

Playing fair

Teaching young children to **resist bias**

What do we mean by bias?

Bias means any attitude, belief or feeling that results in, and helps to justify unfair treatment because of gender, culture, race, sexuality, class, family, age or ability. For example:

'Boys don't dance like that.'

'I won't listen to you; you talk funny.'

'You're a baby in that wheelchair.'

'You're a yucky colour!'

We want to help our children to grow up healthy, happy and confident about their own identity, and respectful of people different from themselves. To do this, we need to identify bias and take positive action to address it. We need to answer children's questions honestly and fairly and help them to learn that there are actions they can take to change things that are unfair.

Bias based on gender, race, ability, sexuality, social class, or cultural beliefs and practices creates serious obstacles to the healthy development of each and every child.

How bias develops

- ▼ In the very early years, children begin to work out how they are the same and how they are different from other people, and how they feel about those differences.
- ▼ What they learn in these early years begins the process of valuing, accepting and 'getting along' with people different from themselves.
- ▼ We now know that young children become aware of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, disabilities, and cultural beliefs and practices, and become sensitive to both positive and negative attitudes from their family, educators and society in general.
- ▼ They can develop misconceptions, discomfort and fear and can reject differences, if families and educators do not intervene.
- ▼ How families and educators react to the ideas that young children express will greatly affect the feelings and attitudes children form.



What families and educators can do

Recognise that every day we are all exposed to messages that reinforce bias. If we don't act against bias, we silently support it.

Be a positive role model

In your relationships with others show that you value and respect the diversity among all people. Teach by example and remember that what you do is as important as what you say. Make it a firm rule that a person's difference is never an acceptable reason for teasing or rejecting them.

Help each child feel good about themselves

Talk positively about each child's characteristics and cultural heritage. Share stories about family backgrounds. Acknowledge Aboriginal cultures and respect all cultures.

Think about what the child sees

Make sure that home and child care, kindergarten or school settings positively reflect the wider society. Use books, toys, decorations and TV programs to show differences positively and discuss bias. Provide opportunities for children to play and mix with children who are different from themselves.

Use everyday situations

Children are often curious about differences and you can encourage the child to ask questions or make comments about what they experience. Make the most of opportunities to build children's positive self-identity and to teach the value of differences among people.

Answer the child's questions

Do not ignore questions, change the subject, sidestep or reprimand the child for asking a question. Answer all questions in a matter-of-fact, brief manner. Listen carefully to what children want to know and what they are feeling.



Questions

families and educators often ask

'My child never asks questions about race, disability or gender. If I raise it myself, will I introduce her to ideas she wouldn't have thought of on her own?'

'I don't know enough. What if I say the wrong thing?'

'Won't it upset the child to know about unfairness?'

Answers



You may. But this discussion expands your child's awareness and knowledge. Children do not learn prejudice from open, honest discussion of differences and fairness. Your child may also have had questions or thoughts, which she didn't feel comfortable raising until you brought up the subject.

Silence can 'speak' louder than words. It is best to respond. If you do not have the information to answer the question, you can say, 'That's a good question, but I don't know the answer right now. Let's find out by ...'

If you feel your response was not good enough you can always go back to a child and say, 'Yesterday, when you asked me about why that person uses a wheelchair, I didn't give you enough of an answer. I've thought about your question some more and today I want to tell you ...'

Preparing our children to deal with life's realities is an important part of their development. Children need to understand that some behaviours inflict pain on others. It is alright for children to sometimes feel sad or upset as long as they know that you are there to comfort and support them.

Children can learn to resist bias

Teach children to recognise stereotypes

A young child can spot 'unfair' images of themselves and others if they are helped to think critically about what they see in books, TV and video games. Help them imagine what it would look like if it were fair.

Teach children to challenge the bias they experience

Be sensitive to the child's feelings about themselves and others and immediately respond when they show any signs of being affected by bias. Give the child ideas for dealing with those who act in a biased way against them, for example, what words to use.

Support the child to take action for change

Tell the child that challenging bias can change unjust things and the future can be fairer. Teach them skills and actions appropriate to their age level. For example:

One evening, after watching her favourite TV show, Kara (age five) says, *'I wish I wasn't a girl.'*

'Why?' asks her mum.

'Cause I want to be a fire fighter.'

'You think you have to be a boy to be a fire fighter, because that's what you saw on TV, isn't it?'

Seeing Kara nod yes, her mum says, *'Even though you saw only male fire fighters on TV, there are many female fire fighters in real life. You can be anything you want when you grow up.'*

'Really?' asks Kara.

ACTION

'Let's write a letter to the TV stations and say that they should show programs with women as fire fighters, pilots and in lots of different jobs.'



Children's questions and ways to respond

Children's comments and questions and the ways they behave can give families an insight into what children are thinking and feeling. These are valuable opportunities to help children develop positive attitudes about themselves and others. For example:

Question ▶

Child: 'Why is that girl in a wheelchair?'

Rather than ▶

'Shh, it's not nice to ask. I'll tell you another time' or acting as if you didn't hear the question.

You could try ▶

'She is using a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her to move around.'

Question ▶

Child: 'Why is his skin so brown?'

Rather than ▶

'His skin doesn't matter. We are all the same underneath.'

[Good try! But this response doesn't answer the child's question. It changes the subject to one of similarity when the child is asking about a difference.]

You could try ▶

'Australians come in many colours, shapes and sizes' or 'His skin is brown because his mum and/or dad have brown skin.'

This is enough for very young children. As children get older, you can add an explanation about skin melanin or cultural background: 'Everyone has a special chemical in their skin called melanin. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is dark. If you only have a little, your skin is light. How much melanin you have in your skin depends on how much your parents have in theirs.'

Question ▶

Child: 'How come she's got two mothers?'

Rather than ▶

'She's only got one really!'

You could try ▶

'A family is made up of adults and children who love and care about each other. There are many different kinds of families.'

Question ▶

Child: 'Why does he speak funny?'

Rather than ▶

'He can't help how he speaks. Don't say anything about it.'

[This response is confusing. It implies agreement with the child's comment, but also tells the child to 'not notice' and be polite.]

You could try ▶

'He doesn't speak funny, he speaks differently to you. He speaks another language at home because that's what his family speaks. You speak English like your family. It is okay to ask questions about what he is saying, but it is not okay to say that his speech sounds funny because that can hurt his feelings.'

It is common for families and educators to mask their own pain or discomfort by choosing not to deal with bias with children. Examine your own feelings about a subject raised by the child's questions or behaviours. Talk over your feelings with a sympathetic family member, friend or educator in order to be better prepared the next time. Families and educators need to work together to support each other and children to resist bias.

For a braille version of this brochure, please telephone the Principal, Townsend School for Vision Impaired Children on 8298 5055.

For an audio tape, in English, please telephone DETE Student and Professional Services on 8226 1755.

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For interpreter support, DETE preschools can telephone the Preschool Bilingual Program on 8226 2546. DETE schools can telephone the Languages and Multicultural Centre on 8366 8555.

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