

# Creating an anti-bias learning environment

by Sandra Richter

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## ABSTRACT

Building on the theoretical principles of the Anti-Bias Education Approach<sup>1</sup> and its four goals for the organisation of educational practice, this paper gives concrete suggestions, practical guidelines and recommendations for creating an anti-bias learning environment.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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<sup>1</sup> The approach is officially called "Ansatz der Vorurteilsbewussten Bildung und Erziehung®" and is copyrighted. For the sake of reader-friendliness, the English translation "Anti-Bias Education Approach" will be used without the copyright symbol throughout this paper.

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### 1. Introduction

If children are to learn not only to tolerate but to respect diversity, they need manifold opportunities to become familiar with it. And given that childcare centres are part of our societal structures, they must be careful not to reproduce and pass on biases and prejudices.

In discourses on anti-bias work, one frequent claim is that very young children could not possibly already have biases or prejudices, and that childcare centres are places of unbiased coexistence. This belief is often accompanied by the idea that when “different types of children” come together, communication is automatically unbiased. But experiences and studies have shown that these notions are simply not true: “When children go into a childcare centre, they are more open to friendships with children of the opposite gender and to non-stereotypical play experiences than when they leave. Of course, the childcare centre is not solely responsible for this biased development, but it is also not entirely innocent.” (Greenberg, cited in Derman-Sparks 1989, 5)<sup>1</sup> “We are going on the assumption that targeted and active interventions of educational professionals are necessary to ensure that young children can develop positive attitudes towards differences. Simply having contact with children of different backgrounds is not enough.” (Wagner 2001, 5)

It is usually not explicit biases that influence children but rather subtler messages that convey attitudes towards right and wrong, acceptance or rejection, “normal” and “abnormal”, important and unimportant. “They make inferences from the mix of people on the staff, the images on the walls, the main characters in stories, the daily routines. They also make inferences from what is not there: when there are no references made to them, their families, their languages, and their particular experiences and abilities, it can mean: ‘This centre would be just fine without me and my family. I don’t belong here.’” (Wagner et al. 2006, 18).

If we want children, with all their unique, individual qualities, to grow up feeling accepted, appreciated and respected for who they are, then we have to create a learning environment that enables this. Therefore, we must establish conditions that allow all children to develop a sense of belonging. They should be able to grow up in an environment where they are not forced to deny their own socio-cultural background. It should be an environment that enables them to develop self-confidence and strengthens their sense of belonging to their own reference group. Once that happens, children will have the chance to flourish both in their own family and in the majority society, and be able to stand up for their rights (cf. Hahn n.d., 1). This paper will outline the ways in

<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Please note that all quotations cited in this paper have been freely translated from German into English by us unless otherwise noted. Some were originally written in German (Wagner, Hahn, Hahn & Henkys, Sikcan-Azun); others in English (Derman-Sparks, Greenberg, DECET).

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which a learning environment can be established in line with the principles of anti-bias education.

## 2. The Anti-Bias Education Approach

The Anti-Bias Education Approach put forward here is based on the anti-bias approach developed by Louise Derman-Sparks and her colleagues in the 1980s for educators working with children aged two and up. The anti-bias approach is an "[...] active approach that rises to the challenge posed by prejudices, stereotyping, biases and 'isms' that are built into our system. It is based on the assumption that it is necessary for everyone to get involved and fight against the individual behaviours and institutional mechanisms that perpetuate suppression" (Derman-Sparks 2001, 1).

Within the framework of the KINDERWELTEN<sup>2</sup> project, the anti-bias approach started to be adapted in Germany in the late 1990s and its development has continued through the work of the KINDERWELTEN Centre<sup>3</sup>. It offers a sound concept for inclusive educational practices and a systematic approach for inclusive quality development in childcare centres.

### Principles

The principles of the Anti-Bias Education Approach are as follows (cf. Derman-Sparks 2001, 4f.; Wagner 2001, 4f.):

#### 1. Be aware of institutionalised exclusion and discrimination

##### Institutionalised exclusion and discrimination

Diversity and differences are always embedded in the context of social power structures and have implications for everyone. Children receive input about processes of inclusion and exclusion in many ways. They then integrate this into the development of their own identity and attitudes towards others. It follows that children do not encounter social diversity in a neutral way, but always in connection with value judgements (cf. Wagner et al. 2013, 87). Education professionals are also affected by this – both in terms of how they see themselves and others and in their interactions with children. Moreover, the way educational institutions are operated and governed is shaped by societal structures as well as by institutional disadvantages or privileges. Thus the anti-bias approach also considers educational institutions themselves as societal institutions where biases and prejudices are conveyed. The assumption is that education professionals must perform targeted and active interventions so that young children can develop positive attitudes towards differences. Simply having contact with children from different backgrounds is not enough to change the power of stereotypical images that perpetuate themselves

##### Educational institutions themselves produce biases

<sup>2</sup> The German word "KINDERWELTEN" literally translates to "children's worlds".

<sup>3</sup> The KINDERWELTEN Centre sees itself as an institution dedicated to the further development and spread of the approach. More information on their activities and current projects can be found at: [www.kinderwelten.net](http://www.kinderwelten.net) (German only).

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### Incorporating findings from developmental psychology research

among even very young children – frequently without any personal experience of difference.

### 2. Be aware of research findings on identity development in young children

Research findings on the identity development of young children as well as their development of attitudes towards others must be incorporated into educational concepts. No child, no matter how young, enters a childcare centre as a “blank slate”. Children already have their first ideas about what is “normal” and “right”, and connect new information with their existing ideas about themselves and others: “Social norms are very powerful and only when educators know what children are thinking can they offer to correct flawed information” (Derman-Sparks 2001, 5). Children do not understand categories like “nationality” until relatively late. According to Swiss psychologist and childhood development expert Jean Piaget, feeling connected to one's own group identity requires “decentration”, i.e., overcoming one's childish egocentrism. Once children develop the ability to refrain from acting on their own impulsive preferences, their reference to family bonds and practices can grow (cf. Marvakis 1995). When abstract concepts such as “German” or “Turkish” are used to describe children or things, they are beyond the cognitive abilities of children whose thinking is closely linked to their own concrete experiences in their sphere of activity.

### 3. Take children's everyday experiences as the starting point

Children start acting and learning in their everyday environment from birth. And when they enter childcare, what they experience in their families and immediate environment is complemented by the educators and group of children at the childcare centre. These people and the spaces of the facility are what make up the social (or material) sphere of activity in which children can broaden their understanding and experience things that are different from what they experience in their private surroundings.

### “The tourism trap”

This is not the case with “tourist” educational approaches (Derman-Sparks 1989) – the sort of approach that “drops in on” cultural or ethnic groups much in the way that one might visit a foreign country. Such “trips” focus on the exceptional rather than the everyday in that they observe celebrations and see cultures as defined, homogenous entities. Such a programme often refers back to the past and, generally speaking, to the situation in countries of origin rather than the current, individual lives of immigrant families. After the “trip” is over, the group returns to the “normal curriculum”, which remains unchanged. As a result, the content communicated to the children is often inaccurate or irrelevant. Activities like these do not give children the opportunity to have any experiences they can apply to their sphere of activity – except for the experience that, although a “strange otherness” might exist elsewhere, what matters right now is what the dominant culture deems important. But educa-

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tional practices in line with the Anti-Bias Approach take the children's individual everyday experiences as their starting point and systematically examine the origins of biases (cf. Wagner n.d. a, 1).

### Pseudo-equality

The "colourblind" approach has proven equally counterproductive in dealing with diversity. This approach, which usually comes from a well-meaning place, is based on the idea that: "All children are equal, we don't see any differences!" The assumption here is that a child's perception will not focus on inequality and differences if those things are not mentioned; the underlying idea being that children are, in principle, free of biases and unconditionally open to new environments or people. Correspondingly, this approach sees childcare centres a sort of "sheltered environment" uninfluenced by social reality. This approach, however, omits a central part of the experiences that even very young children have and therefore neglects to take them and their growing perceptions of the existing differences among people seriously. Namely, it ignores the fact that children categorise and also receive messages about how they should judge specific human characteristics and thus direct their actions. Messages from "colourblind" adults make them think: "My perceptions are wrong" or "Differences are problematic and I can't speak about them". The development of fundamental social skills is thus inhibited (cf. Wagner n.d. b, 1). "Although the intention is to protect children, [this approach] ends up leaving them alone to deal with certain experiences rather than giving them the support they need to competently deal with differences and unfairness" (Wagner n.d. b, 1).

*"We wanted to believe that small children are colourblind, that they do not perceive differences. What we really believed or hoped was: if we could keep children from perceiving differences, they would not develop biases. But that is impossible in a society where racism and other biases are omnipresent in children's everyday lives!" (Derman-Sparks 1998, 23)*

### The goals of Anti-Bias Education

The following four interconnected goals constitute the framework for establishing educational practices in an anti-bias childcare centre (cf. Wagner et al. 2013, 30f.):

#### Goal 1: To strengthen all children in their identities

As an education professional, this means providing support to all children as they develop their personal identity and their group reference orientation. All children should experience conditions that make it possible for them to like themselves the way they are without feeling superior or inferior to others.

### Strengthen a sense of identity

The development of a child's personal identity cannot be separated from his or her reference group orientation. Everyone belongs to several different reference groups. These affiliations have different meanings for a person's identity, understood as the perception of one's own unmistakable distinctiveness

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while simultaneously being connected to others. Children's ability to develop self-awareness and self-confidence is inextricably tied to the social standing of their respective reference group. Starting around the age of three, it becomes clear that children, during their identity development, integrate messages about the value of groups and thus about social power structures into their self-image. Educators must pay attention to this and be informed about which reference groups are important for the child in question. They must take into account that children need different things depending on their group affiliation and group experiences: "Guidance for white children, for instance, must avoid social messages that tell them they are superior due to their skin colour. On the other hand, children whose group reference orientation is shaped by racist or anti-Semitic signals need help in order to develop resistance to such messages" (Derman-Sparks 2001, 7). Moreover, when dealing with differences, one must make sure to establish what people have in common first. This is very important because ideologies often view physical differences as playing a key role in a person's abilities, behaviour and social status.

### Goal 2: To give all children opportunities to experience diversity

**Unanswered questions cause uncertainty and can become the basis for prejudices**

For education professionals this means fostering each and every child's ability to naturally and empathetically interact with people who have all sorts of different backgrounds and experiences. Even in their first year of life, children perceive and pay attention to differences. When children begin to speak, their questions and observations illustrate that they perceive the distinctive features of people belonging to various groups in society. By the time they are three to five years old they already have their own theories about differences, depending on their experiences and cognitive strategies, which they use to give order to the world (Derman-Sparks 2001, 8). Their experiences are also informed by adults' uneasy responses to some of their questions and theories: when adults dodge the question, change the subject, ignore them, or react angrily.

*"A woman sits down across from Maryam on the metro. The woman is dressed entirely in black and is wearing a veil that has only a small slit for her eyes. "It's a witch!" Maryam calls out loudly, with fear in her voice. Her mother is embarrassed. At the next stop she and her daughter change carriages" (Derman-Sparks 1989, 30).*

Such reactions demonstrate to children that something "is not right". As a result, they become distant and uneasy around people with those features. What children really need is factual information and opportunities to have positive and interesting experiences with people who look different from themselves. Education professionals and parents must be aware of children's theories in order to avoid reinforcing misinformation and misunderstandings. To that end, they must foster an open, continuous dialogue with children about differences.

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es and children's own assumptions (cf. Wagner 2001, 8). "In order to show children something about living with disabilities, it can be good to bring in a wheelchair and have the children ride around in it. But only if the educators are there to help the children express their feelings. It could be that children refuse to sit in the wheelchair because they think their legs won't work anymore" (Derman-Sparks 2001, 10).

*A story about a child who hurts herself is read aloud to a group of three year olds. The question of the colour of one's own blood comes up. "Mine is bright red," says Michelle, who has light skin. "But I think Jannine's is dark red." Jannine has dark skin. Several other children also think that people's blood has different shades of red based on their skin tone. The educator is surprised by this theory. She talks to the children about how blood looks when they cut or scratch themselves: "The colour of our blood has nothing to do with the colour of our skin. We all need blood for our body to function" (Derman-Sparks 1989, 32).*

### Goal 3: To encourage critical thinking about fairness and justice

Children need help  
 from adults in the case  
 of injustices

For education professionals, this means fostering every child's ability to think critically about biases. Children's growing cognitive abilities enable them to identify as "unfair" or "untrue" images and behaviours that stereotype or discriminate against people. When they face discrimination themselves, they need help from adults who can provide support and factual information. They have to be able to express what it means to them when they are teased or excluded. They have to develop a vocabulary for saying these things. Only then can they call out and reject unfair behaviour towards others. On the one hand, educators must be aware that the mixing of bias-steeped external features (e.g., gender, skin tone, physical handicap) with socially defined behavioural codes is confusing for young children. On the other, it means educators must take a clear stand against biases and stereotypes in such situations (cf. Wagner 2001, 9).

*Heather complains with tears in her eyes: "Sara says I'm not a girl because I play too wildly!" Her educator asks her: "Do you think you're still a girl?" Heather nods. The educator answers: "Yes, you're still a girl. And you'll be a girl forever, regardless of what you do. Your body is what makes you a girl, not the way you play. I know that you like to play wildly and that's okay. Let's explain that to Sara and tell her that she hurts your feelings when she says you're not a girl!" (cf. Derman-Sparks 1989, 50)*



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### Goal 4: To be proactive about counteracting injustice and discrimination

It is the duty of all education professionals to help every child acquire the ability to stand up for him- or herself and others in the face of discrimination. Children should learn that being critical and fighting against unfairness is worthwhile. Derman-Sparks describes this ability as essential in the Anti-Bias Approach. At the same time, she acknowledges, educators have reported that of the four goals this one is the hardest to accomplish (cf. Derman-Sparks 2001, 14, 21). The emphasis here is on empowering children: standing up for something together gives them the chance to feel proactive and show solidarity with others. In the best-case scenario, they will achieve their objective.

*A group of children discovers the label "flesh-coloured" on a package of plasters. "What does that mean? What do you think?" the educator asks. That these plasters match a person's skin colour, the children say. They conduct a small experiment: children compare the colour of the plaster with the colour of their skin, first in their group, then in other groups of children and at home with their families. They realise that the label "flesh-coloured" is not accurate. And also that it is unfair because most of the children and adults have a different skin tone. They write a letter to the plaster manufacturer and, in response, receive a package with see-through plasters. The children are thrilled because these plasters are fair! (cf. Derman-Sparks 1998, 11).*

### Children learn what is acceptable from their environment

When working with children during their first three years of life, goals 1 and 2 are more relevant. The goals, paired with an anti-bias learning environment, give children a foundation that enables them to verbally express their concerns about unfairness and to actively stand up against injustices over the course of their development. The following sections will describe how to structure such a learning environment.

## 3. Creating an anti-bias learning environment

*"It is very important that children can recognise themselves in the place where they spend their time. That also holds true for their families. When families cannot recognise anything about themselves, their culture or their child in the childcare centre, they are left with little reason to believe that their children are being treated fairly there." (Booze, in cf. DECET 1998)*

In order to create a learning environment that enables all children to develop a sense of belonging, education professionals must critically examine whether – and if so, how – the children and their families are represented in the centre. This is the point at which educators need to reflect on whether the facilities or even the staff are reinforcing stereotypical ideas.

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Possible questions for reflection might include:

- ▶ Are there educators whose native tongue is not German?
- ▶ Are there also male educators at our centre?
- ▶ Are there non-white (i.e., Muslim, Asian or Black<sup>4</sup>) educators?
- ▶ Are there books depicting the lives of children with special needs?
- ▶ Are there books/action figures/images of women in socially relevant roles (doctors, pilots)?
- ▶ Are there options for boys to play dress up and even wear dresses, contrary to the widespread societal "idea of what is normal"?
- ▶ Are there non-white dolls and action figures?
- ▶ Are there stories in which the main characters wear headscarves?
- ▶ Are there books/images that portray different family constellations?
- ▶ Are there stories about same-sex relationships?
- ▶ What do we assume to be "normal", for example, in eating and sleeping situations, without ever thinking about the fact that our idea of "normality" might be very Western, i.e., informed by the perspective of the majority society?

### Important questions for reflection

There are many more questions that could be asked here. But the most important ones that education professionals should always ask themselves are:

- ▶ Can the children in our care and their families find themselves at our centre?
- ▶ Does our centre reproduce clichés and stereotypes?

*A girl runs to her educator and says, "Boys can't play with dolls!" The educator asks the child, "Why not?" "Because they don't know how!" the girl answers. The teacher then makes a suggestion: "Let's find out if that's true! We'll get some boys for an experiment. What do girls do with dolls that boys can't do?"*

<sup>4</sup> In anti-racist discourses, capitalising the word "Black" illustrates that the word is not describing a real attribute but a construct that links a political category to a social affiliation. In contrast to the term "white", it is a political self-designation from a position of resistance.

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One of the responsibilities of education professionals is to be sensitive to exclusion processes and to talk with children about them. Sometimes these are prejudices the child has brought from home, other times they are things the child has only experienced in this one way. Perhaps a child heard from her mother that boys don't play with dolls. Then the educator could tell the children: "You know, maybe boys don't play with dolls at your house. But here at our kindergarten we discovered that they certainly can if they want to and are allowed to, right?" Statements like "Your mum is wrong!" should be avoided. Because the child's mother is right about what happens at home. Apparently boys don't play with dolls there. But there are different rules in the kindergarten and all children – both boys and girls – are allowed to play with dolls (cf. DECET 1998).

### 3.1 Designing anti-bias spaces

When designing the spaces at childcare centres, it is necessary to identify and avoid using stereotypes and clichés, and to cater to all children. This is achieved above all by making diverse ways of life visible.

#### checklist

How to spot an anti-bias learning environment:

1. All the children at the centre are represented in photos.
2. You can see and identify what individual children are interested in and how they spend their time.
3. You see things the children have built, constructed and produced.
4. There are photos of important attachment figures of the children at the centre.
5. There are references to the family languages of all the children.
6. There are different-looking dolls of all skin colours; not just one but many with the same skin colour.<sup>1</sup> No type of doll should be dominant.
7. There are books, images, toys, games and CDs whose characters are girls and boys, men and women, people with diverse backgrounds and skin colours as well as children and adults with disabilities. The characters must also be regularly perceived performing activities that do not conform to stereotypes and other attributions.
8. In the dress-up, dolls and role-playing areas, there are objects and articles of clothing from various types of professional environments and family cultures.
9. A tour of the facility displays clues as to the sort of place the facility is located in and what reference groups live in the immediate surroundings. The design elements reflect the children's life experiences.

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10. The corridors are used as a place to find information and for encounters, and designed in an inviting way.

11. Multilingual signs are an indication that the educators at the childcare centre are interested in informing and addressing all parents, even those who do not speak German.

(cf. Fachstelle KINDERWELTEN für Vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung 2008)

<sup>1</sup> Here Derman-Sparks (1989, 63) warns about "pseudo-diversity": for example, a single Black doll among a sea of white dolls or one book about a certain social group, which merely perpetuates the dominance of the mainstream culture.

### Family walls

Family walls are an excellent and proven method for representing the diversity of family cultures at a facility and bolstering children's development of their personal and group reference identity.

A family wall is a wall of photographs displaying the children, their families and things that are important to them. The concept of family should be broad and flexible, i.e., should not restrict itself to solely normative family constructions (e.g., father-mother-child/children).

Family walls give children and families the opportunity to see themselves represented in the centre without stereotypes. They provide a realistic depiction of the different family cultures and are therefore better suited to represent cultural diversity than other images.

The family wall enables children to experience a sense of belonging in their families every day while also demonstrating to them that their families are welcome in the centre. By making different types of families visible there, even the youngest children can get to know different family cultures and lifestyles as a part of their everyday learning experience and develop empathy in dealing with differences (cf. Hahn & Henkys 2003, 3f.)

The family walls are designed for the children and should have a fixed spot in the rooms of the centre/group. They should be at the children's eye level so they can look at the pictures autonomously. With younger children, laminating the family walls is a good idea –they can then be used for a long time despite being touched every day. The photos should be big enough for the children to recognise who/what is pictured.

What's more, family walls provide ample material for talking to children about similarities and differences.

It is especially beneficial for children whose family culture is different from the majority of the group to be able to represent that culture on the family wall. Family constellations, family languages, family histories, values and rituals or

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### Discover similarities and differences in families

even the jobs of family members can be represented or talked about (cf. Hahn & Henkys 2003, 4).

If the family walls are used in line with the methodological idea and continually updated, the children can regularly discover new similarities and differences and are encouraged to think about different family cultures. This approach is substantially different from selecting individual children and “distinctive” features of their family and talking about them (“othering”). Children (and adults) usually feel uncomfortable when they are put in the spotlight in this way. They feel like they are being “showcased” and become self-conscious. By contrast, when conversations are started in connection with the family wall, children tend to feel important and like they have something to say (cf. Hahn & Henkys 2003, 4).

In conversations about the family walls, it is important to avoid verbally excluding children and to be sensitive to children excluding one another and to intervene if that occurs. It is important that individual families are not portrayed as representations of an entire group and that generalisations are avoided. Education professionals should point out to the children that even though there are socio-cultural family models, each family has its very own family culture. This holds true for families that belong to a minority group as well as those that belong to the German majority society. In general, similarities should be addressed first and then differences. Only once the diversity within one's own group is discussed does it make sense to raise children's awareness of greater diversity (cf. Hahn & Henkys 2003, 5).

*“Particularly exclusionary is the generalising ‘we’. Statements like ‘This is the way we do it’ suggest a homogeneity that might not exist. It implies that the person being addressed does not belong to the ‘we’ and that ‘we’ is above the ‘you’. It actively excludes children” (Hahn & Henkys 2003, 5).*

## 3.2 Selecting anti-bias materials

“For children, the materials given to them by adult authority figures represent a very important view of the world by nature of the fact that they were chosen by the adults” (Wagner et al. 2013, 38). Children believe these materials to be accurate and important and make an effort to integrate them into their own world view. According to Wagner (cf. Wagner et al. 2013, 14), although young children may find stereotypical representations of children uninteresting, they cannot distance themselves from them because they do not have enough knowledge to understand that such representations distort reality – or the ways in which they do so. This applies in particular to young children who, because of their level of linguistic development, are not yet able to enter into a dialogue about biases (cf. Wagner 2013, 38). Consequently, stereo-

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typical representations and materials have no place in childcare centres. It is not always easy to identify and remove them. For example, many centres still have atlases with stereotypical symbols of people on their walls. The following guidelines can be helpful for selecting educational materials that do not perpetuate prejudices:

### A variety of play materials

#### Provide a variety of play materials

- ▶ Make sure that none of the play materials (books, puzzles, games, images, etc.) contain stereotypical portrayals.
- ▶ If you use puzzles/memory games, check whether they represent the diversity at your facility. If they do not, you can make your own games.
- ▶ Dolls that represent diversity – e.g., that have different skin colours, physical abilities, genders (i.e., anatomically correct dolls), body shapes and body features – give even young children the opportunity to develop confidence and a sense of ease when dealing with diversity.

*Observe whether there are any children who only choose dolls that look like them. Invite one such child to play with you and pick a doll that looks "different", while the child looks for "his"/"her" doll. After a while, you could suggest that the two dolls do something together (e.g., go for a train ride, sit on a seesaw, take a nap). Find an opportunity to have the child do something with "your" doll (e.g., to feed the doll while you cook dinner). Help the child develop confidence and ease in playing with different dolls.*

### Role-playing and construction areas

#### Provide many different options for games involving role-playing

- ▶ Provide numerous articles of clothing that are worn by both boys/men and girls/women and various types of "work clothing" that reflect the diversity of the professional world, as well as many types of household objects that make it possible to experience different cooking and eating cultures.
- ▶ If every child brings an object or article of clothing, all the children find both familiar and unfamiliar objects and it adds to free play. Here it is important to talk about the new objects when they are introduced: that way, children are aware of and can actively encounter diversity and variety.
- ▶ Hang pictures in the role-playing area that show a variety of families of different backgrounds, family constellations (e.g., single parents, patchwork families, same-sex parents) and fathers/mothers doing different things.

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- ▶ Help boys and girls to explore non-stereotypical gender roles and intervene if children restrict one another by saying things like: "You can't play (with us) – you're a boy/girl!"
- ▶ People with physical handicaps should also be represented in the centre. In addition to books, there could be prosthetics, glasses, hearing aids or a wheelchair to give children a chance to test out and experience for themselves how it might feel to be physically impaired.
- ▶ Hang up a big mirror in the role-playing or theatre area and use opportune moments to speak to children about their skin, eye and hair colour and texture as well as other physical features.
- ▶ Ensure that action figures in the construction area include women and men as well as a variety of ethnic backgrounds and professions.
- ▶ Regularly observe which children use the building/construction area and make it possible for boys and girls to use it detached from gender stereotypes.

### Facilities for fine- and gross-motor activities

- ▶ Regularly observe which children use which facilities for gross-motor activities. Help shyer children to actively use the facilities, improve their skills at those activities, and feel increasingly more confident and comfortable doing them.
- ▶ You should also intervene if you observe children telling others that they can't or aren't allowed to take part in an activity due to some aspect of their "being" (gender, abilities).
- ▶ Girls are often still taught that they shouldn't or aren't allowed to get dirty. This could make it difficult for many girls to play with sand, water, etc. Help all children feel comfortable and confident with these materials. Use old children's clothes or adult shirts as smocks if it makes it easier for them to have experiences with new materials.
- ▶ Make sure that children with physical handicaps also have access to playing with sand, etc.

### Arts and crafts materials

- ▶ Regularly provide paints, finger paints, crayons, coloured pencils, felt-tipped pens, chalk, brown paper, printer paper and construction paper in a wide spectrum of colours.
- ▶ Make sure that "skin tone" is not confused with "pink". Offer materials in various shades of brown.<sup>5</sup>

**Be sensitive to ascribed status and facilitate other experiences**

**Arts and crafts materials**

<sup>5</sup> The company Lyra offers pencils in various skin tones. For more information and where to order them,

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- ▶ Provide modelling clay in various shades of brown (from light to dark).
- ▶ When one of the children uses a colour that is very similar to his or her own skin, hair or eye colour, use it as an opportunity to praise the child and thus strengthen his or her self-confidence, by saying, for instance, "That's a beautiful (light, medium, dark) brown you're using. It matches your skin colour (or hair or eye colour) very well."

When the children are washing up after painting, you can use it as an opportunity to have them watch what happens to their skin colour as they wash themselves: the colour stays the same – and that's good, because every skin colour is beautiful and special, as are the children themselves. This is especially important when working with Black children because from a very young age they perceive the social classification of "white" as particularly good. Both education professionals and parents have reported many cases of children trying to wash off their skin colour in order to be lighter/white. And white children at first often associate a darker skin colour with "dirt". Through this washing exercise, they can and should learn that there is a wide spectrum of different skin colours, none of which is better than another.

### Make your own anti-bias play materials

Fortunately, anti-bias play materials are becoming increasingly available. But you can also make them yourself. Use basic game ideas – such as memory, puzzles or picture lotto games – and stick or print your own images or photos onto the pieces. One example: display images of the educators, cooks, cleaning staff and administrators of the childcare centre and have the children search for the photos that match them to the things they work with (e.g., pots, telephone, appointment calendars, keys) (cf. Hahn & Henkys 2003, 7).

*Many educators use worksheets for colouring. More often than not, they perpetuate biases regarding the idea of "family". What should a child do who is asked to draw her family members when there is a mother, father and two children on the worksheet? Should she cross out the father she doesn't have? Draw the third sibling into the picture or leave another one out? (cf. Hahn & Henkys 2003, 7) Pay attention to this, especially when you are working with material that has "always" been used and look carefully at whether the diversity of your group of children is represented on those worksheets.*



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Figure 1: The Family Game

*Das Familienspiel*, or “The Family Game” <sup>6</sup>, was developed specifically for anti-bias work with children and adults. It consists of 36 memory card pairs that show a picture of a child and a child with his or her family. The enclosed guide contains information about the ways in which you can use the game aside from the classic memory variant.

One such alternative game is called “Sort and Order”, in which children can identify certain features and find relationships between them. This process provides an opportunity for others to question their ideas and broaden their perspective. Discussions about the families portrayed on the cards can be used in order to start a dialogue with the children. Possible questions could be: Which families look happy? How can you tell? What makes you happy?

“The Family Game is one method for achieving the goals of anti-bias education” (Wagner 2013, 39). However, it requires that the education professionals familiarise themselves with the approach first.

<sup>6</sup> Order at: <http://www.betrifftkindershop.de/Das-Familienspiel>

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**Dolls with stories that correspond to topics that are important to the children**

### Persona Dolls®<sup>7</sup>

Working with Persona Dolls is another anti-bias work method. The education professional working with the Persona Dolls gives them a unique appearance and story. They represent children of different backgrounds and family cultures. Persona Dolls visit children in the childcare centre and get them to talk about their own lives. These interactions teach children to empathise and express their own feelings and experiences. It also makes it easier to talk about difficult subjects, such as conflicts, grief, fears, exclusion or injustice.



**Figure 2:** Persona Dolls

*"The Persona Dolls stimulate children's desire to speak and also help them develop their verbal communication skills. The educator plays an important role as the leader of the conversation. He or she makes sure that all children have the chance to speak. The children should do most of the talking. The educator asks the children open-ended questions, i.e., ones that do not have a simple "yes" or "no" answer: "Some children have siblings; others don't. What's it like in your home?" The educator gives children enough time to think about their answers (just as adults need time to think about their ideas, too). Especially if it's something they haven't experienced for themselves yet. The educator makes sure that no child is laughed at, insulted or excluded by other children: "It is not okay that Verena was not invited to the birthday party because her mother doesn't have enough money to buy a present!" The discussion leader describes people's features in a factually accurate and respectful way. He or she avoids using derogatory or insulting language and does not allow anyone else to, either. Expert knowledge and sensitivity are necessary here because ideas about what is "normal" and who qualifies as "normal" are also reinforced by language. For example: If educators talk about "proper" or "intact" families or about how there is "only" a mother and no father in a family, children get the message that something in their or someone else's family "isn't right". The educator responds positively to the*

<sup>7</sup> For more information on working with Persona Dolls®, visit: <https://situationsansatz.de/persona-dolls-125.html> (in German only) and <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED438490>. Persona Dolls® is a copyrighted term. For better readability, no copyright symbol is used in this paper.

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*children's statements and ideas ("That's a great idea, Beyza!") and summarises what they said. While speaking with the Persona Doll and their educator, the children have the chance to be competent conversation partners. They all have their say, their opinion counts, their suggestions are valuable! Even shy children and children who are not the 'protagonists' of the group can gain the courage to talk about themselves" (Sikcan-Azun 2011, 3).*

### Children's books for anti-bias work

#### Even popular books convey stereotypes

By telling stories, reading aloud or providing books to children, we are encouraging them to confront the world and stimulating early educational processes. Children see the values and norms communicated in the books provided by adults as "right" and (often) adapt their ideas to conform with them. Education professionals should be aware of this fact, i.e., that their value judgements are not only communicated directly to the children but also indirectly through the books and topics they choose to cover (cf. Wagner 2003a, 2). Media such as books strongly contribute to the development and internalisation of negative self-images. Research clearly shows that young children adopt prejudices and stereotypes about themselves and other people because they want to explain the world to themselves. Without deliberate intervention, misinformation and distortions will not change.

Yet in childcare centres there are still many books that reinforce prejudices by conveying stereotypical images and biased ideas rather than the existing diversity. In anti-bias learning environments, it is important to make diversity visible and to make sure a child's appearance, experiences and family are mirrored in books that contain people with diverse features and lifestyles. This bolsters children's feeling of self-worth and the harmony and cohesiveness of the group.

*The KINDERWELTEN project has come up with the following criteria for selecting anti-bias children's books:*

- ▶ *Children with different previous experiences and family cultures should be able to identify with characters in the books.*
- ▶ *The books should encourage children to broaden their horizons and learn something about the diversity of lifestyles.*
- ▶ *The books should help the children to expand their "emotional vocabulary".*
- ▶ *The books should not have any stereotypical or discriminating images or content.*

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- ▶ The books should encourage the children to think critically about prejudices and discrimination.
- ▶ The books should contain examples that give children the courage to defend themselves and others against discrimination and unfairness.

(cf. Fachstelle KINDERWELTEN für Vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung 2005, 3)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A list of children's books recommended for anti-bias work with children can be found at: <https://situationsansatz.de/vorurteilsbewusste-kinderbuecher.html> (in German only)

## 4. Cooperation with families

### Including families

Cooperating with children's families is central to anti-bias work. Many children continue to experience social discrimination because of their family's origins. It is the responsibility of childcare centres to take children's respective reference groups into account, i.e., children must be able to see themselves represented in the centre and also know that their family is welcome and appreciated there (cf. Arbeitskreis Neue Erziehung e.V. 2004, 69). To that end, the basis of the educational work of childcare centres should be the everyday experiences of children and their parents. Therefore, parents should also be considered and involved when creating an anti-bias learning environment. Just as with the children, the families also feel welcome when they see themselves and their children represented in the centre; when there are spaces where they can talk to other parents and feel like they belong.

*Children and families that have distinctive qualities must be represented repeatedly so that they do not feel like they are being put on display or showcased for those qualities. The depiction of a child and his or her family must not under any circumstances be restricted to its distinctive qualities as this can cause further othering. Possible distinctive qualities should always be represented so that similarities between people can be perceived at the same time (cf. Fachstelle KINDERWELTEN für Vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung n.d., 1).*

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### Summary

The creation of an anti-bias learning environment requires a great deal of care in deciding how to furnish and select materials for a childcare centre. Each and every child has the right to belong, because it is only through belonging that a positive development can be assured. As described in this paper, sending biased messages or signals must be avoided and all children should feel that they and their reference groups are welcome in and belong to the centre's community.

Biases and discrimination put a heavy strain on interpersonal relationships for everyone involved – regardless of whether these differentiations produce disadvantages or privileges.

Children – even the youngest of them – cannot be shielded from this reality. Alert and active, “[...] they are constantly taking in information from their environment about the nature of the world, including the social world. And so prejudices and discrimination also become children's concerns” (Wagner et al. 2006, 15). Education professionals are responsible “[...]for recognising] the marginalisation resulting from such processes, as happens with children for whom there are insufficient or no identification opportunities in the childcare centre” (Wagner et. al 2006, 16). Anti-bias work demands sensitive educators who reflect on themselves and their actions, and structure their educational practices accordingly. Anti-bias work is relevant everywhere and for everyone: regardless of whether they live in a big city or a rural town, for children who are monolingual or multilingual, for families with a migrant background or families that have been in Germany for many generations, for children with and without physical handicaps, for Black or white children. Anti-bias work concerns us all (cf. Wagner 2003b, 1) and provides an opportunity to improve the reality of each and every one of us.

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### 5. Questions and further information

#### 5.1 Questions and tasks on engaging with the text



##### QUESTION 1:

What are the basic principles and goals of the Anti-Bias Education Approach and how are these reflected in an anti-bias learning environment?



##### QUESTION 2:

What is meant by "pseudo-diversity", which is, for example, often manifested in educational approaches with a "touristic" orientation? What are the key features of "colourblind" approaches? What are the risks of dealing with diversity in these ways?



##### TASK 1:

Search for "clues" in your practice. Answer the question: Can you tell who comes to the centre every day? Reflect on this question and structure the results of your search based on the following topics:

1. Which clues show who the children in this centre are?
2. Which clues demonstrate dominance?
3. Which clues are missing?

Discuss the results of your analysis with your colleagues at the centre. What opportunities for change and development do you see? Which missing clues could be made visible? And how?



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Figure 1: The Family Game. Fachstelle KINDERWELTEN für Vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung, Berlin, 2010.

Figure 2: Persona Dolls. Fachstelle KINDERWELTEN für Vorurteilsbewusste Bildung und Erziehung, Berlin, n.d.



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### 5.3 Glossary

**Othering** The term “othering” refers to a process in which people/groups with features or qualities that are different from one’s own are classified as “other” and foreign. It involves a specific differentiation of oneself from “the others”, usually to make oneself/one’s own group superior. This rationale is grounded in the idea that “othered” people, because of the features that have been ascribed to them, are clearly different from oneself/one’s own group. “Based on ‘us’ and ‘them’ constructions, the ‘them’ allegedly becomes entirely other, and, in contrast to ‘us’, is considered less emancipated, enlightened, tolerant, democratic, educated, etc.” (IDA NRW 2010, 1). Othering constructs fundamental differences that are negatively judged and emphasised. In socio-psychological discourse, othering is considered one of the key pillars of racism and discrimination.

**Dominant culture** The term “dominant culture”, introduced into the German academic debate by Birgit Rommelspacher, refers to the hegemony of members of a dominant group, i.e., a group that enjoys societal privileges and that denies equal access to societal resources to members of the non-dominant group(s). One key marker of a dominant culture is that its members are often unaware of the ways in which they defend their privileges against those in the sub-dominant group. This is because it often occurs in a subtle way from the perspective of the members of the dominant culture, and they do not recognise their privileges as such. For instance, a white person might automatically be seen as a professionally competent educator, while a Black educator has to prove her competence first (cf. Fachstelle KINDERWELTEN Berlin 2013, 3).

**Family culture** There are many different definitions of the concept of culture. Within the context of anti-bias work, the term “family cultures” is used as opposed to the term “national culture”, i.e., the idea of culture that is often understood to be aligned with nationality. The latter term has proven itself completely unusable as a way of differentiating and describing everyday cultural customs. By contrast, “family culture” is a very individual mosaic made up of many things – values and customs, rhythms of daily life and ways of understanding the world, using language and cultivating relationships – which are not captured by the term “national culture”.

The series KiTa Fachtexte is a collaboration between Alice Salomon University, the FRÖBEL Group and the professional development initiative for early childhood practitioners Weiterbildungsinitiative Frühpädagogische Fachkräfte (WiFF). The series aims to support teaching staff and students at universities and practitioners in crèches and childcare centres by presenting the latest articles for study and practice. All the articles in the series are available online at: [www.kita-fachtexte.de](http://www.kita-fachtexte.de)

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