

## Activities that Promote Racial and Cultural Awareness

by Barbara Biles, M.Ed.

After a workshop session on cultural awareness, I was asked, “Does this really matter? Will adding skin-tone crayons make a difference in children's lives?” “Yes,” I said, “skin-tone crayons help a child become aware of who he is and who others are.”

After age 9, racial attitudes tend to stay the same unless the child has a life-changing experience (Aboud, 1988). Before that, however, we have a good chance to help children develop positive feelings about their racial and cultural identity. We can also challenge the immature thinking that is typical of very young children. That's important because this type of thinking can lead to prejudice (York, 1991).

Children develop their identity and attitudes through experiences with their bodies, social environments, and their cognitive developmental stages (Derman-Sparks, 1989). As these three factors interact, young children progress through certain stages of racial and cultural awareness. In this article, we'll talk first about the stages of racial awareness. Then we'll give you some ideas for activities that will help children accept themselves and others.

### When does it start?

The foundation of self-awareness is laid when children are infants and toddlers. At these stages, children learn “what is me” and “what is not me.” Toddlers are sensitive to the feelings of the adults around them, and they begin to mimic adult behavior. By age two, children recognize and explore physical differences. They are also learning the names of colors, and they begin to apply this to skin color. Natural curiosity will lead to questions about differences.

**The Preschool Years** (age 3 and 4). Children of this age are better at noticing differences among people. They have learned to classify, and they tend to sort based on color and size. They can't yet deal with multiple classification, so they get confused about the names of racial groups and the actual color of their skin. They wonder why two people with different skin tones are considered part of the same racial group. Many preschool children will comment—in words or through actions—on hair texture, eye shape, and other physical characteristics. They want to know how people got their color, hair texture, and eye shape.

Children at this age believe that because other parts of their body grow and change, skin color and other physical traits could also change. Some young black children prefer white dolls over black dolls (Clark, 1963). More often than white children, they may say that they don't like their skin color, hair texture, or another physical trait. By age four, children begin to prefer one race.

At this age, children's thinking is limited, distorted, and inconsistent. For these reasons, it is easy for them to believe stereotypes and form pre-prejudices. In the *Anti-Bias Curriculum* (1989), Louise Derman-Sparks states, “The goals are to facilitate children's awareness that their racial identity does not change, to help them understand that they are part of a large group with similar characteristics (not 'different' from everyone else) and to foster their desire to be exactly who they are.”

**Kindergarten** (age 5 and 6). Kindergartners continue to ask questions about physical differences, and they can begin to understand the explanations for these differences. They can now make distinctions between members of the same racial or cultural group. At this age, children are developing social skills and becoming more group-oriented. They enjoy exploring the culture of their friends. By age six, most children understand the concept of fair and unfair, and they often use these concepts as they try to deal with issues.

**The Early Primary Years** (age 7 and 8). At this age, children acquire racial constancy. They now understand that a person's skin color will not wash off or change but will remain the same as she grows up. At this age, children can



also consider multiple attributes at one time. They can now understand how one person can be a member of several different groups. For example, a person can be part of a family, a classroom, a culture, and a race.

Children can also understand feelings of shame and pride at this age, and they are aware of racism against their own group. They are able to empathize, and they are interested in learning about the world. It's the perfect time for giving them accurate information so they grow out of "preschool" ways of thinking (York, 1991).

Now that you understand how children develop their racial and cultural awareness and identities, it's time to encourage them to accept and celebrate their differences. We want to help all children develop a positive self-concept and feel proud of who they are—although we don't want them to feel better than other groups, either! If this positive sense of self and others is allowed to flourish, today's children will become adults who accept and affirm differences, identify unfair situations, and strive to eliminate racism of any sort.

A first step in helping children feel positive about racial and cultural identity is reflecting diversity in their surroundings. Children notice when the only dolls there are to play with don't look anything like them. Books and toys that reflect racial and cultural diversity serve two purposes. They not only help children of color feel good about themselves, they help all children feel positive about differences. Here are some ideas you can try.

- Remove materials and visuals that promote stereotypes.
- Display images of all the children and families in your program.
- If your group is not diverse, display images of diversity in your community or in U.S. society.
- Add toys and materials that reflect the cultures of the children and families in your group. Then expand to include materials that mirror the diversity in the world.

## Activities for Preschoolers

### Skin-Color Match-Ups

Set out a number of nylon knee-high stockings in various shades—tan, black, white, pink, yellow, and red. Encourage children to try them on their hands and arms or their legs and feet. Ask questions to help the children increase their awareness of skin color. For example, "Can you find a stocking that is the same color as your skin?" Or "What color is that stocking you have on your arm?" Ask the children to "Try the \_\_\_\_\_ stocking. Is it lighter or darker than your own skin?" Tell the children no one's skin color is really white, pink, yellow, or red. Emphasize that skin-color differences are interesting and desirable.

### Hair

Ask parents to give you a tiny bit of hair from each child. If parents cannot do this, use photographs of different hairstyles and hair-care products for the children to use, explore, and talk about. If parents do give you the hair, paste the hair from each child on a 3" x 5" index card, put them in a box, and ask the children to identify each bit of hair. Talk about how hair has texture and curl. For instance, some people have fine hair while others have coarse hair. Some people have straight hair, and others have curly hair. Talk about how people have different hair colors and lengths. Take a photo of each child's face and make a collage of different hairstyles.

### Music and Dance

Ask parents to lend you recordings of music that their family enjoys. Teach the children songs and dances from different nations of the world. Children will begin to see that all people like to sing and dance, but every group has its own special ways of doing it. Talk with the children about how different music sounds: loud, soft, fast, or slow. Listen for the different instruments. Again, ask parents if they have any instruments children could listen to or try.

## Activities for School-Age Children

### Alike and Different (Thumbprints)

Set out white 3" x 5" cards, a black ink pad, a pen, and a magnifying glass. Ask the children to make prints of their thumbs by pressing them on the ink pad and then on the cards. Label each print with the child's name. Let children



use the magnifying glass to see how the prints are alike and different. Point out that everyone has patterns on the skin of their fingers and each person's fingerprints are different from anyone else's.

### **Listening and Carving**

Tell the children that some people from other cultures enjoy carving things from stone. For example, some Inuit artists carve animals out of stone. They pick out a stone and sit with it, spending time with the stone and getting to know it. They listen to the stone, and when they know the stone well, they find the shape or animal that the stone wants to become. Then they begin carving the stone in that shape. Show the children pictures of some of these carved animals if you can find them in an encyclopedia or at the library. Give each child a piece of sandstone (available in art supply stores). Sandstone is a rock made of compressed sand. It can easily be carved by rubbing the sand off with a plastic knife. Encourage the children to carry the stone with them all morning or afternoon. Tell them that after lunch or the next day they can carve their stone into any shape they want. Encourage them to listen to their stone. Maybe it will tell them what shape it wants to become.

### **Proverbs and Traditions**

Ask children to talk with their families about sayings that are common in their culture or traditions that they have in their families. Choose one broad topic, such as love, birthdays, holidays, or time. Chart the responses to see how different cultures express similar ideas. Children might also be fascinated to compare the different names they use for their grandparents (Williams, 1989). Listen and watch for children's comments that can lead to discoveries about each other.

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*Barbara Biles, M.Ed., is training and technical assistant specialist for early childhood and family education at North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Oak Brook, Illinois.*

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