15.5: What Children See and Hear in Child Care Settings

Messages about who matters or does not matter—and who matters more—are significant pathways of bias and inequity. The visual and auditory environment of early childhood education programs communicate many of these kinds of messages. These matter because young children are just beginning to amass and process information about themselves and others. And this awareness starts very early. For example, as young as six months, infants begin to notice differences in skin color (Bronson and Merryman 2009; Katz 1976). Noticing, paying attention to, or being curious about differences and similarities in their environment is not a sign of emerging prejudice, but rather a characteristic of how all children learn.

Inaccurate and stereotypical images of people like themselves are one type of bias that young children may encounter in the early care program. Those images communicate misinformation about their own social identities, which damages their developing sense of self and family. They need accurate, authentic photographs, posters, and pictures of themselves and their families. To begin to develop positive attitudes toward people different from themselves, children also need accurate images about people different from themselves. They do not need misinformation from commercialized, stereotypical, or cartoon looking images of people. Visibility (or the lack thereof) is another powerful pathway of bias and inequity.

When children see images of people who look like them, they receive a positive message for their self-concept. However, seeing only images similar to them conveys a second, negative message: only people like you exist or are important. Conversely, young children who do not see images of people similar to them in the early care and learning environment receive the message that they do not matter as much as the people whose images and languages are visible. Experiencing invisibility in an early childhood education program is especially damaging, since it is one of the first societal institutions that very young children encounter.

The numerical balance of images that reflect diverse racial identities, families, and cultural ways of life also conveys
messages about who matters and who matters more. When the majority of the images in an early childhood environment reflect the “way of life defined by the dominant group in society as the "normal or right way to live, the message conveyed is that the dominant group is the most important. When one cultural group’s way of life becomes the standard for everyone else, the seeds of racial and cultural advantage and disadvantage are sown.

In addition to the visual environment, the sounds of a program also convey information about whose family’s way of life matters or not. The language of the program is the most obvious source of sound—and it may or may not be what children hear at home. Hearing a language different from the one at home creates a more complicated adjustment and developmental challenges for young children than that experienced by those whose home language matches the program’s language. Similarly, the sounds of music and song evoke—or do not evoke—the security of home, depending on how similar or different they are from what a child is used to.

A growing body of research also indicates that misinformation and prejudice about social identity harm children’s development (e.g., Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2004; Tatum 2003). The negative impact is cumulative—coming not just from messages of direct prejudice, but also from the effect of microaggressions, brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership, as well as messages of invisibility regarding who they are.

Children receive both overt messages and covert messages, those that are disguised and subtle and often rationalized in ways that lead to societal acceptance in many forms. They also are exposed to prejudices and discriminatory actions in their daily lives. These all build up to become toxic to children’s sense of self, well-being, and competence. A non-biased environment is a necessary condition for nurturing each child’s healthy identity and positive attitudes about diversity. However, the visual and auditory environment is only one component of culturally responsive programs.