Our ultimate goal as teachers in a democratic society is helping children become kind and caring participants in a world that includes everyone.

So, how are we doing?

What kind of world would we have if every child learned to care about all people’s feelings, beliefs and wellbeing? We all strive for that...We have rules, and charts and incentives to help children “be nice”, “be kind” “be a friend”....Yet, one look around any classroom will evidence hurt, isolation and loneliness....evidence that this kind of empathy is a well-voiced ideal, but a less-successful happening.

What if teaching tolerance and acceptance was as important a part of the curriculum as teaching kids how to read? Would we have grown men bashing each other from political platforms --- men who SAY they share the same philosophy? Would we have war? Would we have abuse in the home? Would the bullies disappear?

This session looks at ways to begin with the very young in instilling the ideals of caring, empathy and acceptance into a workable practice, taking into consideration the young child’s inevitable need to be a toddler – hitting or pushing, or even the dreaded biting!

Caring begin in the classroom. Caring is learned as a result of our experiences with others. Empathy is the ability to be so in tune with another’s feelings that we understand without having to question.
Promoting caring and empathy is a tall order for any classroom, but for the early childhood educator, it is especially so, given the developmental aspects of the young child – her need for “me” and his need to be “big”.

The good news is that small children tend to be far more empathetic than we may believe. Even by the early age of one year, small children will tend to a classmate who is in tears, stroking the child or offering something that is KNOWN to comfort – i.e. a favorite stuffed animal or even a treasured blanket. The early signs of empathy are beautiful to watch in the youngest ones.

These feelings and innate understanding of empathy follow small children through pre-school and into kindergarten. They sense and seem to recognize the needs of their fellow classmates. They come to school amazed at how so many so different from themselves can have the same feelings.

Our job is to help them put their intuitive knowledge into words and actions.

The child’s first participation in an ongoing experience and social structure outside the family is in the classroom. In spite of the home lives that some of our children come from, the vision that is planted in the classroom about caring, sharing, listening and tending to others sets the stage for a lifelong journey that will 1) create a safe space for every child 2) begin teaching that there are places in the world where each child can be accepted and cared for 3) provide tools, even at an early age, for expounding on the natural empathy of small children

An environment in which family structure is acknowledged and accepted allows children to see beyond their differences into what they have in common – feelings. Whether they live with a single parent, a grandparent, a foster parent, in a shelter, or have issues in their families i.e. suicide or illness...they still know they are never alone and have a support system. **Remember, what children are most concerned about is that IS a family, a group of people who live them.**

Children Entering the Classroom:

1. Must leave their familiar surroundings
2. Must deal with a strange ‘big person’s’ new rules
3. Must meet and fit in with other children
4. Must encounter those who look, act, speak...differently than she does
The capacity to thrive in these early experiences has their roots in

1) The Child’s social structure
2) Family roles and treatment
3) Developmental adaptation
4) Personality

Needs for Empathy-Producing classrooms

1) More development of consciousness surrounding children’s family structure and diversity
2) Personal sharing
3) Allowing children to share so that later behavior is understood and dealt with appropriately
4) Making sharing time one of the most important activities of the day….first thing in the morning

IDEAS

1. Make **sharing time** FIRST ACTIVITY of the morning. Encouraging children to share the first thing, allows them the chance to “get it out” – and helps us understanding any related behavior that may result later on in the day --- and appropriate ways to handle it. You can almost COUNT on cooperation for the rest of the day. Things to NOT ALLOW in group: Brand name toys, videos, TV shows, movies…..once these are banished, children tune into their real feelings and thoughts.

Kids come to school full of thoughts and things to say and very often we demand that they sit and be quiet and “get ready for the day” We want them to write and read, but not to talk. How does it come out in your classroom?

2. **Talk a lot about safety** – not just crossing the street, but emotional safety – the kinds of feelings that exist in a place where we feel cared for and protected. What violates safety in your classroom? Put downs? Name calling? Isolation? Teasing? These all violate emotional safety.

3. **Loss** is the theme of many children’s lives – loss of a grandparent, a pet, or even a parent…and in today’s world, loss of economic and resulting family security.

4. There is not magic line that distinguishes **family life** from school life. Your classroom is part of the child’s extended family. He doesn’t leave his feelings and cares behind when he walks through the door to your classroom.
5. Interactive learning through PLAY... Learning has become a business of competition. Scores, grades, accomplishments...often at the expense of relationships with others. Instead of creating children who can read at four (there’s nothing inherently wrong with that, all of you who have four year old readers) ...the learning environment would be structured in terms of fairness and decision making and resolving problems in ways that doesn’t not involved beating – or beating on – each other.

6. Creating an environment of PLURALISM.... Sign language, foreign language, and crafts from other cultures...virtually any subject from dancing to dinosaurs offers opportunities for discussing similarity and difference.

7. Finding new ways to deal with children with BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS. As much as we would often like to segregate these children from our classroom, the truth is that everyone, including young children, need to develop the skills on dealing with those who are difficult. Although attention must be given to how well a child’s special needs are being served by the school or whether the situations monopolizing the teacher’s time, there are still many ways we can develop new skills for dealing with these children and helping our other children understand and appreciate that “different” doesn’t have to mean “bad”. The classroom is a great place to practice what they are inevitably going to experience in the outside world – people who are difficult to deal with no matter how understanding and empathetic one tries to be.

8. Creating OWNERSHIP of classroom procedures by all children, which may include reassessing things like classroom rules and processes if new students have joined the class. Don’t be afraid to start over when things change!

9. What are the EXPECTATIONS that children have of being in your class? Has anyone ever ASKED them what they expect to happen? And once stated, do you ever check back in and see how those expectations are being addressed?

10. Putting NEW SPINS on old concepts, i.e. same and different

11. CELEBRATE accomplishments!
THINGS to CONSIDER

- Racial and Ethnic Awareness
  - Affirming Identity
  - Family Diversity
- Fairness, Justice, Gender Awareness and Equity
- Friendships
  - Building friendship skills
  - Discovering Diversity
- Prejudice Formation
  - Facing prejudice
- The Inclusive Classroom

RACIAL AND ETHNIC AWARENESS
Development of Racial and Ethnic Awareness
I. Identity - and understanding of who we are and who we are not
   a. Early: become aware of wide range of physical characteristics in themselves and other
      a. Skin color
      b. Facial color
      c. Hair Texture
   b. Ethnic values
      a. Customs
      b. Language style
      c. Behavioral codes All of these are recognized by young children Long before they label them as “ethnic”
   c. Middle childhood – begin to understand cultural and political dimensions of race and ethnicity and their significance

While racial issues are sensitive for adults, children are candid about their observations and feelings concerning differences. To understand how racism, prejudice and discrimination develop, we must begin by examining the subject through the eyes of the children.
ACTIVITIES to help encourage children to notice and appreciate their own and others’ physical traits:
1. Hand held and full length mirrors
2. Measuring tapes
3. Self portrait activities in various media throughout the year...paying attention to different characteristics each time... i.e. skin color, hair texture, facial features
4. WHO AM I? snapshots of children’s hands or backs of their heads...guessing game
5. Pay attention to story books and their association with light or dark colored characters and positive or negative traits of characters
6. Examine curriculum and classroom climate for indirect messages about race and ethnicity: colors, pictures of children on posters, etc
7. Use materials and lessons that honor the contributions of cultures
8. Baby dolls in all shades from pink to brown

FAMILY DIVERSITY
It is terrifying for young children to enter a situation in which language differs from that in the classroom. Approximately one in seven residents of the US speak a language other than English as their primary language.

The isolation that a different language engenders may be more difficult to overcome than the cognitive challenges of learning a new language

Cultural knowledge and values grounded in religious tradition is another element of family life that children bring into the classroom. The challenge is for us to simultaneously affirm this while avoiding promotion of a particular religion. “What we do in my family” is one way to help share these religious diversities.

Concepts:
1. Help children develop a sense of pride in and a language to describe their own heritage. i.e. “In my family, we......(speak Spanish) (celebrate Hanukkah) (say grace before meals) (wear traditional clothing)
2. Exploring differences of all kinds
3. Building on children’s notions of fairness to create a sense of justice and capacity to recognize bias
4. Helping children find ways to confront and eliminate the biases they encounter

Multiculturalism is a tricky balance....our own culture, biases and knowledge must be balanced with the cultures of the families we serve. We can’t maintain that balance alone. When we
don’t give them language to talk about differences because WE are so scared to it, it becomes something that children feel as forbidden and dangerous.

One of the tricks is how to support children’s inquisitiveness while teaching them social standards...i.e. “That lady is FAT!”…which can be hurtful.... Could possibly be handled by talking about how people share different kinds and sizes of bodies.

With the wealth of multicultural materials available, most early childhood teachers make some effort to represent various kinds of diversity in their classroom environment, but the challenge is to look deeper than the images of race, culture and gender in your classroom materials... How are your children USING the environment? Who is playing with whom and with which toys? Which books are they reading? What colors are they using to depict each other?

Gender equity: Are boys playing away from girls? Put them in proximity to each other so play can overlap. Have ‘girl’s hour’ at the tool table. Put some of the household items in the sandbox for the boys to use.

When children learn to understand and appreciate diversity rather than fear it, they naturally become attuned to bias...and a sense of “fair” and “unfair” emerges. Talk about stereotypes in terms of what is true and what is not true...Talk about how things that aren’t true hurt people’s feelings and what that is like. Little ones can pick up the injustice of stereotypes, but it needs to be made specific and clear. (upon seeing the fat lady: You know sometimes people see a person with a large body and say “You have a big body so I’m not going to like you” And sometimes people see a person like you with a little body and say “You’re little so I’m not going to like you” Isn’t that too bad?)

FRIENDSHIPS
To have a friend and to be a friend is not just wants for small children – they are NEEDS. Friendships support children’s cognitive and emotional development. Children to who relate to others in socially acceptable ways are usually well liked and included. Factors that hinder or disrupt the emerging bonds of friendship can have lasting negative effects on children.

For most young children, school is the primary place to develop a sense of social belonging to form ideas about friendship and to practice the skills necessary for making and keeping friends. Our affection and respect for each child provides an important model of friendship.
Children’s need for peer connection develops sequentially. Infants as young as six months crawl toward other babies for information or signals that might involve them in a social interchange. Toddlers often prefer certain partners for “parallel play, and may interact with each other at times.

The word “friend” enters a child’s vocabulary in the early months of speech, reinforced by frequent adult references. The designation of ‘friend’ by a two year old reflects the pleasure and comfort of emerging social routines. For three and four year olds, friendship takes on a more intentional aspect. Preeschoolers and kindergartners give and withdraw the status of “friend” at will, depending on situation and mood. “Will you be my friend?” “You’re not my friend!” are not necessarily literal expressions of emotions but rather perceptions of the moment.

Around six through eight, children’s friendships acquire a more sophisticated and lasting content: Friends are people who are nice to each other; they exchange resources and services; and they maintain a relationship over time. They begin to share...secrets, toys and promises. They may also choose to end friendships if they perceive that a partner refuses to help or ignores their feelings or needs.

At all developmental levels, children exhibit varying degrees of success at making and keeping friends. The skills needed come naturally to some children and prove more challenging for others.

We can play a significant role in helping children develop the ability to initiate and sustain friendships. As their concept of friendship changes over time, children can build in basic social skills to make lasting connections.

IDEAS:
1. Celebrate the impotence of friendship in your class
2. Read books, listen to music and view videos with friendship themes
3. Artwork displaying friendship
4. Make a list of what friends do or what friendship means
5. Discuss how it feels to have a friend, lose a friend, be angry with a friend
6. Assess harmful, exclusionary behaviors in the classroom and address in age appropriate ways
7. Set limits on gender segregation and provide opportunities for cross gender friendships
8. Use puppets and skits to model inclusive behavior and appropriate actions
9. Provide opportunities for noncompetitive games that include everyone
10. Make badges, shirts, posters or banners that include every child
11. During play, work, snack times, call attention to the good feelings of belonging and acceptance

THE INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM
Almost fifty million citizens – nearly one in five – claimed a disability in the recent census. Yet the subject of special needs is often difficult to address. Our apprehension about talking about it only makes children’s curiosity greater, reinforcing the confusion and fear they may feel when encountering differences they don’t understand. And for children with special needs, the ignorance and insensitivity of others often leads to painful stereotyping and exclusion.

By age two, children begin to express curiosity and concern about unusual attributes such as ‘funny talking’ or absence of a leg, as well as special equipment and other markers of disability such as crutches, wheelchairs, eye patches. By ages three and four, children want to know what people with disabilities can and cannot do.

Preschoolers lack a firm grasp of concepts such as permanence and change…why doesn’t the lady just grow a new hand… It is important to explain that disabilities cannot be made to go away nor is there any need to worry about “catching” someone’s disability.

We need to point out that we all have limitations and that we find various ways of overcoming them. Having a child with diverse abilities in the classroom gives children the opportunity to work and play with others of varying abilities. It does not erase differences; rather, it provides the opportunity to teach children how to respond positively to a full range of differences including those of ability.

1. Give children concrete information about specific disability of their classmate which will reduce fear as well as the perception of ability differences as “strange.” Point out the skills, strengths and talents of children with special needs, so that other children will see them as peers, not objects of pity.
2. The feelings of all children, including those with disabilities should be acknowledged by teachers to make children aware that everyone has similar needs for affection, comfort and fun.

The issue of fairness can emerge in classrooms when children with special needs require individual consideration. In subtle ways, we can emphasize that every child, regardless of ability
level, has special needs. Careful attention to individual differences helps remove the spotlight from the “exceptional” child.

While we can employ special techniques to teach differently abled children basic skills, only children working together as friends can learn from each other the skills needed to develop socially and academically. Children with physical or intellectual challenges might need teacher assistance to enter play groups and sustain playtime with peers. Likewise, children who do not have special needs might need help learning how to be sensitive to the difficulties and competencies of children who do.

Through a variety of social interactions, children come to realize that everyone participates in their classroom. A classroom in which diverse abilities are represented offers endless possibilities for fostering and modeling empathy, kindness and justice. Children in such settings learn that a truly inclusive community is based not on special accommodation but on mutual adaptation.

STARTING SMALL: Teaching Tolerance in Preschool and Early Grades
By The Teaching Tolerance Project
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