FAMILY CHILD CARE
CONNECTIONS
Volume 4, Issue 3, 1994

Activities that Promote Racial and Cultural Awareness

by Barbara Biles

In This Issue

After a workshop session on cultural awareness, I was asked,"Does this really matter? Will adding skin-tone crayons make a difference in children's lives?" "Yes," I said, "skin-tone crayons help a child become aware of who he is and who others are." After age 9, racial attitudes tend to stay the same unless the child has a life-changing experience (Aboud, 1988). Before that, however, we have a good chance to help children develop positive feelings about their racial and cultural identity. We can also challenge the immature thinking that is typical of very young children. That's important because this type of thinking can lead to prejudice (York, 1991).

Children develop their identity and attitudes through experiences with their bodies, social environments, and their cognitive developmental stages (Derman-Sparks, 1989). As these three factors interact, young children progress through certain stages of racial and cultural awareness. In this article, we'll talk first about the stages of racial awareness. Then we'll give you some ideas for activities that will help children accept themselves and others.

When Does It Start?

The foundation of self-awareness is laid when children are infants and toddlers. At these stages, children learn "what is me" and "what is not me." Toddlers are sensitive to the feelings of the adults around them, and they begin to mimic adult behavior. By age two, children recognize and explore physical differences. They are also learning the names of colors, and they begin to apply this to skin color. Natural curiosity will lead to questions about differences.

The Preschool Years (age 3 and 4). Children of this age are better at noticing differences among people. They have learned to classify, and they tend to sort based on color and size. They can't yet deal with multiple classification, so they get confused about the names of racial groups and the actual color of their skin. They wonder why two people with different skin tones are considered part of the same racial group. Many preschool children will comment—in words or through actions—on hair texture, eye shape, and other physical characteristics. They want to know how people got their color, hair texture, and eye shape.

Children at this age believe that because other parts of their body grow and change, skin color and other physical traits could also change. Some young black children prefer white dolls over black dolls (Clark, 1963). More often than white children, they may say that they don't like their skin color, hair texture, or another physical trait. By age four, children begin to prefer one race.

At this age, children's thinking is limited, distorted, and inconsistent. For these reasons, it is easy for them to believe stereotypes and form pre-prejudices. In the *Anti-Bias Curriculum* (1989), Louise Derman-Sparks states, "The goals are to facilitate children's awareness that their racial identity does not change, to help them understand that they are part of a large group with similar characteristics (not "different" from everyone else) and to foster their desire to be exactly who they are."

Kindergarten (age 5 and 6). Kindergarteners continue to ask questions about physical differences, and they can begin to understand the explanations for these differences. They can now make distinctions between members of the same racial or cultural group. At this age, children are developing social skills and becoming more group-oriented. They enjoy exploring the culture of their friends. By age six, most children understand the concept of fair and unfair, and they often use these concepts as they try to deal with issues.

The Early Primary Years (age 7 and 8). At this age, children acquire racial constancy. They now understand that a person's skin color will not wash off or change but will remain the same as she grows up. At this age, children can also consider multiple attributes at one time. They can now understand how one person can be a member of several different groups. For example, a person can be part of a family, a classroom, a culture, and a race.

Children can also understand feelings of shame and pride at this age, and they are aware of racism against their own group. They are able to empathize, and they are interested in learning about the world. It's the perfect time for giving them accurate information so they grow out of "preschool" ways of thinking (York, 1991).

Now that you understand how children develop their racial and cultural awareness and identities, it's time to encourage them to accept and celebrate their differences. We want to help all children develop a positive self-concept and feel proud of who they are—although we don't want them to feel better than other groups, either! If this positive sense of self and others is allowed to flourish, today's children will become adults who accept and affirm differences, identify unfair situations, and strive to elimination racism of any sort.

A first step in helping children feel positive about racial and cultural identity is reflecting diversity in their surroundings. Children notice when the only dolls there are to play with don't look anything like them. Books and toys that reflect racial and cultural diversity serve two purposes. They not only help children of color feel good about themselves, they help all children feel positive about differences. Here are some ideas you can try.

- Remove materials and visuals that promote stereotypes.
- Display images of *all* the children and families in your program.
- If your group is not diverse, display images of diversity in your community or in U.S. society.
- Add toys and materials that reflect the cultures of the children and families in your group. Then expand to include materials that mirror the diversity in the world.

Activities for Preschoolers

Skin-Color Match-ups
Set out a number of nylon knee-high stockings in various shades—tan, black, white, pink, yellow, and red. Encourage children to try them on their hands and arms or their legs and feet. Ask questions to help the children increase their awareness of skin color. For example, "Can you find a stocking that is the same color as your skin?" Or "What color is that stocking you have on your arm?" Ask the children to "Try the _____ stocking. Is it lighter or darker than your own skin?" Tell the children no one's skin color is really white, pink, yellow, or red. Emphasize that skin-color differences are interesting and desirable.

Hair
Ask parents to give you a tiny bit of hair from each child. If parents cannot do this, use photographs of different hairstyles and hair-care products for the children to use, explore, and talk about. If parents do give you the hair, paste the hair from each child on a 3" x 5" index card, put them in a box, and ask the children to identify each bit of hair. Talk about how hair has texture and curl. For instance, some people have fine hair while others have coarse hair. Some people have straight hair, and others have curly hair. Talk about how people have different hair colors and lengths. Take a photo of each child's face and make a collage of different hairstyles.

Music and Dance
Ask parents to lend you recordings of music that their family enjoys. Teach the children songs and dances from different nations of the world. Children will begin to see that all people like to sing and dance, but every group has its own special ways of doing it. Talk with the children about how different music sounds: loud, soft, fast, or slow. Listen for the different instruments. Again, ask parents if they have any instruments children could listen to or try.

Activities for School-Age Children

Alike and Different (Thumbprints)
Set out white 3" x 5" cards, a black ink pad, a pen, and a magnifying glass. Ask the children to make prints of their thumbs by pressing them on the ink pad and then on the cards. Label each print with the child's name. Let children use the magnifying glass to see how the prints are alike and different. Point out that everyone has patterns on the skin of their fingers and each person's fingerprints are different from anyone else's.

Listening and Carving
Tell the children that some people from other cultures enjoy carving things from stone. For example, some Inuit artists carve animals out of stone. They pick out a stone and sit with it, spending time with the stone and getting to know it. They listen to the stone, and when they know the stone well, they find the shape or animal that the stone wants to become. Then they begin carving the stone in that shape. Show the children pictures of some of these carved animals if you can find them in an encyclopedia or at the library. Give each child a piece of sandstone (available in art supply stores). Sandstone is a rock made of compressed sand. It can easily be carved by rubbing the sand off with a plastic knife. Encourage the children to carry the stone with them all morning or afternoon. Tell them that after lunch or the next day they can carve their stone into any shape they want. Encourage them to listen to their stone. Maybe it will tell them what shape it wants to become.

Proverbs and Traditions
Ask children to talk with their families about sayings that are common in their culture or traditions that they have in their families. Choose one broad topic, such as love, birthdays, holidays, or time. Chart the responses to see how different cultures express similar ideas. Children might also be fascinated to compare the different names they use for their grandparents (Williams, 1989). Listen and watch for children's comments that can lead to discoveries about each other.

> *Prejudices, it is well known, are most difficult to eradicate from the heart whose soil has never been loosened or fertilized by education: they grow there, firm as weeds among stones.*
>
> *—Charlotte Bronte*

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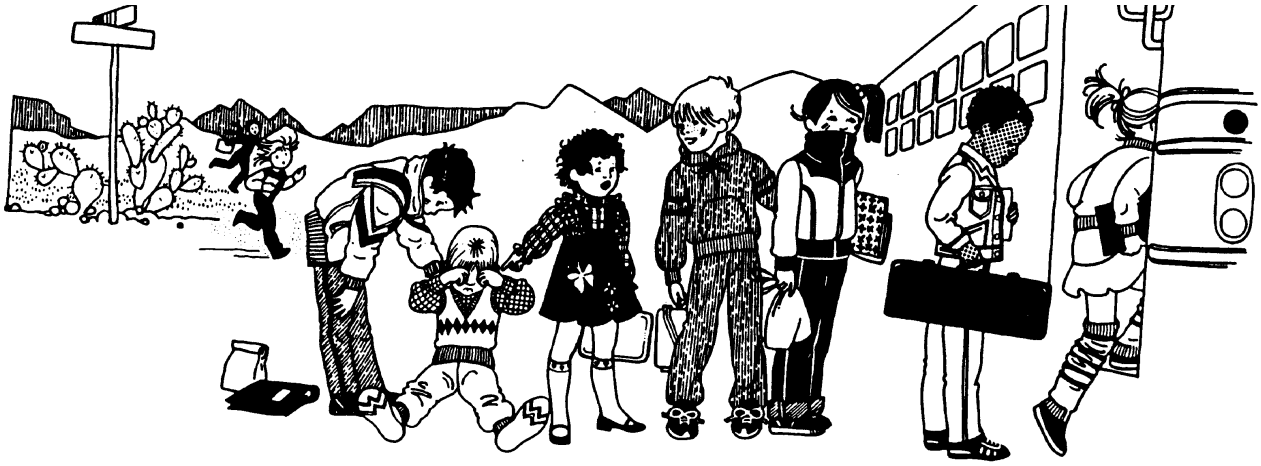
When Children Attend Multiple Programs

by Mary Donegan and Michaelene Ostrosky

You may work with families who have to piece together different part-time programs so their children can receive child care *and* special services. Families of young children who are considered "at risk" for later school problems may enroll their children in half-day Head Start programs. Some children may be eligible for special services at a public school's special education program. We refer to children who are enrolled in two or more programs as *dually enrolled*.

Let's look at a typical day in the life of a preschooler who is dually enrolled. Jason, a four-year-old child with speech and language delays, attends a family child-care home, a special education preschool, and Head Start in the course of each day. His parents, Andrea and Charlie, work full time so Andrea drops Jason off at the provider's home at 7:45 each morning. Jason greets Audrey, his provider, who tells him his friend Paul is already here. Jason notices Paul is building a cage to hold a stuffed toy lion so Jason gets a stuffed dog from the shelf and they play together.

Just then, Audrey tells them it's time to walk to the bus. The bus pulls up just as they get there. Gary, the bus driver, is glad that Jason got on the bus today without any tears. At Lincoln School, Jason remembers there are no stuffed animals at this place so he joins Teisha in the housekeeping area. During small-group time, Jason and Heriberta play sound games with Sally, his speech teacher. His favorite time at Lincoln School is outdoor play because there is a big fire-engine to climb on. After a few minutes outside, his teacher Millie calls Jason in so he can eat lunch with the two other children who will also go to Head Start at 11:45. Jason stomps his feet and says he doesn't want to eat lunch today. Millie hopes this isn't going to be one of those days for Jason. Inside, Millie reminds Jason to go to the bathroom before



lunch so he won't be late for the bus, which is due in 20 minutes. Jason is not really hungry because he had a snack a little while ago, and he doesn't finish his sandwich.

Jason boards the bus that takes him to Head Start each afternoon. About halfway into the 20-minute bus ride, Alice, the bus driver, notices that Jason has fallen asleep again. Alice sighs because it is so hard to wake him up when this happens. As Jason stumbles off the bus, he ignores the hellos of his afternoon teachers, Marci and June. In the classroom at Head Start, Jason stands to the side and watches Henri and Robin building with blocks. Jason can't wait for snack because now he is really hungry.

At 3:15, it is time to get on another bus. The bus takes Jason back to the family child-care home where different kids are playing.

Jason is fortunate to have so many chances to grow and learn in different programs. However, dual enrollment may be too much for some children to handle. It's stressful to change places so frequently. Because each place has different rules, expectations, children, and staff, some children misbehave, some become anxious, and some just take a while to adjust. Children who attend more than one program may experience these problems.

- It is difficult for children to stop playing when they are having fun.
- It is hard to enter into games that are already going on. Children may feel lonely or left out.
- If no time is set aside for naps, children may be tired and grouchy, especially later in the day.
- Children with busy schedules may end up skipping meals, eating their meals quickly, or trying to eat when they're not hungry.

Because dual enrollment can be difficult, attending a neighborhood child-care program that offers special services on-site may be a better choice for some preschool children. If you are concerned that a child is not handling dual enrollment well, you may want to raise the issue with the parent.

Even when dual enrollment appears to be working well, you can help ease the transitions. Learn about the child's schedule by asking questions such as: Where does he go each day? Where does he eat, and where does he nap? Who are some of his friends and teachers at the other programs? You can also help by giving him time and cues to prepare for his transitions. You can make sure he has enough time and food to eat, and you can give him a chance to rest.

It may help to attend a meeting between all the people who work with the child. Increasingly, home providers are being asked to attend meetings with staff members from other programs, family members, and specialists who work with the child.

Providers and parents can also use a notebook, kept in the child's bookbag, to share information about the child and his daily activities. Working together will help make daily transitions between home and different programs a less stressful and more positive experience.

Thanks to FACTS/LRE, a federally funded project at the University of Illinois, for this article.

Make Sure Children Exercise Regularly

by Gail Carlson

Billy does the bunny hop twice and stops. He would rather watch the other children. Billy is overweight.

Wendy has high cholesterol. Her provider can't believe that a child as young as Wendy could have this problem.

Johnny never charges around the play yard with the other kids. He says he would rather watch.

Almost half of American children are not getting enough exercise to develop healthy hearts and lungs. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends more physical education programs at the preschool and primary level, and they'd like to see families promoting fitness at home.

Most of us believe that preschoolers are always active. Research has found, however, that children spend very little time exercising vigorously. Children who are overweight or inactive are the least likely to participate in vigorous exercise. These children are at special risk.

People who work with young children are usually more concerned about language development, science projects, and art than with developing large motor skills. Although providers often urge children to participate in indoor activities, outside time is often viewed as free play. Providers are apt to set up the slide or put out the tricycles and then stand by and watch. They rarely encourage the children to take part in gross motor activities, even though fitness is vital to good health.

Children imitate adult behavior, and children with active parents are usually active themselves. Providers can be good role models, too. Get involved in the activities you plan for them. If children see you running, jumping, climbing, dancing, and exercising, they will probably join in.

Build an activity plan for large-muscle physical activity, just as you would for art and science. Here are some ideas.

- Help children do warm-up routines that include stretching, flexing, and balancing. Make sure the exercises you select are suitable for small children. Draw attention to their bodies. Get them to feel their muscles, enjoy their flexibility, and compare tight muscles with relaxed ones.

- Present exercise in ways that will interest children. Plan active games, dancing, group exercises, and relay races.

- Start with very brief activities so that overweight or inactive children can succeed.

- Be sure that children participate on the playground, especially the ones who need it most.

- Plan daily physical activities for providers and children to do together. Plan to jog or walk around the block once or twice before going to the playground. Or you could exercise to music each morning. Start slow and work up to 10 minutes.

- Combine music and movement every day. Give children the chance to be a jet plane, a galloping horse, or a speeding train.

- Set up obstacle courses designed for your age group.

- Require children to take part in gross motor activities, just as you require them to wash their hands after using the toilet.

It's hard to break old habits, but you can help children get into the exercise habit early. This habit will pay off both now and later for providers, children, and their families.

Family Child-Care Connections

Family Child-Care Connections is a professional medium for the interchange of information related to home child-care published by the Cooperative Extension System. The newsletter is targeted to family child-care providers who care for children from birth to twelve years of age. For ordering information, contact *Family Child-Care Connections*, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois, 174 Bevier Hall, Urbana, IL 61801. Phone: (217)244-6798.

Those involved as providers, educators, or researchers in the area of family child-care are encouraged to submit articles. Articles about appropriate practice, program implementation and maintenance, and/or the child-care profession are encouraged. Authors submitting articles for review should be aware of the following policies.

The article is subject to peer review and will be edited to conform with the newsletter's goals, space requirements, and eighth-grade reading level.

The article should be consistent with the content and language used in *Family Child-Care Connections*.

Articles typically should be one to three pages, typewritten, double-spaced, and on one side of 8 1/2" x 11" paper with 1-inch margins. Please include your full name, title and affiliation, your address, and your phone and fax numbers.

The article should be submitted to Christine M. Todd, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service at the address listed above. Articles submitted for publication will not be returned.

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