holidays that were uncomplicated for you may have been troublesome for people from different cultures and traditions. The complexity also existed then – it just hadn't been brought out fully into public awareness.

Commemorative days like Columbus Day still can be used to help young people learn about this nation's history. In fact, the holiday commemorates an event that triggered a series of extremely complex phenomena. The arrival of Columbus marked the beginning of a migration of European settlers that caused the destruction of the civilizations already existing on these shores – a myriad of diverse cultures collectively known today as Native-Americans. At the same time, America offered a wonderful opportunity to those Europeans searching for political, religious, and economic freedom. It is important to help youth explore and understand both of these truths, to help them learn from past problems, and to recognize the effects of those problems on modern-day America.

At even an early age students can grasp that Native-American cultures were highly developed societies when Columbus arrived and that the Europeans did not actually “discover” America. As they grow and mature, students can use that information to build an understanding of the complexities of a multicultural society.

“The more I think about teaching my students about racism, prejudice, and diversity, the more nervous I get. I want to do the right thing, but I'm afraid that I will offend someone or say the wrong thing. What should I do?”

Before any of us can help children think constructively about diversity, bias, prejudice, and hate, each of us must consider how we ourselves feel about these issues. This process of discovery is an exciting, yet difficult journey. Perhaps the most daunting challenge is facing – and understanding – the roots of our own biases. Examining how we have learned the prejudices that we harbor and why we continue to hold them is a difficult process, but it is one that can make us better role models for all children.

It is also rewarding to discuss these questions with other people. You might find it helpful to talk with your fellow teachers about their experiences addressing these issues in their own classrooms. How did they begin? What worked for them and what didn't? They might be able to suggest some promising resources and approaches. Sometimes professional conferences provide a forum in which to

discuss diversity issues in a group led by an experienced facilitator. Some schools are willing to invite speakers or to conduct workshops that enable teachers to discover ways to communicate information about multiculturalism or prejudice.

As you embark on this journey, remember that you will make mistakes. Also remember that you and all those around you can learn from those mistakes if you are willing to engage in honest conversations, and that means sharing information, asking questions, and listening to others who know more about certain topics because their life experiences have been different from yours.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT RESPECTS DIVERSITY

What is present in the school, classroom, home, or other environments where youth spend a considerable amount of time, as well as what is absent, provides them with important information about who and what is important. Every effort should be made to create a setting that is rich in possibilities for exploring cultural diversity. The list of things to include is limited only by one's imagination. Artwork, books, magazines, pictures, musical instruments, and recordings of music in many languages are just a few examples of the many objects that can be used to reflect the world's cultures.

Such an environment helps youth develop their ideas about themselves and others, creates the conditions under which they initiate conversations about differences, and provides teachers and other youth service professionals with a setting for introducing activities about diversity. This type of environment also helps to foster positive self-concept and attitudes.

The following guidelines suggest the types of images that are desirable in the classroom or other youth-centered environments:

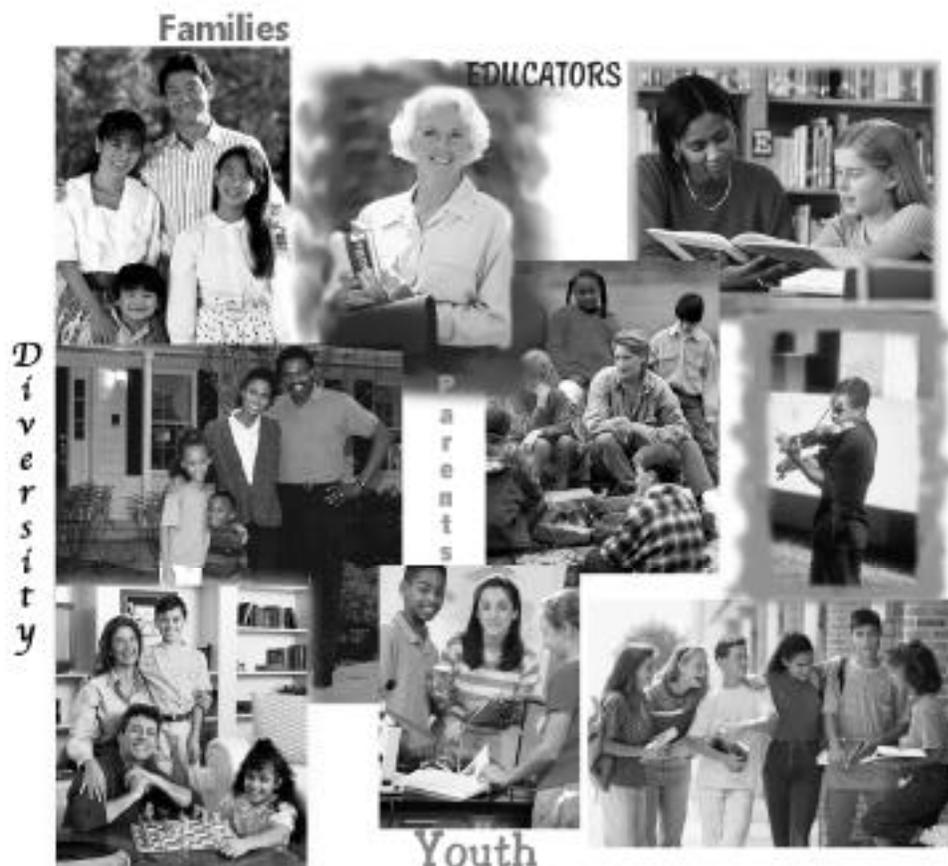
- Images that accurately reflect people's current daily lives in the United States, including home, work, and recreation.
- Images of all the cultural groups within the community, across the United States, and in the world.
- Images that show people of various cultural groups engaged in both similar and different activities.
- Images that reflect diversity in gender roles – women and men engaged in a variety of tasks, in and out of the home.
- Images that reflect diversity in family styles and configurations – single-parent, two-parent, and extended family homes.
- Images that reflect different body shapes and sizes.
- Images of people who reflect various physical and mental abilities.
- Images that accurately reflect diverse socioeconomic groups.

When deciding which materials to include in the classroom, reject pictures, books, or objects that reinforce stereotypes. Repeated exposure to biased representations through words and pictures helps cause such distortions to become part of

everyday thinking. It is also important not to confuse images of past ways of life of a group with the group's contemporary life or to confuse images of people's ceremonial/holiday life with their daily lives. This confusion is reflected in many materials that focus almost exclusively on "minority" group holidays.

Finding anti-bias materials that reflect many cultural groups in a nonstereotypic manner can be difficult even for schools or youth centers with adequate budgets and access to educational materials. Consider having parents, other family members, other members of the community, and the students themselves donate or make materials that can be used in the classroom. Creating such an inclusive environment helps convey the message that all people are valuable.

IMAGES



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MEDIA INFLUENCE

Teen values are shaped and influenced by numerous people, including parents, family members, teachers, religious leaders, friends, and other members of the community. No wonder adolescents are so often an unpredictable mix of principals about themselves and the world. Add to the mix the everyday interaction that young people have with the media and it is easy to see how they can appear unsure about who and what to believe. The messages are often conflicting; they can all appear reasonable on the surface; and many are manipulative. All of this is happening at a time when adolescents are discovering, developing, and consolidating their identities.

Youth need only turn on the television, put a movie in the VCR or DVD player, listen to a CD, open a magazine, look at a billboard, click on a Web site, or play a video game to experience all kinds of messages. While media offer entertainment, culture, news, sports, education, and recreation, they also send powerful messages that are potentially harmful. Sometimes the harmful impact is obvious (e.g., nightmares), but in other cases the impact may not be immediate, but can have a cumulative effect. Such messages may include the idea that fighting and other forms of violence are appropriate responses to conflict, society expects men to be aggressive, women are attractive only if they look a particular way, and telling jokes at other people's expense is an acceptable form of humor. Adopting such beliefs and attitudes has the danger of making young people less caring of others, more aggressive, more likely to engage in dangerous risk-taking, and can interfere with the development of a healthy self-concept.

The effects of television and movie violence present a frightening picture. According to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary in its *Children, Violence, and the Media: A Report for Parents and Policymakers* (September 14, 1999), "since the 1950's, more than 1,000 studies have been done on the effects of violence in television and movies. The majority of these studies conclude that children who watch significant amounts of television and movie violence are more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior, attitudes, and values." Children as young as two are facile at imitating televised behaviors, and these effects on their behavior can extend into adolescence. The Surgeon General's 2001 report on youth violence concluded that "research to date justifies sustained efforts to curb the adverse effects of media violence on youths."

► Suggested Resource

Visit www.tolerance.org/news/feature/soundtrack_of_hate/index.html to learn more about hate music from information developed by the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Intelligence Report*.

Music, which frequently edges out television as the media of choice among teens, also helps to shape cultural identity and helps teens define their social group. Often teens consider musicians their idols and rate the influence of music higher than religion or books. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the troublesome lyrics of some teen music glamorizes drug and alcohol abuse; glorifies suicide; dehumanizes women; and advocates violence against specific racial or cultural groups. While most teens are not at-risk for adopting such attitudes and behaviors, there are a number of youth who will begin to identify with such themes and messages, often because they already feel alienated or are faced with other family or school problems.

While video games are entertaining and can provide practice in problem solving, logic, and in the use of fine motor and spatial skills, there are also numerous concerns associated with their use. Unlike television and movies, where youth

observe violent acts, or music, where youth might hear about violence, video games often provide an opportunity for youth to actually practice violence and be rewarded for their efforts. A large number of video games are based on plots of violence, aggression, and gender bias, and almost all confuse reality and fantasy. When one considers that in households with children, 67 percent own a video game system, concerns that an over-dependence on video games might foster social isolation or contribute to aggressive behavior must be taken seriously.

Advertising is a 130 million dollar a year industry in the United States. It is thus a powerful educational force in our culture. It is estimated that the average American watches television 30 hours a week and spends 110 hours a year reading magazines – the result is that the average person can be exposed to 1,500 ads daily. The powerful messages conveyed to youth through advertisements are exemplified in the current emphasis on excessive thinness. Studies show that girls of all ages worry about their weight. Billboards and newspaper, magazine, and catalog advertisements promote an unrealistic image of how people should look. Often models are excessively thin (on average, top models weigh between 30 and 35 pounds less than the “average” American woman), are White or light-skinned women of color, and have hair that has been heavily processed, dyed, and styled. And, it is not unusual for the images that youth see in advertisements to also be airbrushed and enhanced using computers. The cumulative effect of such unrealistic images on young girls can be dissatisfaction with their own bodies, eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem.

Media literacy must be taken seriously by parents, educators, youth service professionals, health care professionals, and others in the community. The importance of limiting youth’s exposure to the media and helping young people think critically about the messages that they see are two ways that parents and educators can be particularly helpful. Examples of things that parents and educators can do include the following:

- Set media time limits. This includes the amount of time children can watch television, videotapes, play video and computer games, and surf the Internet. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours of quality television and videos a day.
- Develop a media plan with your family, whereby media times and choices are scheduled in advance. Help teens choose shows, videos, and video games that are appropriate for their ages and interests. If you do not approve of their media choices, explain why and help them choose something more appropriate.
- Check the content ratings and parental advisories on all media.
- Keep televisions, VCR’s, DVD players, video games, and computers out of children’s bedrooms. Place these items in areas where you can monitor their use.

► Suggested Resource

Beyond Killing Us Softly: The Strength to Resist is a 33-minute educational video about the image of women in advertising. The film presents the thoughts of girls and young women, as well as ideas of leading authorities in psychology, eating disorders, gender studies, and violence against women. To learn more about this film, contact Cambridge Documentary Films, Inc., P.O. Box 390385, Cambridge, MA 02139-0004. Telephone: 617-484-3993; Web site: www.cambridgedocumentaryfilms.org.

- Talk with children about what they are seeing on television. Help them practice critical thinking skills by asking questions like, “What are some other ways that the character in this story might have solved his/her problem?” or “Have you ever noticed how advertisements promote unhealthy foods while at the same they remind people that they need to lose weight and be thin?”
- Remind children that television and movies are not accurate representations of how problems are solved in real life or how long it takes to solve them, even though many of the situations portrayed may seem very realistic. Successfully solving real-life problems usually takes much longer than 30 to 120 minutes.
- Ask children to talk about movies that they see. Question them about whose point of view the story was told from and how the story might have been very different if told from another character’s point of view. Ask them to consider the values that the movie was promoting and how those values compare to their own values.
- Discuss the health risks of using products that are often advertised in a glamorous and seductive manner, namely, alcohol and tobacco.
- Watch music videos with your children and talk about the stereotypical, violent, or sexual images that are being portrayed. Ask children what they think about the images that they are seeing and how those images make them feel.
- Expose children to a broad range of music.
- Keep the lines of communication open about the music that children are listening to. Ask them why they enjoy particular types of music and what the lyrics mean to them.
- Rent a video game to preview before actually buying it. Remember that if there are violent and sexual themes in the title or cover picture, those themes are also in the game.
- Look for video games that involve two players to encourage group activity as opposed to isolated play.
- Look for games that require the player to come up with strategies and decisions that are more complex than running, jumping, and punching.
- Talk with children about the content of video games. Ask them to explain what is going on in the game, what the goal is, and what strategies they need to

employ to “win.”

Parents and educators, despite putting systems in place like those outlined above, will not be able to protect or hide teens from the negative messages in the media. Adults themselves are constantly influenced by the media – in the products they choose to buy, the activities they participate in, how they see themselves, and their beliefs about others. Deciphering the hidden messages in the media is a time-consuming task that people must consciously choose to make, and it is unrealistic to think that people can be questioning, analyzing, and evaluating each and every media interaction that they have – there would be little time for anything else! Still parents and educators can model media literacy whenever possible and be aware of the media teens use. Adults working with teens should also be aware of behaviors that may be the result of media influence and take steps to eliminate or curtail such influences. Some of the warning signs include:

- Poor school performance
- Lack of interest in group activities (e.g., clubs, sports)
- Aggressive behavior (e.g., hitting, pushing, talking back to adults)
- Increased eating of unhealthy foods
- Excessive dieting or preoccupation with weight loss
- Smoking, drinking, or drug use
- Cursing
- Provocative dress
- Interest in weapons
- Degrading language about women, gays, or lesbians
- Racial or religious epithets

▶ ***Suggested Resource***

Numerous articles on the impact of the media on children and teens are available at the American Academy of Pediatrics Web site, www.aap.org.