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Why should I work to build an anti-racist classroom?

Most of this brief will detail the “what” and “how” of an anti-racist classroom. Although it may seem obvious that we all want a classroom culture of equity and inclusion, before we begin the hard work of making it happen, it’s a good idea to take a deeper dive into the “WHY” of the work.

Most children are raised to be “color silent”

Many parents truly believe they are raising their children to be “color blind,” that their children don’t see racial differences and don’t behave differently with different races. But research tells us that there is no such thing as “color blindness.” Even very young children are aware of differences in skin color. Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, an expert on talking with children about race, tells us that while children really aren’t raised to be color blind, they are raised to be color silent. In many homes of both white and black families, race and racism are taboo topics. Children grow up learning that this is something you just don’t talk about. This is what we clearly heard from the teachers who participated in our anti-racist learning circle. If we wish to raise a truly equitable generation, we must make children comfortable talking with each other about both racial differences as well as the common humanity of all people. In the early childhood classroom, we can create the first safe place where those conversations can happen.

Implicit biases are transmitted across generations

It can seem puzzling why racism has persisted throughout our history. Most of us adults are unaware of our own biases about race, and we are certainly ignorant of how we send messages about our implicit biases to our children. Research has shown that when parents talk with their children about race, children are able to exhibit fairness and be accepting of others who are different from them. In early childhood, children are just beginning to construct their beliefs about themselves, other people, and the world in general. It’s now that they learn whether differences are gifts that should be celebrated, or that differences are deficits that should be shunned. Their experiences in your classroom may go a long way in determining their beliefs about race.

You can create a true equity generation

By creating an anti-racist culture in your classroom, you are part of the “first chance solution” to ending racism. By your words, attitudes, and behavior, you model a way of being comfortable and loving in a world of many different people. To paraphrase Dr. King, real justice happens when those in control of a culture correct anything that stands against love. Imagine your classroom where all children learn to correct anything that stands against love. Then imagine them bringing that attitude and behavior to their schools, families, workplaces, and communities. That’s how we create a true equity generation. That’s how we create a just nation. We hope these guidelines not only help you with the “what” and “how” to be an anti-racist; but also provide a deep understanding of the “why” it is so important. May you have the knowledge, dedication and love to make it happen in your classroom.



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Classroom guidelines for talking with children about race and racism

Best Practice – Intentional Teaching Practices in an Anti-Racist Classroom

1. Develop an awareness of your own biases. For most of us, our biases do not arise from malice, but from a lack of awareness and knowledge.
 - Ask yourself some questions /self-reflection - Do I interact with people who do not have the same experiences as I? Do I avoid conversations about social issues? What privileges do I have that others do not? Where do my implicit biases come from?
 - Biases can be contagious, especially with young children. Be cautious not to infect your relationships with children, families, and each other.
 - Educate yourself – read books, watch videos, learn new vocabulary and do research that helps challenge and inform your thoughts and ideas around race and racism.
 - Know your own history within the context of racism. What does that history mean to you? When were you born or where did you enter history? Did you hear about particular events that related to racism?
2. Create a safe/brave space in your classroom or program for the sharing of thoughts and feelings.
 - Start at home. Have courageous conversations about race with family and friends.
 - In team meetings, plan and prepare for ongoing conversations with your team – Are we all on the same page? How will we get there?
3. Take an inventory of your classroom materials. Ask some reflective questions.
 - Do your materials (books, pictures, manipulatives, etc.) reflect a variety of people (race and ethnicity) and relationships?
 - Can all children not only see themselves in the materials, but also see others who are different?
 - Do you have real pictures of children's families in the classroom?
 - Are your materials current, relevant and authentic? Avoid pictures and materials that are stereotypical.
4. Create invitations for the children to see beyond themselves and their own family unit.
 - Provide materials that spark conversations.
 - Work with children in small groups to foster deeper and more personal conversations.
5. Remember always that success will come when you not only have the right materials in the classroom, but the conversations that support those materials.
 - Celebrate feel-good moments and give yourself and others grace, knowing you are on a journey to get there.