

## The Environment

Katherine's experience shows how a professional can build on the existing home environment to promote interactions that make children feel included and give them the opportunity to learn in their typical home and community environments. Early childhood professionals should regularly examine the physical environment and materials they use to ensure that the materials support multicultural practices. The physical environment (room decorations, toys, displays, books, music, art, food) should reflect the lives and interests of those within the program or classroom and also encourage knowledge and respect for individuals from various cultures in our own country and around the world.

Room decorations should not only incorporate all the races, ethnicities, cultures, and personal realities of the children in the program or school, but should also expose children to visual reminders of diversity that exists outside of the early childhood setting. Displays should include pictures of people of many colors, different forms of housing, various geographic settings from rural to urban, different family styles, and different expressions of cultural events and holidays (Sandall et al., 2005). Toys and books that reflect diversity in languages, races, ethnicities, cultures, and abilities should be available for children to explore. For example, if there are different languages (including sign language) in the program or classroom, then it is particularly important to include books, signs, and other materials in those languages. Children should be exposed to music, art, artifacts, and foods from different cultures and allowed freedom for exploring and cooperative learning.

Given that developmental outcomes vary with cultural interpretations, it follows that methods of child care or education vary from one culture to the next. Practices in other cultures may challenge the values and beliefs about child development prevalent in the mainstream. For example, a teacher might purposely select materials for the classroom that encourage cooperation and altruism, such as large building blocks that are too big for one child to carry alone.

Avoid using pictures, books, or objects that reinforce stereotypes when choosing materials for a program or classroom. Some professionals are unsure about including cultural diversity and end up having books and materials that just show animals. But choosing culturally and linguistically appropriate materials means finding books and materials that show people within cultural groups enjoying a range of customs and activities, living in a variety of settings, and belonging to a variety of socioeconomic groups, as well as single-parent families, two-parent families, and other styles of family composition. Do not confuse images of past ways of life of a group with its contemporary life or confuse images of people's holiday life with their daily lives. For example, Native Americans should not always be presented in traditional clothing, participating in traditional customs, and living in tepees. Look for bias or stereotypes in materials before selecting them. For example, books and materials should show women working inside and outside the home and men as caregivers. People of all races should be shown as professionals in positions such as doctors, teachers, and lawyers. Likewise, people of all races should be seen in service positions such as maids, gardeners, and cooks.

Furthermore, linguistic diversity can make an environment more welcoming to children and families and bring awareness and education to children who speak English. For example, a professional may want to use books and music in various languages. The physical environment might be labeled in two or more languages (see

the English/Spanish Glossary of Familiar Words in the appendix at the end of this module), depending on the linguistic background of the children in the program.

Keep in mind that not all materials marked *multicultural* are good materials for your classroom or for the children you serve. It is essential that you find out about the children and families and about the cultural backgrounds and the communities in which they live. This information, together with guidance on selecting appropriate materials (see the Antibias Observation Checklist in Appendix C at the end of the book), will help you choose the materials that are right for the children and families you serve.

A preschool teacher with a diverse classroom, including Caucasian and African American children as well as Spanish-speaking Latino children, some of whom had hearing impairments, decided to enrich her classroom environment with multicultural materials, displays, and dolls. She bought posters, puzzles, and other materials showing children from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as children with disabilities. She labeled classroom objects in both English and Spanish. She added an African American doll and a Latino doll in the housekeeping center and put a hearing aid on the Latino doll. Immediately, she noticed that all the children liked the new dolls. The children with and without hearing impairments wanted to play with the doll with the hearing aid. One day the teacher observed the children playing with the Latino doll with the hearing aid. One of the hearing kids started to put the infant in the sink for a bath, and one of the children with a cochlear implant said, "No, no, no, no!" The second child rushed to remove the hearing aid before the doll went into the bath water, adding, "This cannot get wet!"

## **Hints for Selecting Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Materials**

When choosing materials for your program or classroom, look at them closely to ensure that they are truly multicultural and appropriate. The following questions and ideas are from Santos and Reese (1999).

1. Does the publication, DVD, or CD take into account both implicit and explicit assumptions, beliefs, or values that are appropriate or potentially problematic for the receiving family?
2. Is the information presented in a format preferred by the receiving family?
3. Is the literacy level appropriate for the receiving family? Or, is the information presented in such a way that the family will find the material patronizing and insulting?
4. Are technical terms and jargon explained effectively? For example, does the publication include a glossary of frequently used terms?
5. Are the case studies, pictures, and graphics welcoming to the receiving family? For example, are diverse groups of people represented in the images? Do the images suggest a contemporary or nonstereotypical view of various families?
6. Find someone to help you review the translated material to prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding between you and the families with whom you work.

7. Develop excerpts, revise material, or present one chapter of a longer book or manual. (Be mindful of copyright issues.)
8. Develop companion brochures or guides to help parents apply concepts presented in a publication to their own situation.
9. Develop fliers that list related local resources or explain terms or jargon.
10. Remember: No single resource can address all of a family's needs, but in many cases, materials can be adapted to make them more useful.

## Types of Bias to Look for in Books

Be aware of the types of bias that can be found in books when choosing culturally and linguistically appropriate materials. If you are familiar with the following types of bias (Sadker, Sadker, & Long, 1997), then you can recognize them in materials and avoid having biased books in your program or classroom.

- Linguistic bias: Culturally loaded terms (*black sheep, jew down*) or sexist language (*fireman, policeman, mailman*)
- Stereotyping: Stereotypes (e.g., ethnic, gender, socioeconomic status, religion) in storylines and illustrations
- Invisibility: Systematic exclusion of races, people of lower socioeconomic status, and so forth
- Imbalance: Simplifying complex issues or people by presenting limited, select information
- Unreality: Glossed-over discussion or unrealistic portrayal of issues (e.g., slavery, discrimination, prejudice, homelessness)
- Fragmentation: Information presented as unique occurrences rather than integrated in the text

## School or Program Culture

What about the broader school or program culture? The most prepared teachers and service providers may find that the existing school culture or structure creates barriers to implementing a multicultural approach. Biases may exist in the very structure of the school or program, creating inequalities for children from races, cultures, or languages different from the dominant culture. For example, there may be policies regarding standardized testing, placing children into gifted or remedial programs, and tracking of students. There may be policies or procedures related to parent involvement, the calendar of holidays, and school or program activities, as well as hiring and training staff and programwide curriculum requirements.

Participating in transforming a school or program is the final step for a professional who wants to implement a multicultural approach. Banks (2004) talked about "empowering school culture and social structure." You can start by encouraging your school or program to create a mission statement and values that embrace

multiculturalism. Help identify existing policies that are barriers to multiculturalism and facilitate the change in order to create an environment that supports and empowers all children, families, and professionals, regardless of race, ethnicity, language, and culture (Sandall et al., 2005). Policies that you may want to encourage include the following.

- Hiring and retaining staff from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds
- Hiring and retaining bilingual staff
- Using multicultural or antibias curriculum
- Using multicultural materials such as books, dolls, and puzzles
- Using alternate authentic assessment methods
- Involving parents in the curriculum

## Conclusion

This module discussed the concept of developmentally appropriate practices and how it has changed to include cultural and linguistic diversity. The module talked about multicultural education, its primary goals, and persistent myths that have prevented its full understanding. In addition, it presented some strategies for incorporating a multicultural approach to child care and education, including activities that promote cultural awareness and incorporate the home culture and language. Finally, the module talked about transforming programs and schools so that the culture and structure of these institutions support all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, or disability.

## Key Ideas to Remember

- Developmentally appropriate practices include not only age and individual appropriateness, but also social and cultural appropriateness.
- Multicultural education is both an idea and a process, founded on the principles of freedom, equality, equity, and justice, with the goal of creating institutions in which all children, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, culture, language, or abilities, have equal quality of care and education and equal opportunities to succeed.
- Banks (2004) and Banks and Banks (2007) described five dimensions of multicultural education—content integration, knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and empowering school culture and social structure.
- There are persistent myths about multicultural education that prevent a full or accurate understanding and implementation of multicultural practices, including the ideas that multicultural practices emphasize how other cultures are different from the dominant culture, bilingualism is a liability, multicultural practices are only relevant in environments with children from diverse backgrounds, and random and sporadic cultural activities make good multicultural practices.

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