

## “Never too early to learn”: implementing a race-conscious, anti-bias approach in early childhood education

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Talking about race can be difficult for educators, especially those who work with very young children. Presuming children to be free of racial bias, many adults worry that talking about race itself might engender bias. However, children as young as 15 months old express racial preferences; by the time they enter kindergarten, children tend to display racial prejudices similar to those of the adults in their lives.

Important lessons about race, diversity, and equity can and should be taught in early childhood and preschool settings. Drawing on their experience at the Child Care Center at Hort Woods, a preschool and early learning center at Pennsylvania State University, the authors offer suggestions about introducing anti-bias education to very young children.

#1

### Try not to jump to conclusions.

Young children tend to be very literal, and adults often read more into their words than is intended. At Hort Woods, a white child called a classmate with dark skin a “dirty man,” raising alarm bells among the teachers. As it turned out, the first child had noticed the second child touching eggs at the lunch table and worried that his friend might be exposed to salmonella. Adults eager to confront racial bias can see teachable moments in every other remark. In this case, however, to jump on the comment right away would have needlessly signalled anxiety about the subject of race and potentially caused the children to shy away from it.

#2

### Look for subtle cues and nonverbal behaviors.

Young children often express their curiosity in subtle and nonverbal ways. One of us has helped other staff members learn how to be close observers of children’s behavior around issues related to race and difference. While many older preschool children have the verbal skills to ask direct questions, toddlers may simply point to someone who looks different than them, or reach out to touch another child’s hair or skin. Each of these situations is an invitation for adults to scaffold children’s learning and help them learn to appreciate differences in others.





### #3 Adapt to the age group.

When teaching about race and diversity, as with every other topic the age of the kids matters a great deal. A class of infants and toddlers needs very different lessons and explanations than one of 4-year-olds. Taking time to think through the topics and conversations one might have with children allows us to choose concepts carefully, assess developmental appropriateness, and use words the children will understand.

#4

### Build community.

EmbraceRace talks about the importance of raising racially literate children in community. We have focused on connecting with families, hosting a series of brown bag discussions to provide parents opportunities to ask questions about the curriculum and learn about related resources. The larger network of Penn State child care centers has adopted a statement of diversity, which lends institutional support to teachers doing this work and communicates to parents the value placed on antiracist, anti-bias education.

#5

### Be patient with colleagues.

Having peers who can support each other's professional growth is an essential part of taking on anti-bias education. Supportive coworkers help us be courageous in leading conversations about diversity and inclusion, but even difficult conversations with colleagues can ultimately lead to personal and professional growth. The act of working through topics that are challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable, helps us assess our biases and create the opportunity to dive deep into conversations that influence our practice.

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The longer, original version of this piece, including references, was published with [Phi Delta Kappan](#).