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# What If All the Kids Are White?

## Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families

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with Julie Olsen Edwards

*Foreword by Carol Brunson Day*



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> In untying the knot [of racism and other isms], you're unraveling the web of lies that each of us has inevitably experienced [and] that have taken their dehumanizing toll. . . . in unraveling even a bit of the whole, we feel tremendously excited. We have only to unravel more of it to reclaim ourselves more completely. (Early childhood teacher quoted in Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, p. 137)

Knowing that children and adults can and do demonstrate empathic and respectful connections to the human family and the capacity to engage in anti-racist, social justice activism, we now turn to guidelines and strategies for nurturing these dispositions and skills. In the following two chapters we explore Learning Themes 4, 5, 6, and 7 and suggest a range of activities for implementing them in early childhood programs.

CHAPTER 8

# Fostering Children's Caring and Activism

> Fair is when everybody gets everything, but nobody gets everything they want. Unfair is when somebody gets left out.
> —Jenna, 5-year-old, quoted in E. Hoffman, *Magic Capes, Amazing Powers: Transforming Superhero Play in the Classroom*

In this chapter we talk about ways to develop white children's positive awareness of people of color and to instill a sense of caring and responsibility toward people who are racially, culturally, and economically different from them. We want to encourage white children to begin to understand that everyone does not live or should live the way that they do, and to see themselves as coequal members of the human family. Since this chapter builds on Chapter 4's learning themes, we strongly urge you to incorporate them into your daily curriculum before moving on to the learning themes of this chapter. As in all AB/MC education, learning about others must rest on a strong sense of individual and group identity.

Some child developmentalists argue that young children are not able to comprehend events and situations they have not directly experienced. Thus, they do not accept that children are constructing ideas about people with whom they do not have direct experience. However, as we saw in Chapters 3 and 7, children readily absorb and express prevailing stereotypes about different racial groups. Moreover, we believe that 4- and 5-year-olds can begin to understand and feel connected to people and circumstances beyond their own immediate world, if teachers carefully tie children's learning about others to meaningful events and experiences. Early childhood teachers have the potential to lay the foundation for the long-term goal of raising children who grow up identifying as members of a global community, committed to creating an equitable and sustainable world.

## LEARNING THEMES

The learning themes discussed in this chapter aim to expand children's interests and concerns beyond their immediate world and to help them to see themselves as agents of change.

*Theme 4: Understand, appreciate, and respect differences and similarities beyond the immediate family, neighborhood center/classroom, and racial group.* As we have previously described, white children in our society learn about people of color from an early age and what they absorb is often incorrect, negative information that lays a foundation for prejudice and discrimination. Teachers need to promote accurate, positive understandings and attitudes about people of color before the misinformation becomes too strongly rooted in white children's minds. Through concrete examples, children can learn to see human differences and similarities as points on a continuum—not as polarized opposites. From this perspective, they can learn to reach out and connect authentically with people as equals, not simply "being nice" to groups that they regard—perhaps unconsciously—as inferior. Also, when children begin to see beyond group differences and recognize that cross-race individuals are like them in many ways, they are more likely to recognize the harm caused by prejudiced behaviors and feel motivated to act in more just ways.

*Theme 5: Learn to identify and challenge stereotypes, prejudice, and discriminatory practices in the immediate environment.* As the research in Chapter 3 illustrates, many young white children already hold ideas about white superiority and "normalcy" and negative, stereotyped attitudes toward people of color that they have absorbed from images and messages all around them, including from books, television, video games, holiday decorations, greeting cards, and toys. Moreover, children will continue to be exposed to racist ideas for the rest of their lives. However, the experience of early childhood anti-bias educators tells us that by 4 years of age, children can profit from learning opportunities that encourage them to contrast accurate images and information with incorrect and stereotypical ones. They can also learn to recognize and challenge the concrete ways that whiteness is presented as the norm and, in many cases, superior. Because of their cognitive developmental stage and continual exposure to misinformation, it is impossible to eradicate all of their stereotypical ideas. However, we *can* help them develop their capacities to think critically and flexibly.

*Theme 6: Commit to the ideal that all people have the right to a secure, healthy, comfortable, and sustainable life and that everyone must equitably share the resources of the earth and collaboratively care for them.* Americans currently



consume the lion's share of the world's resources. Caught up in the passion for consumption that pervades our society, most adults rarely think about the real costs of their purchases in terms of labor practices (outsourcing jobs overseas; unsafe factories in poor countries), the unequal distribution of resources, or the impact on the environment). Moreover, most parents delight in making their children happy and may not consider the deleterious effects of giving them more and more things that then may become the central hallmark of their children's identities. These consumerist attitudes and behaviors reinforce young children's belief that what they want is theirs by right; as a result, for many children developmental egocentrism grows into a sense of entitlement. This profound sense of privilege, in turn, can undermine children's abilities to care about and connect with others. Clark (1963) many years ago warned of the destructive effect of teaching white children to "pursue the symbols of status and success, [while] they are at the same time being taught to compete with others—and to exclude from the area of meaningful competitions those who are 'obviously inferior'" (p. 73).

Family, social class, cultural contexts, and life experiences affect the degree to which children feel this entitlement. For children in lower-income families, expectations about consumerism are tempered by life realities. For children growing up in racially and economically privileged families, budding beliefs in personal and group entitlement (Coles, 1977) converges with and supports assumptions about racial and class superiority. Families who have strong cultural or religious values about sharing resources, rather than amassing them for personal gain, may impart a counterconsumerist message. However, despite material limitations and parents' efforts to negate consumerist messages, children are constantly tantalized and may reject counterconsumerist realities or messages. Social class may also influence attitudes about the impact of consumerism on the environment. Wealthier people often focus on preserving pristine wilderness areas—a worthy cause—but ignore struggles to overcome environmental degradation in poor communities (waste-processing plants in low-income urban communities; nuclear waste sites on Native American lands) and in other countries. In contrast, working-class whites may resent environmental protections because corporations often cite these regulations as reasons for eliminating or outsourcing jobs.

To connect and care for all the human family, children need to resist pressures to consume and should focus instead on developing a broad sense of responsibility that embraces all beings with whom they cohabit the earth.

*Theme 7: Build identities that include anti-bias ideals and possibilities and acquire skills and confidence to work together for social justice in their own classrooms and communities and in the larger society.* As children develop more authentic identities and differentiated views of the world, learning

to take a stand for fairness for oneself and for others is the next step on their developmental journey. Experience has shown that teachers can effectively engage children as young as 4 years old in activism if the projects emerge from real incidents or issues in their lives; are simple and direct; have a clear, tangible focus; and are geared to the children's experiences rather than to achieving a particular outcome. By participating in these learning opportunities, children learn to act responsibly; consider people's feelings, perspectives, and ideas; and notice how their actions might affect other people (Pelo & Davidson, 2000).

Just like white adults who are struggling to form anti-racist identities, children need role models of courageous white anti-racists. Children love stories of adventure and courage. Learning about the struggles and victories of anti-racists—whites and people of color—is a way of channeling this fascination away from films, television shows, and video games in which strength and courage are measured only by violent actions that often reflect racist and sexist themes. We need to imbue our children with courage and a sense of possibility that rest, not on dreams of individual entitlement, but on the desire to make the world a better place for everyone.

## LEARNING WHAT YOUR CHILDREN ARE THINKING AND FEELING

As we stated in Chapter 4, regularly observing, listening to, and informally talking with your children are essential to implementing relevant AB/MC curriculum. Needless to say, each child will have a unique "take" on these issues, and we will never know all that each child thinks and feels about them. However, as you listen and observe, you will get a sense of the range of ideas that children are developing, which will, in turn, help you to design activities that potentially enlarge children's realm of caring and strengthen and deepen their commitment to fairness.

The techniques for learning how children feel about different groups of people are similar to those we suggested in Chapter 4, although specific questions are different.

- *Use photographs and books that depict a wide range of people of color and their daily lives in the United States to elicit children's thoughts and feelings about different groups.* With individual children and with small groups, you might ask questions such as, What do you notice about the person? What might this person do for fun or for work? In addition to seeking children's ideas about different aspects of diversity, note their emotional reactions: Do any children laugh? Ask questions? Seem interested? Scornful? When children see pictures or hear stories about people with more/less money, how do they react? Do they "blame" poor people for their plight or are they more sympathetic and respectful? Do they assume that rich people are better or happier than poor people? Ask children which of the people depicted in the photographs they would like to have join their class or live in their neighborhood. Then explore the reasons behind their selections. Encourage children to make up stories about the people in some of the pictures.
- *Note any comments implying that people of color are deviant or inferior that children make in their play or conversations.* For example, early childhood teachers have reported hearing the following comments: "His skin looks like mud. Yuk!" "Chinese people can't see good 'cause their eyes are kinda shut," "Look! I am sitting 'Indian style,'" "Arabs kill people," and "Vietnamese people talk funny." These comments can become the starting point for planning activities to challenge beliefs that may be precursers to prejudice.
- *Ask children and family members about children's previous contacts with groups other than their own.* What groups are represented in their neighborhood, social groups, place of worship, and workplace? Have families traveled or lived in other cities and regions in the United States or other countries? Were they tourists or did they live as members of the local community? How did their children react to unfamiliar people and situations? These questions can be incorporated into your initial intake interview, as well as your ongoing conversations with families (as described in Chapter 5). How families tell their stories provides a glimpse into their views of people who are different from themselves (such as describing other customs/lifestyles respectfully or disdainfully).
- *Observe how children and family members view possessions.* How often do children come into school reciting a catalog of their new purchases? How much attention do they pay to one another's new clothes? New toys? Do they tease children who wear worn clothing or shoes? Do they use new, "hot" toys to entice or control other children? Do they appear to be highly influenced by television commercials? How do the families feel toward consumerism and social-class differences? Do they talk a lot about possessions? Fancy trips? How competitive or cooperative are they with other families in the program? Do wealthier families ignore families with lower incomes?

- *Observe how children react to the natural environment.* How do children react to the animals and plants in your classroom? Do they take an interest? Think about what other living things need? What do children do when they are outside? Do they express curiosity and concern about plants and animals or do they tend to "conquer" nature (pretend to chop down trees, avoid or destroy bugs when they see them)? Do they notice litter and other local environmental problems?
- *Watch how children react to unfair situations.* Are there frequent situations in which children are unfair or mean to each other? How do others react to these situations? Do children stand up for themselves and others? Do they seem to understand the concept of fairness (not just use it to justify what they want)?

## STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN

The strategies we suggest in this chapter build on children's previous exploration of similarities and differences among whites and the creating of caring connections within their immediate world (see Chapter 4). The goals are for children to understand how people from *all* groups share commonalities and differences and to construct the attitudes and skills to eventually help build a diverse society free of racism.

### Implementing Learning Theme Four

This set of strategies focuses on differences and similarities beyond white children's immediate environment. They are similar to those found in other anti-bias and multicultural curriculum resources (e.g., Derman-Sparks et al., 1989; Ramsey, 2004; Wolpert, 2002; York, 2003). Remember to connect this learning theme to children's understanding of similarities and differences among themselves.

*Model inclusive practices.* How you set up and use your aesthetic and material environment sets the stage for expanding your children's learning about racial and cultural diversity. If your visual and material environment is filled with diverse images, it immediately tells children and families that this is a priority for you. Therefore, while displaying images of the children in your program is essential, it is equally essential to bring the diversity of people in the United States into children's daily lives. If you have families in your program who are from other countries, then make sure to include images of those countries. However, avoid exotic images of people from places that are completely unfamiliar to children.



For infant and toddler groups, it is particularly important to introduce unfamiliar images slowly, while balancing them with depictions of familiar people and situations, and to limit the amount of images and materials (Janet Gonzlaes-Mena, personal communication, 2004).

*Make an inventory of your current educational materials and work on building a collection of materials that accurately depict the diversity within all groups (including whites) in the United States.* Include materials that reflect the many ways that people live (urban, rural, suburban; poor, working class, middle class, wealthy; small and large families); how they look (different skin tones, facial features, and body types); what they wear (traditional or contemporary clothing); and what they do (people with a number of abilities and disabilities; women and men in a range of occupations and roles). In particular, be sure that many of the images counteract common stereotypes.

*Use these materials regularly in your on-going curriculum, not just at "special" times.* For example, choose books with people of color to explore basic early childhood themes such as friends, a new baby in the family, the first day of school, grandparents, birthdays, or holiday celebrations.

*Watch to see if children avoid playing with certain materials and try to counteract their avoidance.* For example, if children are not playing with the African American or Asian doll, join their dramatic play and make a point of holding and taking care of that doll, emphasizing how much you are enjoying playing with it. Try to incorporate the doll into their play rather than coercing the children to play with it.

*Explore the racial and cultural diversity that exists in the children's larger community, always making it concrete and individualized.* With preschoolers and kindergarten-age children, focus on the immediate community and city (for instance, taking neighborhood walks). With 6- to 8-year-olds, you can move further afield (state and country), using photographic essays, books, and so on.

*Regularly schedule people from different racial and ethnic groups to do a series of specific activities with your children.* Ongoing face-to-face contact is probably the best way to break down barriers, recognize similarities, and see differences as enriching rather than frightening or distasteful. Be sure that visitors are introduced as complex real people (with families, specific

interests and tastes, particular ways of doing things) not as representatives of a class of people. Hoffman (2004) explains, "When I ask someone to be an 'example' for my curriculum, I don't want the children to think of that person in only one way. . . . I ask the person beforehand for three things he or she would like the children to know about them and focus on those" (p. 166).

*Enhance children's sense of connection with others by exploring how people meet similar needs in different ways.* Explore the many different ways people manage day-to-day life (carry babies or put them to sleep, live in different types of houses, prepare food).

*If you take field trips to visit people in the community, make the outings purposeful.* Go to a store to buy materials for the classroom, visit people to learn about their interesting work. Avoid one-time, superficial field trips or visits, because these experiences may only reinforce children's stereotypes about different racial or cultural groups.

*Tell persona doll stories that explore differences and similarities beyond children's immediate experiences in meaningful and empathic ways.* Make sure the stories authentically reflect real, "ordinary" lives in your community by getting help from colleagues or friends from that group. Always use more than one doll of a particular group and tell stories that are about everyday experiences to illustrate similarities as well as differences between your children and the dolls. Also maintain a balance between positive experiences, such as family visits and celebrations, and challenging ones, such as handling prejudice.

*Talk about why people have different skin colors. All the Colors We Are,* by Katie Kissinger (1994), is one of several excellent resources for these discussions. Written in English and Spanish, the book includes several suggestions for discussing skin color with preschool children that are based on the author's many years of experience as an early childhood teacher.

*Teach children everyday words that people use to carry out shared human activities in languages other than English.* Teaching these words (words for family members, expressions of feeling, foods, numbers, colors) in languages other than English helps children experience and explore their connections with others in a concrete form. Use persona dolls to introduce words that are spoken in their "families." Label materials around the room in more than one language. Use different languages when you sing songs or do counting activities.



*With 5- to 8-year-olds, begin to connect different ways of meeting similar needs with the environments in which people live.* For example, you might create puppet shows or skits to show how someone from another type of community or climate finds your ways to be strange (a rural child wondering how city children manage without land and a creek to play in or a child who comes from a warm climate being surprised by snow).

### Implementing Learning Theme Five

The following strategies build on the work you have done creating caring, respectful connections between the children in your program as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. As you work to counter children's stereotypes and discomforts, be conscious of the reality that every day they are being exposed to misinformation. At times it may feel like a losing battle. Do not get discouraged; expect that it will take a long time and many discussions for children to learn to resist this pull.

*Use children's biased remarks as teachable moments.* Although children may not understand the full meaning of their biased comments, these can become the basis for more developed prejudice if adults do not respond to them. When you hear such a comment, immediately follow up with exploratory questions to gain a deeper understanding of the child's thoughts and feelings ("What do you mean by that?" "How do you know that?" "Do you think that all the people there do _____? What about moms and dads and kids?"). Use an exploratory, rather than accusatory, tone. Ask questions in ways that let you into the children's thinking, rather than close them down. Then plan both immediate and longer–term experiences, as illustrated by the following example from Eric Hoffman (personal communication, April 2005):

> "Did you hear what those children said?" The parent's question drew my attention to four 4-year-olds sitting at a table, talking and giggling. To me, they looked like they had found a good way to get away from the crowd and relax, but when I focused on their words, I understood the parent's distress. They were repeating a jingle that made fun of Chinese people. The children were clearly unaware that their language was racist. Their interest was in the silly sounds and their feelings of friendship.
>
> "I hear you saying a rhyme that makes you laugh." They started to repeat the words, but I stopped them. "Do you know what the word *Chinese* means?" They all shook their heads. I explained that it referred to people from a part of the world called

China, and that Chinese people would be insulted by the jingle. They were taken aback—that was not their intention.

"I know one that's not about Chinese," a child said, and he started saying another rhyme that made fun of Asian eyes. I explained that even though the new rhyme didn't mention Chinese people, it was still making fun of people. I started to explain about Asia and China, but I could see that my geography lesson was beyond their comprehension.

"It looks like you're not trying to hurt anybody's feelings. You want to be friends and laugh about silly words. So let's think of some that won't upset anyone." We came up with a great list of ridiculous rhymes that left them rolling on the floor with laughter. I felt good about how I handled the situation, until I heard one of the children say to another, "You shouldn't say Chinese. That's a bad word."

In discussing with my staff how we should respond, I was struck by a dilemma that is common in anti-bias work: How do you help people unlearn racism without hurting those who are the targets of that racism? We wanted to create curriculum that would help the children develop positive feelings about ethnic and national differences. However, we knew that we ran the risk of uncovering more racist ideas. We didn't want the children to censor themselves out of fear they would be punished; it felt important to get those misconceptions out in the open so they could be challenged. On the other hand, allowing children to voice racism, even when it is unintended, can damage children who are members of the targeted group. People of color shouldn't be forced to listen in while white people work out their racism. I find this especially important to keep in mind in groups where there is little ethnic or racial diversity, because it's so easy to dismiss the feelings of the minority when there is no one around to express them.

One way to make sure those feelings are heard is through persona dolls. By introducing a variety of dolls at the beginning of the year, I can bring people to my class who can voice the unfairness of name-calling and discrimination. If I have used the dolls correctly and brought them to life, young children will respond to those voices with compassion and work hard to correct the injustice.

So when my staff and I planned our new curriculum we didn't start with lectures and geography lessons, we started with feelings. One of the dolls talked about her wonderful Vietnamese



family and how much she hated being made fun of for her differences. She spoke with great pride and great pain. That opened the door for many discussions about ethnic labels, places in the world, ancestors, and how much it hurts to have someone make fun of the way you look, speak, or act.

*Help children recognize stereotypes and incorrect information, and appreciate the harm they can do.* When you read stories or show pictures that have stereotypes, encourage the children to identify them and talk about why they are not fair. Wolpert (1999) suggests playing a "Stereotype or Fact" game with older preschoolers and kindergarteners to help them explore the differences between a stereotype and a fact. The teacher makes exaggerated statements that the children know from experience are obviously not true, such as, "All children hate ice cream." Then she asks if the statement is true or false and how the children know. Some of the teacher's statements can also be tested out by the children, as in, "Only boys know how to run." After trying out several similar kinds of statements, the teacher explains that the untrue statements are called *stereotypes*, because they say "all children" or "all boys", and so on, even when it isn't true for everyone. Then, when children make a stereotypical comment about a person/group not in their experience, the teacher can refer to the Stereotype or Fact game as one way to introduce critical thinking about misinformation.

*Start exploring stereotypes with statements about gender.* Preschool children are very concerned about gender identification, often express gender stereotypes, and exclude peers along these lines. Thus, addressing gender-related assumptions is a good way to begin. Moreover, children can "test" these beliefs against their own experiences. For instance, make a list with the children of the activities boys like and the activities girls like. Then take photographs of play in the classroom and playground and compare the photographs with the list. What do children notice? Should any changes to the list be made? Encourage children to talk about times that they have been teased, rejected, or told that they couldn't play with a particular toy, because of being a girl or a boy. How did they feel when that happened.

*Next, work in a similar way with children's ideas about people of color, which you may have documented in your information gathering.* Provide images and books that challenge the common stereotypes to which children are exposed in society and help children see and think about the contrast between what they may think and what is real. For example, contrast young children's common belief that all American Indians live in tepees

or shoot people with bows and arrows with photographs and books about real contemporary American Indians.

*Engage children in critiquing children's books that only include images of whites or that depict inaccurate images of people of color.* Ask children to imagine each story with more diverse characters or accurate images ("Could this character be a person with dark skin instead of a white skin?" "Do you think that this book tells the truth/is fair to Vietnamese people?"). Invite children to dictate or write letters to authors about what they like and do not like in their stories and how they could make future stories more inclusive.

*Spark children's empathy about the hurt that stereotypes can cause.* As we saw in the previous example of Eric Hoffman's use of a teachable moment with a group of preschoolers, persona doll stories are especially helpful for these explorations. A doll of color can talk about being teased or excluded by her white peers because of skin color or being in a classroom where there are no images of people who look like her. As you tell the persona doll story, involve children in exploring the doll's feelings and how it feels to be the target of prejudice or discrimination. Then, ask children to help figure out what they would do to stop the discrimination described in the story. You can do many stories throughout the school year that address many types of prejudice and discrimination.

*Promote children's capacity to problem-solve ways to handle incidents of prejudice and discrimination.* As with the previous activities in this chapter, begin with incidents in your own classroom or in your children's lives, and then make the bridge to prejudice and discrimination directed against others. Use conflict-resolution strategies to help children resolve incidents that involve being teased or rejected because of an aspect of identity (excluding children on the basis of dress, always assigning a small child the "baby" role in dramatic play, teasing a child who wears glasses). Use these incidents to help children understand the impact of discrimination directed at people not in their immediate environment.

### Implementing Learning Theme Six

We now move on to strategies for promoting children's interest in the care of the environment and in sharing resources.

*Nurture children's respect, love, and sense of responsibility for the well-being of the natural environment.* Involve children in the traditional early



childhood education activities of planting and caring for classroom plants and animals as a first step. If possible, take field trips to explore different types of natural environments in your community.

*Engage children in taking care of the environment around them.* Pick up litter. Start a recycling program. Analyze the trash in your classroom and think of ways to decrease the use of disposable materials.

*Help children identify and work on local environmental problems.* Invite local environmental activists to tell the children about what they do, and find ways for the children to visit and participate in some of their activities. Find meaningful ways to involve children. Learning about the destruction of distant environments may not be an effective starting point, but cleaning up a favorite park would be.

*When engaged in cooking projects or eating new foods, talk about where food comes from.* Help children think about what plants and animals need to survive. They can also think about the farmers who plowed the fields and nurtured and harvested the plants. If you are eating a food that is from a different climate, talk about that part of the country or world and what it would be like to live there.

*Encourage children to develop a sense of responsibility in regard to people in their community and to think about how to distribute resources equitably.* Organize and participate in toy and clothing exchanges for families in the center and immediate neighborhood or food and toy collections for community organizations or food distribution centers. Be sure these efforts are not one-time superficial acts of "charity." Work closely with one organization and, if possible, have children spend time with their clients. If that cannot be arranged, invite a staff member to visit your program and talk about some of the individuals who are receiving the food and clothing. In this way children see people who are poor as individuals who are very much like them in many ways. This perspective may help to inoculate children from absorbing and believing common stereotypes of poor people. To avoid fostering stereotypes about class and race, be careful not to focus on only one racial or ethnic group. (For an excellent example of this kind of action project, see Pelo & Davidson, 2000).

*With children 5 to 8 years old, create situations that draw children's attention to economic inequities in the wider community.* You can use role-playing activities to raise these issues. For example, in one kindergarten serving middle- and upper-middle-class children, the teachers set up a store

in the role-playing area but gave children different amounts of "money" to spend. One of the teachers described the follow-up discussions, in which the children expressed their strong reactions the situation and offered a number of solutions to the make it fairer.

> Kyle, Ashley, and Blake (among others) suggested sharing the food with the group after each shopping trip. . . . Eva, Josiah, and Corey suggested that the group should redistribute the money more evenly. . . . Josiah is adamant on this point saying, "everyone should have two [play dollars]" and later "I want to play the fair and square way." (Lee, 2004, pp. 74)

Discussions of social class grew beyond the store activity. The teachers used photographs and stories that depicted people in different economic circumstances to help children make the connection between their immediate "store" experience and broader equity issues. In a discussion with Corey and Josiah, one of the teachers asked "How do people get money?" to which Corey replied, "At the bank. Some people have zero dollars." When the teacher asked them both about jobs, Josiah said, "My dad has a job so we have money." Later the boys and the teacher decided that they would "work" (tidy the pretend area) to earn their two dollars for shopping (Lee, 2004, pp. 74–75).

These conversations are consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Furnham & Stacey, 1991) that children at 5 and 6 years old are able to understand the concrete ideas of wealth (buying and selling; money) and offer equitable solutions, although they cannot yet understand some of the larger questions (for example, "How do people get money?").

*Teach children about environmental activists who work on issues that the children are exploring.* Here is an example from the Dandelion School, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a full-service child-care program that serves a racially and economically diverse population and practices anti-bias education. Expanding on the children's typical preschooler interest in animals, which had led to their making zoos, farms, jungles, and aquariums for their rubber animals, the teachers introduced *The Great Kapok Tree,* by Lynne Cherry (1990). Like most of the book's readers, the children learned about the need to protect the Amazon rain forest and its animals. Unlike most readers, however, they also learned about Chico Mendes, a rubber tapper and environmentalist whose campaign to save the rain forest from exploitation by industrialists and large landowners inspired Cherry to write her book. Similarly, when the children became interested in sharks and other fish, this sparked a wider concern about oceans. The teachers did some research about environmental activism and learned of



diver Sylvia Earl's work to protect the oceans. While the children enjoyed playing "deep-sea diver," they also became intrigued by Dr. Earl's work and began asking questions about how they could help to make the water cleaner. (Kathy Roberts, personal communication, June 2005).

### Implementing Learning Theme Seven

This final set of strategies is aimed at fostering children's activism skills and their confidence that they can make a difference.

*Engage children in democratic social processes by involving them in creating group/classroom structures that are fair to everyone.* Include children in deciding on classroom procedures and rules. Obviously, the latitude that we give children in these decisions varies by age. However, children at all ages have ideas about helpful and hurtful interpersonal behaviors and usually eagerly contribute ideas about how to make the classroom "safe" for everyone (for example, no hitting). Children can also begin to discuss how to ensure that everyone has an equal voice in discussions and equitably participates in making classroom decisions. In the process of deciding on procedures and rules, children experience the interdependence of all members of the class and the need to be flexible. They learn to articulate their own needs; listen to the opinions of others; see their own needs and views in a broader perspective; and think about the purpose, fairness, and enforcement of the rules. They also experience on a small scale what it takes for a society to function and what skills are needed to organize democratic communities. (For more details on making decisions about classroom rules and routines, see Ramsey 2004.)

*Engage children in activism related to issues that are meaningful and relevant to them.* Remember that these activities are not about changing the world from an adult's perspective, but rather about children making their own worlds a little fairer. Use the following steps to design appropriate activism projects:

1. *Listen to and observe what is happening in your early childhood classroom and in the larger community of your program.* Be alert to specific unfair situations and practices in the life of the classroom or immediate community that directly affect the children's lives. For example, you might notice that only the boys use the block area or realize that the classroom space needs to be reorganized to accommodate a child who uses a wheelchair. In the community, you might draw children's attention to the fact that there is

no safe way to cross the street to get to the park or to the lack of diversity in the dolls and puzzles that are offered in the school or available in the local toy store.

2. *Discuss potential activism with the children.* Guide them in exploring their ideas and feeling about the fairness of the situation and what might be done to make it fairer. Assess the children's interest and the possibilities for action that are appropriate to their ages and skills.
3. *Work with children to design actions that are safe and workable from your perspective.* Examples of children taking action reflect a range of issues. When children in a community college child development center noticed the lack of diversity in the images of children in a new calendar, their teacher helped them write a letter to the company. When the company did not respond, the children circulated a petition around the college. At another center, racist slurs appeared on a wall in a nearby playground used by the children. The children and their teacher discussed what to do and painted over the hurtful words. In a parent-cooperative preschool, the children, with their teacher's help, made signs asking people not to litter in their favorite park. A first-grade class wrote letters to the local newspaper about the closure of a local library. In an early childhood special education program, the children put "tickets" on cars parked illegally in their school's handicapped parking spots. (For a fuller discussion of the process for generating and implementing emergent activism projects, see Hoffman, 2004 and Pelo & Davidson, 2000.)

*Help children appreciate that ordinary people working together can make a positive difference in their lives.* There are now some excellent children's books for 4- and 5-year-olds about children engaged in actions that remedy unfair situations in their immediate environments. (See list in Appendix A.)

*With 5- to 8-year-olds, widen the focus to include activism to improve the lives of children in the larger community.* As issues come up in the community, talk to children about them and see what strikes their interest. For example, children might write and visit municipal officials to press to have swings, slides, and play areas added to a park that is close to a poor neighborhood. At this age they may also be interested in raising money for people in more distant areas who are suffering particular hardships such as those caused by civil war or natural disasters.



*Invite local activists, including members of children and staff's families, to talk about what they are doing.* Remember that activism takes many forms, including cultural work such as community art and children's theater. White people and people of color work on campaigns to eliminate racial prejudice and discrimination through many educational and faith-based initiatives. These "unsung s/heroes" often have rich stories to tell, which help children see activists as real people. Be sure that the message is not about "rescuing" others but rather about the power and impact of people working together to make positive changes. Children can share these stories with their families by documenting the visits of local activists and making books or chart stories.

*Familiarize school-age children with the history of resistance to injustice in our country that has been carried on by activists of all backgrounds, including whites.* Knowing about white anti-racism activists is essential to white children's building a new white identity. However, there is very little material for children on this topic. In fact, because this information is excluded from mainstream textbooks, you may need to build your own knowledge about anti-racism activism. One way to begin is to learn more about the people whom we talk about in Chapter 6 and who are listed in Appendix C. With Internet resources, this information is much more readily available than it was only a few years ago. Learning about these activists and the movements in which they were or are participating will lead you to other people and resources. You can then turn this information into stories to share with the children. In these stories, be sure to emphasize the collective nature of activism and the importance of ordinary people's involvement, as well as the roles of leaders. Be sure to include examples of whites participating in organizations and movements that are led by people of color. Send book ideas to publishers and urge that they encourage authors to write stories about past and current activists.

In this chapter we have offered strategies and examples for supporting the development of children's empathic awareness of racial and cultural diversity, critical thinking, and activism. It is a challenge to make these skills and issues meaningful to young children, but by weaving these themes into all parts of your program, they will become part of children's earliest orientations to their social worlds. They will learn to value this work, not because it is something "nice" for others, but because it engenders a more satisfying and powerful way to live.