

Incorporating Diversity

By Julie Dotsch

Diversity refers to all the ways that humans are unique. It influences many things, including how we judge others, how society values individuals and the outcomes individuals will have in life. It also influences our self image and our expectations for ourselves, our children and our families. All children have the right to be respected and to have programs adapted for their abilities, learning style and family beliefs.

Categories of Diversity

There are 12 categories of diversity used to describe someone.

- 1) **Ability** – different developmental or physical abilities
- 2) **Age** – perceived and actual age-related judgments (e.g., teen parent, old man)
- 3) **Appearance** – different heights, weights, perceptions of beauty
- 4) **Beliefs** – religions, spiritualism, child-rearing, family values
- 5) **Criminal Record** – including formerly imprisoned political refugees
- 6) **Culture** – traditions, language, shared values, perceptions, practices
- 7) **Family Composition** – who is in the family, family roles and any recent changes
- 8) **Gender** – whether a person is male, female or transgendered
- 9) **Language** – home language, ESL or literacy level
- 10) **Race** – a group of people connected by a set of genetically determined physical characteristics (e.g., skin colour, facial features and hair)
- 11) **Socio-economic Status** – a person's occupation, financial status
- 12) **Sexual Orientation** – heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and trans-sexuality

Benefits of Including Diversity

- Children build self-esteem and a positive cultural identity when they feel they belong.
- Children and families are more likely to keep cultural traditions and feel supported and valued in their child-rearing practices and beliefs.
- Children build social skills and become more adaptable to varying cultures, beliefs and abilities.
- Naturalizes children's similarities and differences in positive ways.
- Encourages interaction amongst families and involves them in the program.
- Gives educators a better understanding of individual children.
- Makes educators more aware of their biases so they can make efforts to reduce them.

Trying to Reduce Your Biases

To give children positive messages about similarities and differences, our own behaviour should reflect what we hope to teach. Many biases are unintentional. Look at your current practices. (e.g., Which families or children are you drawn to? Which do you avoid?) Write down all the children's names. Which came more readily to you and why? Write down something you know about each child. Which children had a negative attribute attached to them and which ones did you have trouble coming up with an attribute for? It takes conscious work to make yourself be more equitable.



Adapting Settings, Programs and Interactions

Children need to see images of others like themselves throughout the program — on the walls, in books, in materials and in activities. Photos of children's families help children connect home and school and learn about diversity. (For more information about inclusive settings, check your program resources for *Checklist for Quality Inclusive Education: A Self-Assessment Tool for Early Childhood Settings*. If needed, you can purchase a copy through the Early Childhood Resource Teachers Network of Ontario.)

Look at the books in your program and see how they can be adapted to include home language, diverse illustrations and support for second language learning. Create diverse experiences through play. For example, when you observe children fighting over the one doll carriage you have, bring in scarves and slings and sing lullaby songs from different lands.

Include children's home languages in your program to build feelings of identity, connection and pride. Care also needs to be taken to use inclusive language (e.g., letter carrier vs. mailman), and gender role assumptions must be looked at carefully.

Holiday Celebrations

Traditionally, Canadian child care centres have focused on Christian celebrations. This has left some children and families feeling excluded.

Guidelines for Celebrating Holidays

- Use holiday activities as a part of many other kinds of activities about a cultural group.
- Set holiday activities in the context of people's daily lives and beliefs.
- Establish the distinction between learning about another person's holiday rituals and celebrating one's own. Encourage children to share feelings as well as information.

- Honour and demonstrate respect for every group that is represented in your classroom. Do not treat some holidays as "exotic" and others as "regular."
- Plan strategies for working with the children whose families' beliefs do not permit participation in holiday celebrations.
- Be sensitive to the possibility that families with low incomes may find certain holidays stressful. Find inexpensive ways to celebrate rather than solving the problem with charity.

DIVERSITY CHECKLIST

How does your program rate?

- Materials given to parents are translated and/or written in simple English or with visuals.
- I have reviewed my materials to ensure they include non-stereotypical, modern-day images of people of differing races, religions, cultures, ages, appearances, social classes and genders.
- A special effort has been made to incorporate and support diverse family languages, beliefs, traditions and values into the regular program.
- I deal with any discrimination immediately even if it not intentional.
- I avoid using terms like "we" and "they" when speaking about a person whose racial/cultural background differs from my own.
- I adjust my communication style for each child and parent that I interact with and spend time communicating with every child and family.
- I demonstrate that I value diversity and see the benefits of this for myself and others.
- There is regular training for staff on these issues.

Julie Dotsch is an ECE Diversity consultant for her company One World. She is well known in the community for her interactive workshops and her specialized knowledge of immigrant preschoolers and their families. Julie can be contacted at oneworld@sympatico.ca.



17 Fairmeadow Avenue, Suite 211, Toronto, ON M2P 1W6 — Tel. 416.395.5027 | Fax. 416.395.5190 | www.cmascanada.ca
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