Creating a Culturally Diverse Child Care Environment

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The children of today are growing up in a world that will be quite different than the one in which their parents grew up. A major difference will be the increasing diversity in the United States population. "By the year 2056, when someone born today will be 66 years old, the average U.S. resident will trace his or her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia - almost anywhere but white Europe" (Henry, p. 28).

Race and ethnicity are not the only factors which make this country a very diverse society. Currently, 45 million Americans (13% of U.S. population) are physically challenged. Also, one in every seven Americans speaks a language other than English in their homes. One fourth of the population is over 50 with the median age of the population continuing to rise, and it is estimated that 10% of the population is gay or lesbian.

An important responsibility of parents and child care providers will be to help prepare children with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary to live and work successfully in a complex, diverse world. *Children begin to notice differences and evaluate others at a very early age. By the age of three, children begin to show signs of being influenced by societal norms and biases and may exhibit "pre-prejudice" toward others on the basis of gender or race or being differently abled* (Derman-Sparks, p. 2). In fact, some psychologists say that children are "culturally programmed" by the age of three.

Special efforts must be made to create a positive environment which acknowledges and values human differences, and that helps children learn positive, appropriate responses to differences. Most early childhood programs have an abundance of materials reflecting White, able-bodied children in traditional gender roles. We need to make the environment more inclusive, more reflective of the diverse society in which our children will live.

The following are considerations that can be used to assess a child care environment.

		Assessing the Physical/Material Environment
Yes	No	Do books, pictures/posters, videos/movies: include children and adults of color as well as White?
Yes	No	project a fair balance of men and women doing similar jobs, both inside the home and outside the home?
Yes	No	include stories about different cultures?
Yes	No	show people who are physically challenged in a variety of settings including family roles, recreational activities, and employment positions?
Yes	No	feature important people who reflect racial/ethnic, gender, and ableness diversity?
Yes	No	avoid the use of stereotypes (e.g., cowboys and Indians)?
Yes	No	depict people in a variety of social/economic classes including working class, middle class, and upper class?
Yes	No	show pictures of older people engaged in a variety of activities.
		Language
Yes	No	Are children provided an opportunity to see and hear a variety of different languages, including songs and music?
		Toys and Play Materials
Yes	No	Do dolls represent a fair balance of all the major groups in the United States-White, African American, Latino, Asian-Pacific Islander, Native American?
Yes	No	Do dolls represent a fair balance of males and females? Do female dolls have both dresses and pants for clothing?
Yes	No	Do colored paper, crayons, and play dough include a variety of brown skin tone colors ranging from light brown to dark brown, as well as flesh and peach colors?
		Holidays and Celebrations and Foods
Yes	No	Are children exposed to holiday celebrations of different religions and different racial/ethnic groups?
Yes	No	Do snacks and meals include foods and dishes from other cultures?
		Assessing Our Interactions With Children
Yes	No	Are girls offered as much physical freedom and use of large motor equipment as boys?

Yes	No	Are similar behaviors interpreted or responded to differently with boys than girls?
Yes	No	Are similar behaviors interpreted or responded to differently with White children than children of color?
Yes	No	Is the language used by adults free of gender bias (e.g. police officer vs. policeman, fire fighter vs. fireman)?
Yes	No	Do children receive open, unbiased answers to their questions about disabilities, gender, and race or ethnicity?
Yes	No	Does information about other cultures only focus on other countries and ignore the cultural diversity within this country (e.g. Mexico vs. Mexican-Americans)?
		Assessing Our Own Beliefs and Attitudes
Yes	No	Do I/staff appreciate the similarities and differences that exist among different racial and ethnic groups?
Yes	No	Do I/staff feel comfortable interacting with people who are racially or culturally different from myself?
Yes	No	Am I/staff comfortable interacting with people who have a physical or mental disability?
Yes	No	Does each minority culture has something positive to contribute to American society?
Yes	No	Do I/staff think the ability to speak another language is a valuable skill in this country?
Yes	No	It is good for children to learn a second language, other than English?
Yes	No	Am I comfortable talking about difference in religious beliefs?
Yes	No	Are women are as capable as men in American society?

Child care providers have an opportunity to help children develop a high level of understanding, appreciation, and respect for individual differences in themselves and others. Young children model the behavior of older children and adults. Remember, what is *not* included in the environment can be as powerful a contributor to attitudes as what *is* included in the environment.

Exposure to human differences and relationships with diverse people help to break down fear and negative stereotypes. Learning to respect our differences is the only way we can get along in a changing world.

References: Derman-Sparks. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum: tools for empowering young children.* Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Henry, William. (1990). *Beyond the melting pot.* Time, 135 (15), 28-31.