

ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION (ABE) – Source: Tufts Eliot-Pearson Children's School

1. What is anti-bias education (ABE)?

Anti-bias education is a stance that supports children, and their families, as they develop a sense of personal and group identity within a complex and multicultural society. This approach helps teach children to be proud of themselves and their families, to respect a range of human differences, to recognize unfairness and bias, and to speak up for what is right. (Derman-Sparks & Olsen, 2010).

At School for Friends, this means working to create an inclusive community that encourages conversations among children and adults about all types of human differences in the context of classroom life. Discussions may include topics such as: culture, race, language, physical, mental, and social-emotional abilities, learning styles, ethnicity, family structure, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age, socio-economic differences, and our many ways of being. ABE supports children and adults to listen to each other with open minds, and to reserve judgment when we encounter views with which we disagree.

Parent: "Anti-bias Education gives us tools to talk about difficult topics. It's safe to disagree."

Teacher: "ABE is a complicated, messy process. There is no right or wrong answer."

2. Why is ABE so important?

Anti-bias teachers are committed to the principle that every child deserves to develop to their fullest potential and an ABE stance helps every child do that. ABE is important at all stages of development. Early childhood is a critical period of time as it is when children first receive and perceive messages about who they are, as well as how others see them and their families. With ABE, we work to make sure that all children see themselves and their families reflected and respected in the early childhood classroom.

Parent: "If we fail to talk about our differences, all we are left with is to make assumptions about others that are often misleading or unfair."

Teacher: "Children need language and experiences to broaden their understanding about diversity. The more experiences they have, the more easily they can take on an anti-bias approach themselves."

3. What do children learn in an ABE environment?

Children learn about similarities and differences in people and communities. They are encouraged to act in ways that reflect anti-bias values and to stand up for things they feel are unfair. ABE is integrated into the classroom activities. It is both planned curriculum within the structure of the day, as well as natural "teachable moments" based on children's social interactions, conversations and play. Anti-bias curriculum topics come from the children, families, and teachers, as well as historical or current events. When children ask questions about differences, adults listen in order to facilitate conversations and responses.

Examples of questions and comments children ask about differences:

"What color is my skin? Why does my skin look different?"

"He's a baby because he can't walk."

"Why does she wear that scarf on her head?"

"He has two mommies."

4. What is the role of families in ABE?

Families can play many roles.

1. Be aware of the school's approach to ABE and understand the ways that it may be manifested in the classroom.
2. Build relationships and engage in dialogue with teachers, staff, other families, and your own children.
3. Share your wisdom and insights about your child with the school, including information about your home culture, values, and ways of being.
4. Participate in classroom activities and school-wide activities.

Each family's level of participation is unique and is respected. As teachers learn more about your child and family throughout the school year, they become better equipped to invite and facilitate rich discussions and learning opportunities for both the individual child and the classroom group. Families should feel empowered and valued to share ideas and perspectives – not only when concepts or topics make

sense, but especially when topics are confusing or uncomfortable. Families should feel able to tell us the ways in which their family interacts with the world.

Parent: "Families do and don't feel like they fit in for a whole range of reasons. We want to be heard, valued and included in ways that seem meaningful and valuable to us."

5. **How does ABE relate to bullying?**

ABE is an example of an anti-bullying, pro-social curriculum because we are proactively teaching children how to fairly understand and respond when they encounter difference. However, we do not use the word "bullying" in early childhood because young children are not bullies; children at this age are simply learning to get along. Exploration of power and conflict are a natural part of this process.

Creating and maintaining a classroom community where everyone feels safe and respected is an essential part of the teacher's role at every age level. During the first weeks of school, teachers develop "ground rules" or "classroom agreements" with the older children. These may include words such as "We take care of each other. We don't use words or actions that hurt others". Teachers lead discussions and activities that foster understanding others' points of views and differences. Problem solving strategies are directly taught.

6. **Where can I get more information about ABE?**

The Director and Teachers can answer questions about ABE. Also, a list of anti-bias readings and resources is available.

7. **What are the specific goals of an anti-bias education?**

(Derman-Sparks & Olsen, 2010).

- ABE Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
- ABE Goal 2: Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.
- ABE Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
- ABE Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

8. **How do teachers decide what to teach? What types of similarities and differences are discussed with the children?**

Sources of anti-bias curriculum topics can come from the children, families, teachers or historical and current events. Implementation of anti-bias curriculum takes place with a focus at three different levels: individual children and families; specific classroom topics; and school-wide themes.

Teachers, working in partnership with families, start by creating a classroom environment that represents the children and families within the classroom, as well as and the diversity of people in their world. Songs and books, in languages that are spoken by families in the classroom, are often used as a starting point. Children and families also participate in learning and sharing about their own identities through activities such as making self-portraits with materials that match the colors of their skin, hair and eyes; experiencing stories about different types of families; and participating in "share days" for each child and family. Classroom materials such as books, dolls, play props, puzzles, music and images on the wall reflect people from various racial and cultural groups, gender roles and differing abilities.

In an effort to help children understand, respect and interact comfortably with people different from themselves, teachers discuss and plan activities that consider how we are alike and how we are different, including physical characteristics, gender, language, culture, religion, ability and family make-up. Teachers also make decisions on what to teach based on the interests, questions and issues that children show us through their play and conversations. For example, if children are excluding others based on gender, ("This is a game for boys only") discussions, books and "problem stories" related to gender differences and exclusion become part of the curriculum.

School-wide themes that focus on resisting stereotyping and discriminatory behavior take place in each classroom in different ways, depending on the children's ages and experiences. For example, stories, discussions and role-playing related to Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott lead to a beginning awareness of unfairness and power based on differences between people. The details of how this topic is addressed, however, depend on what is developmentally appropriate for each class and the individual children in it. Therefore, the specific ways in which a single school-wide theme is explored will vary greatly from toddler to preschool.

9. **How is Anti-Bias Education integrated into the school day? What is the relationship between play, academics and ABE?**

Anti-bias education occurs through both proactive, planned curriculum as well as natural "teachable moments" that arise in children's social interactions, conversations, and play. Teachers also carefully think about what children need in terms of individual and group

development throughout the year. Balancing these aspects of curriculum development leads to activities that integrate into the classroom's daily schedule, as well as with the social, emotional, cognitive, motor, and academic goals that we have for the children. Teachers develop activities that support many learning goals at once, such as in the following example.

- A teacher overhears children talking about their skin colors while out in the playground. Afterwards, as a literacy activity, the teacher reads a story celebrating different skin colors. During choice time, children mix their own skin colors with paint and teachers facilitate conversations about the colors with other children at the table.

10. Is anti-bias education appropriate for young children? Will my child learn or acquire biases about others?

Three aspects inform early childhood teachers' thinking about developmental appropriateness: what we know about the individual child, the sociocultural context (such as communities, cultural, ethnic, or linguistic groups, or national context), and what researchers have learned over time about children's development. In most cases, children in our program are exposed to diversity on a daily basis from their neighborhoods, all forms of media, and schools. From infancy on, children are constantly deriving meanings from their experiences, regardless of whether adults are supporting them in this process. Anti-bias educators believe that it is the responsibility of adults to scaffold children's learning about diversity to ensure that the messages that children take away are positive and will help them develop into effective citizens in a diverse democracy (see ABE goals in question 7).

Some families may worry that talking about biases might foster bias in children and choose to avoid discussing the topic. However, studies show that tolerant children do not become prejudiced after talking about race, while prejudiced children show greater tolerance after such discussions. Moreover, children have trouble predicting adults' attitudes about diversity unless adults have communicated their attitudes directly to them.

Learning is a process. As a child learns to spell the word "school," the word may take different forms, including "s-k-l," to "s-k-o-o-l." These forms are important steps in the learning process. We would not discontinue writing instruction because a child temporarily uses incorrect spelling. Anti-bias learning is also a journey and a process, made even more complicated that society has yet to agree on all the "right answers" about how to be unified in diversity. **It may appear that a child who has begun to spontaneously point out racial diversity is acquiring bias. Instead, if we view this behavior as a step in the process of learning to recognize and appreciate human diversity, we can take advantage of a teachable moment!**

11. Will my child experience moments in which s/he feels included and/or excluded?

Yes. As with all explorations of the world, children bring themselves to their learning. This means that as we explore similarities and differences, children are quick to connect and compare images and words to themselves. As children are learning about who they are and then testing out and refining these ideas and perspectives, at times they may perceive their similarities as being "included" and their differences as being "excluded." Because our society uses distinct affinity groupings to discuss cultural identities, it is easy for a child to perceive that 'if I am a member of one group (i.e. girls) than this means that I am not a member in another group (i.e. boys).'

As children work to understand what a particular identity means to them, they may even temporarily segregate themselves into distinct groupings. This allows them to observe and test out ideas about what it means to be a 'boy' or a 'girl'. In these cases, teachers consider the careful balance between providing children space to consider and test their ideas while also asking children to expand their thinking and embrace a wider and more inclusive lens. Teachers also help children to understand the emotional impact of including and excluding, while work towards a space of respect and acceptance. They help children become better able to articulate their questions and ideas in ways that do not hurt the feelings of others.

12. How does the school discuss similarities and differences between families, in terms of their parenting styles, beliefs and values? Is there room for discussion when a family's approach is different from that of the school?

Families come from diverse cultural, religious, socioeconomic, linguistic, and geographic backgrounds, and this wealth of diversity contributes to the overall health and vibrancy of a school. Every family offers expertise, resources, and opportunities to enrich all children's learning. Within this diversity, it is inevitable that there will be varying viewpoints, cultural conflicts, and differences in values, goals for children, and expectations of schools. People will not always agree. While anti-bias education does not offer simple solutions for when such conflicts or differences in expectations arise, it prepares us with the confidence that these conflicts are a healthy part of the process of learning from one another. Anti-bias education supports open dialogues and opportunities to engage with differences rather than ignoring or minimizing them.

Some foundational principles (or "bottom lines") guide us in our efforts to make every family feel respected, valued, and included within the school culture. We have the four goals of anti-bias education stated above; we also have the school's published philosophy, guiding principles, and commitment to inclusion. Families are always welcome and encouraged to share their experiences, questions, and concerns with teachers and administrators. These bottom lines provide the scaffolding necessary for the school and families to approach differences with mutual respect, a spirit of generosity, and trust in the process that we are partners in working for solutions that consider the needs of individual children and families as well as the good of the community.

13. How is anti-bias education related to special education inclusion?

Special education inclusion is the practice of educating children with physical and/or learning challenges together with typically developing peers. Special education inclusion is supported and regulated by state and federal laws. Anti-bias education is a voluntary approach that encompasses special education inclusion and extends it to address differences in culture, race, language, gender, economic class, and family structure. The goals of anti-bias education and special education inclusion are very similar in that they place positive value on differences and treating all people with fairness and respect.

Teachers use a variety of language to support children in learning about their own and one another's unique learning needs. Children are invited to share their strengths and expertise, as well as their challenges and skills that they are working on. Children also are exposed to the idea that "fair is not always equal." This means that what one child may need to do her best learning may be different from what another child needs. Children learn to express their own needs as well as understand and support the needs of others. In practice this may mean that some children require specialized seating, additional sensory breaks, or distinct writing tools in order to work to their highest ability. In addition, children learn that all classmates have contributions to make to the community. These contributions are acknowledged and children are encouraged to seek one another out for their strengths and contributions.

14. How can I stay informed about the work my child's class is doing with in regard to anti-bias education?

There are many ways to stay informed about ABE in your class. Some of them include:

- Most important: ask your child and your child's teacher
- Read the classroom newsletter. This will give you a regular window into the ongoing anti-bias work that occurs in your child's class. Several classrooms have explicit ABE updates in their newsletters.
- Find out about the books that teachers are using in class to address anti-bias issues. Check these books out or ask your child's teacher if you can borrow the book from the class for a night!
- Let your child's teacher know you are interested in observing anti-bias work. Find a time to observe during explicit anti-bias discussion.
- Volunteer in the classroom. Find out from your child's teacher if it possible for you to take part in an ABE lesson.

15. How are the teachers trained to use Anti-bias Education? How can teachers teach Anti-bias Education in a responsive and sensitive way to children whose identities are different from their own?

The role of the teacher is to provide an equitable education to all children, and to cause children to question and challenge exclusionary and unfair practices. This means supporting a child's identity development, pride in family and community, respect for range of human differences, ability to recognize unfairness and bias, and empowerment to speak up for what is right. Teachers do this work by not only developing curriculum, but by generating questions for themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

Teachers at School for Friends are developing their skills as anti-bias educators. Coursework, reading and ongoing discussion enable teachers to have a philosophical and theoretical understanding of anti-bias education. Teachers also develop a high level of self-awareness that informs their own practice through a cycle of questioning and discussing their own perspectives, along with those of the children and families. Teachers are actively engaged in their own on-going professional development to provide them with the knowledge and support they need to be an effective anti-bias educator.