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Ending Bias Begins at Home

By Kim Anderson, MSW, LCSW, ATR-BC

Like all character education, understanding diversity, embracing difference, and ending bias begins at home. Despite overt change in America, there seems to be an increase in tension and resurgence of intolerance which needs our attention. Helping children negotiate their feelings and thoughts about those they consider different is essential to their development and greatly improves the well-being of our school communities. Practice may not make perfect, but does instill critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Eliminating bias based assumptions and resulting actions can easily begin with discovering difference and diversity within one's own family and learning how to ask respectful questions. Conversations about diversity often are limited to issues of race, ethnicity, religion or gender. Expanding ideas of diversity, however, expands notions of difference while lessening the divide between groups of people. Teaching children that everyone has a story of difference can also empower them to share how they, too, may feel separate or apart from their peers or even their family.

Rather than start with complicated social issues such as ethnicity or religion, begin by talking with children about issues such as heritage and history, geography, and personal circumstance. Help children form questions to learn about these distinctions, first from close family members, then from other nurturing and safe adults, finally from friends and schoolmates.

Helping children demonstrate a basic interest in others helps foster a sense of positive regard for the unfamiliar or the misunderstood. Children are innately curious. Fine tuning their inquisitive natures is a relatively simple task. Like riding a bike or swimming, if children are not taught to fear, they learn these skills quickly and without hesitancy. Often, it is the adult instructor who imposes preconceptions about balance and buoyancy.

Consider these ideas to help children become comfortable with those who are different from them:

Family interview

- Ask your child who in the family he or she is most like. Ask him or her to list three things that make them alike.
- Ask who your child feels is the family member most different from everyone else and what three things make them different.
- Help your son or daughter formulate respectful questions about those three differences. Do not restrict the questions; do edit how they are asked. Teach children how to ask open-ended questions such as “Would you please tell me about your red hair?” or “What was it like growing up in Ireland?”
- Ask the family member for their cooperation in this learning experience. If they are uncomfortable, tell your child in an age-appropriate way. Rather than saying, “Aunt Joanne doesn’t want to talk to you,” tell him or her that it isn’t a good time for Aunt Joanne to talk about these things. Ask who else in the family interests him or her.
- Assuming the family member is willing, safe, and nurturing, allow your child to interview the person alone. Don’t hover. Trust that he or she will be sensitive.
- Talk about the experience with both your child and the interviewee separately to discover what went well, what didn’t, and what could have furthered the discussion.
- Don’t hesitate to give your child accurate, yet supportive feedback. For example, if Uncle Larry reports that your son used an ethnic slur, be clear and honest about the inappropriateness of the word. Remember to reassure the child that there are no “bad” questions but suggest other ways in which he might have asked why Uncle Larry’s skin is darker than the rest of the family and explain why this would be a better approach.

View a new community.

- We don’t have to go very far to find communities different from our own. Ask your child to pick a community within ten to twenty miles from home. Give him/her a disposable camera and ask him/her to take pictures of things that are different from things in their community.
- Have the photos developed.
- Ask what is important in each picture.
- Listen for things that are accurate and things that are not. Ask how he or she came to those conclusions. Correct the misconceptions and ask more about their thoughtful insights.

Solve a mystery, make a new friend.

- Kids love a good mystery. Ask your child who in his or her class is the biggest mystery. Ask if they would want to have that classmate over to play or study after school. If they say no, explore why.
- If they are interested, help make it happen.
- Suggest that your son or daughter use the skills they used in interviewing the family to learn more about this potential new friend.

Help your child identify his or her personal distinctions.

- Ask your child if there is one thing he or she feels is different about him or her from most everyone else in the world.
- What would he or she like others to know about that one thing?
- If he or she could change it, why or why not?
- Be cautious in your response. Listen carefully and refrain from correcting or downplaying the importance of your child's feelings. Model unconditional caring and acceptance.

Invite your child to interview you about your own differences.

- Be open and honest, yet answer only the questions your child asks. Often, we try to anticipate the worst and over explain. If they want to know more, they will ask.

Unbiased life lessons to teach and remember.

- Difference makes the world more interesting.
- Everyone deserves respect.
- Always speak out of kindness.
- Never speak out of hate.

The backlash of bias in the world today gives us an opportunity to help our children maneuver through this challenging time by teaching skills beyond tolerance. Bias may be born out of fear and misinformation but it ends at home where character education begins.

Kim Anderson is an expressive arts psychotherapist with nearly thirty years of experience working with families, children, individuals, and groups. She specializes in clinical issues of diversity and is a contributor to The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience: A Journey to Racial Literacy, by Bonnie M. Davis. Kim is currently working on a book entitled, Helping without Bias: A New Paradigm of Cultural Competence for School Counselors.