

Encouraging Inclusive Behaviour

By Tracy Morrison

Young children's perceptions of themselves and the world are influenced by the complex and diverse communities in which they live and by their family culture and lifestyle. Given these complexities, child care services can help children to understand difference and diversity by providing them with strategies and support to positively explore these concepts. Families using child care are diverse and a service may contain a variety of family structures: traditional, sole or same-sex parents, blended or extended families.

Why anti-bias child care environments are important for children

Research suggests that children are aware of differences in relation to race, physical ability and gender from an early age, possibly infancy. As a result they begin to understand that they are distinct individuals within a diverse social framework.

Children construct their knowledge of diversity by adopting the perceptions of people in their immediate environment. Glover (cited in Dau, 2001: p.2) supports this, suggesting that "as children become aware of difference, they simultaneously develop positive or negative feelings about each difference they observe."

Therefore, carers have a responsibility to respect and represent diversity in ways that foster children's developing sense of self and identity. An anti-bias approach is one that includes all possible differences not just those represented specifically in the service. Inclusive practice is about universal respect and representation.



This article relates to:

FDCQA: Principle 1.3

OSHCQA: Principle 1.2

QIAS: Principles 1.4 and 1.5

Children's awareness of diversity is developed in social contexts. It is imperative that these contexts offer positive evaluations and reinforcement so that children can learn to accept and appreciate diversity.

The culture of the child care environment should be respectful and supportive of individuals. It is important that children know that differences exist and are valuable. Anti-bias environments should embrace multiple perspectives and constantly evaluate and reflect on similarities and differences.

Staff inclusive behaviour

It is important to consider the ways in which a service reflects the diverse beliefs and values of all individuals in the environment. Arthur et al (2003: p.9) suggest that, "it is sometimes difficult to acknowledge the everyday experiences of families when they are different from our own and challenge long held values and assumptions". Carers need to feel comfortable talking about difference so that children and families do as well. In order to achieve this carers need to assess whether a culture of respect is encouraged in the service and how this is demonstrated.

Arthur, et al (2005: p.94) suggest that for young children "the ability to adopt the perspectives of others develops over time, and opportunities to observe how adults achieve this, as well as opportunities to engage in experiences that promote perspective taking, are to be encouraged."

Promoting equity for individuals: Inclusive practices in child care services

There are many biases that programs should address, challenge, and encourage children to explore. Glover (cited in Dau, 2001: p.8) states that, "children will absorb all kinds of misinformation and stereotypes, by both what they see and hear and what they don't see and hear, as they participate in early childhood programs". It is important that carers reflect on their own attitudes, biases and behaviour as well as their knowledge about the diversity in contemporary Australian society and how this might be communicated in the service.

Child care environments are equitable when individuals are acknowledged and supported irrespective of difference. This can be evidenced through the service philosophy, broad goals, policies and other documentation. How carers put these policies into practice is essential to the effectiveness of anti-bias programs. Inclusive programs constantly challenge and discuss stereotypes and represent similarities and differences. Arthur et al (2005: p.284) state "[carers] need to work with children and families to challenge children's preconceptions, link the curriculum to all children's family and community experiences, and take a critical perspective in analysing... popular media and educational texts." By doing this children can explore ideas with peers, gain knowledge and begin to construct their own understandings that will, ultimately, challenge dominant discourses.

The interactions that young children have with others, both peers and adults, influence their developing belief systems and thus their sense of self and identity. Their relationships with others help them to form their ideas about the world and about the complex social concepts and appropriate behaviours that are related to these. Genuine and trusting relationships allow children to feel accepted and valued within their social communities. Feelings of acceptance result in individual's empowerment and the ability to understand the need to accept others regardless of difference.

Anti-bias early childhood environments must actively encourage children to respect others by helping them to listen to peers and empathise with others. Ultimately, an inclusive early childhood environment is one where everyone feels welcome and comfortable. Jones and Mules (in Dau, 2001: p.202) suggest that "critical reflection and taking action against bias requires all involved to be willing to take risks, ask hard questions and make change. A team will need opportunities to discuss their experiences and challenges together, to share knowledge and debate and work together to achieve anti-bias goals".

It is essential that individual children, families and carers do not feel marginalised or invisible in their own social worlds. ■

Questions to consider about inclusive practices:

- What opportunities do children have to question and explore the social constructions of gender?
- How are femininities and masculinities challenged and addressed with children?
- What opportunities do children have to analyse resources/media representations of bias?
- What questions are asked of children that challenge biases and move towards facilitating understanding about diversity?
- How are the questions asked by young children about bias answered?
- How do carers encourage children to understand the right of individuals to have their thoughts, feelings and ideas heard and respected?
- How are diverse cultures and abilities represented in the child care service?
- Are resources inclusive and supportive of gender, culture and physical ability?
- Do the resources at the service encourage critical thinking about difference and represent diversity?
- How are resources reflecting diversity used by carers to support children explore difference?
- How are instances of prejudice confronted and acted on in the early childhood environment?

Further reading

- Arthur, L., Beecher, B., Death, E., Dockett, S., and Farmer, S. (2005). *Programming and Planning in Early Childhood Settings*. (3rd ed.). Southbank: Thomson.
- Arthur, L., Beecher, B., Harrison, C., and Morandini, C. (2003). Sharing the Lived Experiences of Children. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol 28, No. 2.
- Dau, E., Ed. (2001). *The Anti-Bias Approach in Early Childhood*. (2nd ed.). Frenchs Forest: Longman.
- Gonzalez-Mena, J., and Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Making Links: A Collaborative Approach to Planning and Practice in Early Childhood*. Castle Hill: Pademelon Press.
- MacNaughton, G. (2003). *Shaping Early Childhood: Learners, Curriculum and Contexts*. Berridge: Open University Press.