



Promoting diversity, inclusion and equality for all children

An Equal Start

Promoting Equal Opportunities in the Early Years

(adapted from a joint publication produced by the Commission for Racial Equality in Scotland, the Disability Rights Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission Scotland, 2000)

1. Discrimination

In our society, discrimination is widespread, which means that not all people are able to participate fully as equal citizens. When we talk about discrimination we are usually talking about two particular types of treatment, namely direct and indirect.

Direct discrimination means treating people less favourably than others because of their race, gender or disability. If in an early years' setting girls were asked to play in the home corner while the boys played in the toy garage, for example, this could be interpreted as direct discrimination on the grounds of gender.

Indirect discrimination occurs when rules or policies apply to everyone but some groups are more disadvantaged as a result. An example of indirect discrimination would be where there is a rule that children should not wear headwear indoors. This rule could be interpreted as discriminating against some children on the grounds of race.

Indirect discrimination is often unintentional: this is why it is very important to think carefully about the impact on all the children concerned when making or reviewing policies or rules of practice.

2. Early Influences

Children do not exclude or devalue each other until they learn to do so from adults, but this can happen very early. Research shows that children become aware of visible differences between people before the age of two, and that between two and three they can pick up unspoken attitudes and assumptions. Around this age they learn about being a boy or girl and form their social identity in terms of ethnicity, culture and social class.

Disabled children and children from ethnic minorities may learn at an early age to see themselves as subordinate to others from these attitudes and assumptions. It is our duty to teach all children that they are of equal value in our society. Girls and boys learn early that their behaviour, their likes and dislikes and their expectations should follow a set of unwritten but widely recognised rules about male and female roles.



If children are encouraged early in life to develop a positive view of themselves and others, they may be less prone to discriminate as they grow older.

3. Decisions Affecting Children

It is important that you create an environment that celebrates diversity and provides opportunities for all irrespective of gender, ability and ethnicity. To achieve this we ask you to think about and challenge inadvertent discrimination, an example of which may be special interventions for children with impairments, such as removing them from the group. These can reinforce the child's impression that she or he is powerless and is being punished for being different.

Similarly, disabled children may have no concept of having a problem until we imply it by asking questions such as, "What's wrong with you?", after which they may begin to feel that they are deficient and lose their sense of self-worth.

As adults we usually think that we know what is best for a child and exclude him or her from any decisions being taken on his or her behalf. It is vital from the outset that children are given the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them.

4. Direct Intervention

Is direct intervention always a bad thing?

No, not when your intention is to help children deal with prejudice and eliminate discrimination.

This is often needed to help children establish their own identity and respect for others.

Young children may make hurtful comments to each other. If, for example, a child makes racist remarks to another child, it is important to deal with such remarks positively and constructively. For example, in a play situation, Chloe says "Anna can't be a queen! There are no black queens!" It is important to focus on the statement rather than avoiding it. Chloe can be helped to understand that not only was she incorrect, she was also hurting Anna, which at this point is more important, since dealing with children's emotions is paramount. Similarly, children may make hurtful comments to a disabled child because they do not understand impairment. "Amanda looks silly. She's got funny glasses!" provides an opportunity for explaining that Amanda finds it difficult to see. Ask the child to partially cover her eyes for a moment and say, "What can you see? Not a lot! That's why Amanda needs her glasses to help her see more clearly".

5. Bullying and Harassment

The reasons behind bullying and harassment are complex, but discrimination and prejudice are often the source. Incidents of bullying and harassment are best dealt with quickly and directly.

Victims of bullying and harassment must be strongly supported, while those responsible will need sensitive counselling and should be provided with the



opportunity to think about their actions and understand clearly that their behaviour is unacceptable.

6. Combating Discrimination

You may not be immediately able to affect the discrimination that occurs in the wider society, but you do have an important role to play. You are children's first contact outside the home, their first role models after their parents. You can make the most of every child's potential by making them feel fully included, both as individuals, as children from different ethnic backgrounds, and as disabled children.

7. Stereotyping

Stereotyping is making assumptions about people that are based on their gender, race or disability, the effect of which can influence their role in society, their opportunities and experiences.

It can have serious long-term consequences. Stereotypes are often used to justify prejudice and discrimination against others and to provide the basis of jokes told at the expense of others. Labels such as *Jamie is deaf*; *Rachel is a diabetic* imply that the person and the impairment are one and the same. Clearly they are not. Although much has been achieved in tackling such stereotyping, we still need to see more examples of positive images of disabled children and young people.

Black and ethnic minority children also suffer from the devaluing effects of stereotyping which can lead them often to reject unconsciously their own culture and its values, and consequently, in a sense, their own being and self-identity.

8. Influencing Factors

As early years' workers, you may have to try to counter-balance some of the strong influences affecting children in other areas of their lives. Principal among these are:

The Home

Sex stereotyping begins at birth. Many parents have deep-seated perceptions of their children based on gender. As soon as a child is born it is treated according to its gender, and parents react differently to their babies, depending on whether they are girls or boys. As babies and toddlers, for example, boys and girls are often not given the same range of toys; girls can be supervised more closely than boys, and even the language used when talking to them can be more protective.

Later on, girls are less likely to be asked to help with hobbies of a technical nature, or DIY at home, but they will be expected to help with domestic chores. Parents' expectations of what children will do in later life have an enormous effect on the performance of young children. As children grow, their understanding of differing gender behaviours continues to be influenced.



The Media

Children's notions about identity are strongly influenced by children's TV. The media often perpetuates stereotypical gender roles, and the portrayal of black and ethnic minority groups has over many years proved equally harmful. There is a long-standing tradition in the media to create negative images of black people, for example by portraying them too often as drug dealers, crooks and assorted villains. This occurs in children's literature and entertainment, and is a powerful stereotype that must be addressed. Disabled characters are rarely seen in mainstream media and when they are, the focus can often be on the difficulties experienced by the individual. Rarely are disabled people portrayed as valuable, equal members of society.

The Peer Group

The peer group also exerts irresistible pressure on children. The three-year old Bob the Builder fan who is rarely seen without her spanner and hard hat will, sadly, eventually ask for a Barbie Doll because all her friends have one.

9. Challenging Stereotyping

As early years workers you can increase your awareness by undertaking courses and training on issues around disability, race and gender. On a practical level, you can help challenge stereotyping by intervening in children's play and by using imaginative toys and texts.

Play can be used to question stereotypes. Children often behave in a certain way to demonstrate clearly that they are a 'proper' boy or a girl, and your active intervention is needed to help them understand that a variety of behaviours is acceptable. For example, some manufactured 'boys' games are noticeably aggressive, and it is sometimes necessary for adults to intervene. Offering alternative images of what it means to be a boy may not be enough, however: boys in our society do not want to be seen as 'soft'. It may be necessary to help the children understand that there are different ways of showing that one is, for example, strong or brave.

Imaginative texts are another way of questioning stereotypes. Different texts often depict a range of ways of being a particular character. For example, princesses are portrayed differently in fairy tales and stories from different cultures, and in factual books. The princesses in *Princesses Are Not Quitters* are very different characters from the heroine of *The Princess and the Pea*. You can ask the children questions to help them recognise different but equally acceptable versions of such characters in stories:

*Are all princesses young and beautiful?
Do all princesses wear long dresses?
Can princesses do real jobs?
Are all princesses white?*

Reading can take many forms. Books that are bilingual in nature, for example in two languages, in print and in Braille, can be read to children to familiarise them with different forms of print.



10. Using Imaginative Toys to Question Stereotypes

Toys can be put to good use to challenge stereotypes. You may have long since abandoned the notion of *boys' toys* and *girls' toys*, but unfortunately they are to be found in most shops, and remain a key influence on children. It is therefore good to encourage children to take up toys or activities traditionally associated with the opposite sex, but this alone may not succeed in broadening their notions of how girls and boys behave.

Toys that celebrate racial and cultural variety, and ones featuring positive images of disability, also have an important role in helping to challenge stereotypes.

11. Persona Dolls

Persona Dolls can be used to raise difficult issues with young children in a non-threatening and enjoyable way. They encourage the skills and confidence children need to challenge unfairness against themselves or others and to feel good about themselves. They visit, usually at circle time, to tell the children about their good and bad experiences. The Dolls are transformed from inanimate objects into people, with their own personalities, families and cultural backgrounds, their own capabilities and problems. The children quickly bond and identify with the Dolls and see them as small friends; they are happy and sad for them, and talk about their problems.

To avoid stereotypes, staff and parents together decide the selection of the Dolls and how they should be presented to the children. Dolls may represent a racial and cultural range; they may have an impairment; they may be male or female.

12. Things to Consider

Sometimes you may stereotype by making assumptions about a child's potential. Children may adapt their behaviour to fall into line with expectations, and may begin to fail. For example, it has been perceived in the past that as a result of a physical disability a child will have less intellectual ability. Similarly, if you accept an assumption that children from one ethnic group will tend to have a short attention span, you may allow them to wander off and may not encourage them to complete a task, while other children increase their learning and confidence by doing so.

Here are some questions you may wish to consider:

- What are the main theories and ideas that determine the way I work with young children?
- Do these take account of gender, ethnicity and differing abilities?
- Do I expect children to act in certain ways because of their gender, ethnicity or disability?
- Do I have different expectations about their abilities or potential?
- Does the way I interact with children influence their self-image in a positive way?



13. Creating an Inclusive Environment

Inclusion in the early years setting involves providing a welcoming environment for all children and equal access to all the play and learning experiences available. Every child has a value, not because of what they might achieve in the future, but for who they are today.

On occasion, you may need to make some changes to your daily routine to ensure that all the children are able to participate equally. Disabled children need the space to move around safely, however they go about it. This might involve changing the way you use your available space, for example by putting all the activities around the edge of the room. Flexibility is also important. Easily moved rather than fixed equipment frees up space and is likely to be more accessible for the disabled child.

You may also have to consider more fundamental issues such as the assumptions that might be implicit in your approach — we sometimes betray assumptions in commonplace remarks such as “Don’t be a baby! Girls don’t hit each other!” You need to be aware of the possible effects of how you talk to the children and the language you use.

14. Inclusive Activities

We recognise that it can sometimes be difficult to provide a full range of activities without excluding anyone. For example, a deaf child who can happily join in practical activities may feel excluded during a group story-telling session. Children can easily interpret this as meaning that being different means not being equal.

There are imaginative and creative alternative ways of communicating, for example, if possible, by using sign language to tell the story. This is not only something that all children can enjoy learning; it will also help them interact more readily with deaf children. Even the words of songs need to be carefully thought about. If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands leaves out the child who can’t make that movement, but maybe alternative words that don’t exclude her from joining in can be composed. There are not many songs for young children that celebrate inclusion, certainly not in the traditional collection, but it is important to be sensitive to the messages they carry and the ability of everyone to join in.

15. Mealtimes

Mealtimes provide many ways of encouraging children’s awareness of diversity, for example, by making and serving simply prepared foods from different cultures, possibly with help from parents. Some children (usually over the age of six) may fast at certain times, and these occasions can also be used to increase children’s understanding of cultural differences. At mealtimes, discussions about the different ways some children eat, for example, with chopsticks, can be used to encourage cultural awareness.

Some children have special dietary requirements, and others are less able than others to feed themselves. No one is singled out when everyone eats together and staff join the children at the table to provide discreet assistance where



necessary. Special dietary needs can be a topic for conversation, so that the children accept and understand that others may require a variety of diets.

16. Responding to Individual Children

While early learning experiences are often based around themes, it is easy to break off occasionally to respond to children's individual experiences and interests. (It is important, however, that while doing so you do not inadvertently focus on the child's difference but rather on the experience or interest itself.) For example, if a child is moving home, or a new baby is expected, time can be allowed to focus on the event. In this way, all children are helped to accept and enjoy these new experiences.

Similarly, at different times of the year various festivals are celebrated, and all children should be included. Parents can be asked to help by making a visit to describe the celebration and its traditions. This encourages children to take a pride in their culture and to develop positive attitudes to others and other ways of life.

17. Children Learning a Second Language

Language is learned through play and interaction. In a positive atmosphere, older children can be encouraged to help a learner, and language acquisition can be fun. Children learning a second language differ from others only in that they are learning two languages instead of one. Everyone is learning language at this stage, and the child who uses another language at home has no difficulty in assimilating an additional language. There are occasions, however, when bilingual support, if available, may be helpful.

Children can also be introduced to different forms of communication, e.g. sign language, and to different languages. Sometimes, for example, it is possible to invite adults with language skills to teach different languages through song, poetry and play. The children learn readily and enjoy the experience.

18. Action Points

You will help create a positive and inclusive environment by:

- having high expectations of the children's behaviour and learning
- using praise effectively and responding to problems sensitively
- encouraging enlightened views about gender roles, levels of ability and ethnicity

and providing:

- themes and activities which are representative of all children
- flexible equipment and the space for disabled children to move around safely
- books, pictures, puzzles and stories that give positive images of people of different races, cultures and abilities, and that depict men and women in non-traditional roles and a variety of cultural traditions
- a wide variety of play experiences that involve different cultures and non-traditional attitudes to male and female roles
- toys that are not overtly sexist and dolls that represent a variety of physical characteristics, skin tones and hair textures



- foodstuffs used to teach weighing and calculating that are drawn from a variety of cultures and cuisines.

19. Involving Parents

Your role as an early years worker is complementary to that of *parents, who often possess a wide range of skills that can, with careful planning, be used as a resource to enrich the children's experience and help in celebrating diversity.

Involving parents can be mutually beneficial. In addition to being involved in day-to-day learning and play, parents can participate by planning events and visits from outside agencies, organising social events and taking part in fund raising. The greater the participation, the stronger the sense of partnership becomes. Parents feel that their views are respected, that they are personally involved in their children's early education, and that they can have an effect on their children's future. By working together, you can give children an excellent start to their education.

(*When we speak about parents we use it as an umbrella term for parents, lone parents, carers and members of the extended family, whether heterosexual or same sex, who may be involved in looking after the child in the home.)

