



## Best Practices

Early childhood educators play an important role in a young child's life, not only by fostering developmental growth, but also by helping shape that child's identity and character. A major focus of that character building is teaching children to respect others—to celebrate our similarities and differences and treat each other with kindness and fairness. This is not something an educator can effectively address in an isolated lesson. Rather, it should happen every day, minute-to-minute, day in and day out—by continually fostering children's sense of self, helping children to recognize and honor our many differences (cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and more), and developing an understanding of what it means to be fair and how unfairness hurts.

### Foster a Sense of Self

To understand and respect others we must understand and respect ourselves. In their early years, children are just beginning to develop an identity of their own, and to recognize that they are individuals separate from others. You may notice this as children shift from referring to themselves in the third person (“Jarrod’s truck!”) to the use of the pronoun I. (“I want that truck!”) It is vital that educators nurture this emerging sense of self-identity. Yet it is equally important to nurture a child's sense of belonging in the group. By creating a welcoming environment that respects diversity and celebrates differences between and among individuals and groups, educators help children develop self-confidence, self-esteem, a sense of belonging, a positive social identity, and interpersonal skills.

- **Nurture children's development** of both individual and group identities.
- **Nurture children's awareness** of their own strengths, talents, and needs.
- **Help children develop strategies** for getting help when they need it.
- **Treat learning as a social act** and teach children skills to work and play with others appropriately.

### Why is it important to develop a positive sense of self and social identity early in a child's life?

- Each child learns to recognize herself/himself as a unique and special individual.
- Understanding and respecting others requires that you first understand and respect yourself.
- Recognizing and celebrating diversity within a group relies on individuals having a positive self-identity and then a positive group identity.

**How can educators continuously help children develop a positive sense of self?**

- Create a warm, welcoming, and nurturing environment.
- Emphasize the special abilities and qualities of individual children by pointing out their talents and strengths. Being recognized for a talent or skill, such as singing a song, writing letters, or building a great block structure, will make a child feel good about himself or herself.
- Acknowledge children's accomplishments and progress. For example, in the video, Denise commends children for their abilities to aim ramps at targets, balance objects, and cooperate with others.
- Find opportunities for positive feedback in everyday activities and routines.
- Celebrate children's family's traditions, cultures, and languages through conversations and activities. For example,
  - In the video, Denise uses home visits to get to know children's families. She celebrates the family by posting photographs of family members and talking about how all families are different, yet each is special.
  - Encourage children to share their family's customs and language during class discussions.
- Teach children strategies and interactions about helping others. For example,
  - Suggest that children work together to perform routine tasks (*Who can help Maria put away the blocks?*)
  - Ask for volunteers to help you or others in the classroom.
  - Encourage children to ask for help from, and offer help to, one another.

**How can everyday activities and routines be opportunities to develop a child's self and group identity?**

- Welcome children each day to the group by singing songs or chants.
- Use small group meetings to have children tell what they know, what they are good at, what their interests are.
- Assign "jobs" (such as line leader, door holder) so children feel like a valuable member of the group.
- Give children a chance to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions about books during read-aloud sessions.

- Listen to and talk about music and art from around the world, including children's home cultures.
- Have books and other materials available that explore or represent different cultures and traditions, old and new.

## Celebrate Differences in Others

As children develop their self-identities, they should also be learning acceptance of themselves and others—that each of us are alike and each of us are different, and that we are all valuable in our own way. Educators can convey this message of acceptance by highlighting the ways in which children are alike and different from their peers. Help children see the richness in their diversity.

- **Help children understand how they are different and alike**—in skin color, body size and shape, hairstyles or textures, home languages, clothing, foods, holidays, and so on.
- **Prompt children to express their thoughts and ideas about differences** through planned conversations using pictures, questions, or books. Show diverse cultures, languages, and traditions; girls or boys or men and women in nontraditional roles; or differently-abled children and adults demonstrating strengths and abilities. Explore universal themes with images of children of different cultures.
- **Give children the appropriate language to talk about differences in a respectful way.** When children make hurtful or insensitive comments about others, model language that acknowledges the difference in an open and honest way, while deflecting negative connotations. For example, when a child asks, *Why does Joseph have a weird arm?* Respond, *Everyone has differences in their bodies. Joseph has a different arm. It's not okay to say that Joseph has a weird arm because that hurts his feelings. It is okay to say that Joseph has a different arm.*
- **Respond to expressions of dislike or bias immediately** with positive, kind, and explanatory language. For example, Yes, David wears glasses. He is lucky because he can see better when he has them on. Or, Marisol knows the words to that song in Spanish. Let's ask her to teach us the words she knows. When a hurtful statement is made, do not confront the child who said it to make him or her feel uncomfortable. Gently correct the statement. The child will learn more appropriate ways to express his or her opinions or observations.

### Why is it important for educators to take note of and talk openly about diversity?

- Children are concrete thinkers. They recognize when a peer looks different, speaks another language, or is differently-abled.
- By talking about differences openly, educators can teach children how to acknowledge and celebrate them.
- A frank discussion of differences, when carefully planned and skillfully taught, can help children see diversity as valuable and important.

### How can educators model appropriate responses to issues of human differences?

- Use language that acknowledges the child's observation. For instance, if a child says "Carlos talks funny," respond, *Carlos is learning to speak English. Saying that he "talks funny" can hurt his feelings. Maybe you could help Carlos learn some more words in English and he could help you learn some words in Spanish.*
- Choose words that help children see differences as "normal" human characteristics so that they learn how to treat those differences with respect. *(Everyone has differences. Isabelle has a different way of walking. It's not okay to say that Isabelle walks funny because that hurts her feelings. It is okay to say that Isabelle walks differently.)*

### What is the long-term benefit of teaching about diversity?

- Children learn to see and appreciate the similarity and the diversity of humans in their world.
- Children will grow to be more accepting of their own and others' differences.
- Celebrating diversity helps children recognize and reject bias against race, language, culture, gender, abilities, and so on.

### Teach About Fairness

Children need to learn about fairness and recognize how and when being unfair is hurtful. This lays a foundation for developing empathy and sensitivity that will, in turn, help prevent bullying. But fairness can be a difficult concept for very young children because it is abstract. Young children are often egocentric thinkers, and tend to see the world from their own perspective. So when they say "That's not fair," it's because *they* don't like the outcome. Educators can teach children that fairness involves thinking of others, too. Help children to recognize unfairness, develop language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

- **Listen for unfair comments, behaviors, or actions** and address the behaviors honestly, directly and immediately. For example, *It makes Lauren feel sad when you tell her she cannot play with you. Or, All the children in our class can share these toys. It is not okay for you to tell someone they cannot play.*
- **Help children develop appropriate responses** when they experience themselves or others being treated unfairly. For instance, *Tell Mindy how that makes you feel. Say, "That makes me feel sad when you do that."*
- **Give kids the language they need** to talk about unfairness. Ask children to express their ideas about fairness and sharing. Prompt children to talk about their feelings when they are treated unfairly. Discuss words or phrases that children can use to express their feelings and guide others to correct unfair behaviors. For example, *When we have our morning meeting, how can we make sure everyone gets a chance to share? Who has an idea how we can do that?*
- **Teach fairness as a basic classroom rule** to help children feel safe.

### Why is it difficult for children to understand the concept of fairness?

- Very young children are concrete thinkers. Fairness is an abstract concept.
- Children are naturally egocentric, so they tend to think of themselves first. They will identify a situation or action that works against them as unfair, but will have a more difficult time identifying an action they perform as unfair to others.

### What strategies can be used to teach about fairness, and make it more understandable for young children?

- Have children brainstorm and role-play solutions such as trading toys, sharing, and playing together.
- Be attuned to children's interactions and be ready to respond immediately to incidents of unfairness.
- Identify and point out fair and unfair behaviors.
- Encourage a safe and secure atmosphere in which children feel free to express their feelings and ask questions.
- Make the idea of fairness concrete. Use images to inspire conversations about fairness.

### How can educators help children respond appropriately when conflict arises?

- Address unfair behaviors honestly, directly, and immediately.
- Give children the language they need to talk about unfair treatment. Discuss words or phrases that children can use to express their feelings and guide others to correct unfair behaviors. As Cary says in the video, “It’s really the teacher’s job to find those little moments during the day and give support to the kids so they know what words to say.”

### Glossary

**cultural diversity:** the different beliefs, religions, languages, family heritage, socio-economic background, and ethnicities in a group

**ethnicity:** a societal grouping based on place of origin of a person and his/her ancestors

**linguistic diversity:** the many different home languages spoken in a group

**race:** a societal grouping based on physical and biological characteristics that people share

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.