



Tips on Providing an Environment that Supports All Children

In its simplest form, diversity education is about making each child feel welcome and important. That sounds simpler than it is. Here are some things you can do:

- If you are planning to introduce a culture that is not your own, check with families first. You can't possibly be an expert on every culture in the world, and not every member of a culture agrees on what is appropriate. Ask if what you are planning is okay, and if not, what would be okay. Invite people to share their own cultures.

Note: Parents are a good first resource, but because of work demands they may not always be available. Grandparents or other relatives, clergy or volunteers from local ethnic organizations can also be good resources.

- Share a culture through concrete daily experience (everyday clothing, work, daily religious practice, language, etc.), and not just through holidays or food. When you are able, connect cultural activities directly to specific children: "This is what Tariq's family does." Remind children that other families (even of the same ethnic or racial group) may do things differently.
- Young children need a familiar frame of reference in order to understand new information, so first point out what is the same ("We all communicate through language."). Then go on to what is different ("Some children speak with their hands - we call it sign language. Here is the way they say hello.").
- Take care not to confuse the range and variety of cultures in the U.S. with life in other countries. For example, presenting information about Mexico is relevant to Mexican-Americans, but it is not the same as presenting information about Mexican-American culture.
- Integrate diversity into all facets of your caregiving. For example, instead of having just one token book with pictures of girls doing non-traditional activities, check to see that all your books and displays of jobs include pictures of girls doing non-traditional things (as well as people of different sizes, colors, ages, etc.).
- Children learn from their surroundings. When children don't see themselves in their surroundings they get the message that they don't belong, just like you would feel out of place if you showed up at a party in your best dressy clothes, only to find out that everyone else was wearing jeans and T-shirts. Ask yourself, "Am I providing images that include children and adults from all the major groups in my community, my country, and my world?" Magazines and catalogues can be good sources for pictures. How-



ever, many magazines contain inappropriate images for children, especially in their ads. Clip images and specific pages rather than making the whole magazine available.

- Children also learn from repetition. When they see certain kinds of images over and over again, those images come to be accepted as normal, and those images that are rare come to be seen as abnormal. For example, if children never see Latinos who are lawyers or judges, they may think that Latinos can't be judges or lawyers.
- Look for pictures that can expand a child's vision of the world. Choose images that counter the influence of negative pictures your children are likely to see when they are not in your care. Avoid pictures that repeat stereotypes (such as the warrior in a headdress that is the local high school team logo or the picture in your alphabet book under "I is for Indian").
- Include many different options for skin colors in your crayon box, paint set, clay and construction paper.
- Provide dolls of varying ethnicities, races, shapes, sizes and physical abilities.
- For pretend play, broaden children's vision by providing as many different kinds of materials as possible (environments like farm, city, waterfront, jungle, desert, and forest; different kinds of hats for different professions; animals from different parts of the world; etc.). Also provide toys that encourage imagination rather than limit it (such as generic dolls instead of characters from a commercial TV show).
- If you have a play kitchen, gather cooking and eating utensils that reflect the home life of the children or of different ethnicities (for example, chopsticks and a wok in addition to forks and a pan).
- Encourage children's pride by putting up a mirror so that they can see what they look like and get a sense of how they are both unique and like others. Also try hanging pictures of each child with their family.
- Pay attention to when you use the word "we." Do you really mean everyone ("In this home we don't hit")? Or are you just assuming that everyone is alike ("I won't see you next week because we are all going to take some time off to celebrate Christmas with our families.")?
- Include girls by using non-sexist terms like "firefighter" instead of "fireman," or "mail carrier" instead of "mailman." If the books you are reading aloud use sexist terms,



change them.

- Experiment with playing music from different cultures. Ask families to tape record stories from their cultures, or borrow cassettes or CDs from the library.
- Offer materials and label things in languages that are spoken in your children's homes.
- Let your use of language be guided first by the families with whom you work and second by your community. Labels are important, especially to children trying to figure out where they fit into the world (e.g., "Am I a boy or a girl?"). When it comes to ethnic and racial labels, there is no absolute agreement about appropriate terms. While slurs are clearly off limits, there is much debate over terms like African-American or Black; Native American or American Indian; Latino/a, Chicano/a, or Hispanic; physically challenged or disabled or differently abled. When in doubt, ask families what term they prefer.

Adapted from *The Puzzle Place Trainer Manual*, pp. B16-17. (c) Lancit Copyright Corp. /KCET.