Bias Starts Early. Let's Start Now: Developing an Anti-Racist, Anti-Bias Book Collection for Infants and Toddlers

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Books that celebrate diversity can interrupt early prejudice and bias. How can educators curate a classroom library that promotes anti-racism and anti-bias while supporting emergent literacy among infants and toddlers?

Bias starts early in life. As early as 3 months old, infants prefer faces from their own racial group over others (Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Fassbender & Lohaus, 2019). By 9 months, infants demonstrate decreased ability to distinguish between other-race faces (Kelly et al., 2009; Quinn et al., 2020). In the toddler years, children express bias using race and other cues (e.g., skin color, hair texture, language use) as deciding factors when selecting toys, choosing friends, or predicting the behavior and social values of others (e.g., Byrd, 2012). Although these biases are based on familiarity and expected in the early years, they can set the foundation for more harmful biases to develop over time (Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Setoh et al., 2019). Counteracting racial and other biases in infancy and toddlerhood is critical for interrupting the early development of biases.

One way to interrupt this process is by sharing books in ways that promote anti-racist/anti-bias perspectives (e.g., Husband, 2019; Nguyen, 2022). Exposure to individuals and images representing social identity out-group members can mitigate the development of bias (e.g., Howard et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2019). Furthermore, books can facilitate interactions between adults and children that promote anti-racism and anti-bias thoughts and behaviors, while supporting emergent literacy. This article provides guidance for building a classroom library and suggestions for engaging in interactions that promote anti-racism and anti-bias.

Early Identity Development

Although self-consciousness typically emerges in the second year, the development of social identity begins in infancy and continues across the lifespan (Williams et al., 2020). Infants are profoundly aware of their environments and their rapidly developing brains process information to make meaning and form an understanding of the world using categorization and the distinction of "what is me" and "what is not me" (Waxman, 2021). Noticing differences and gravitating toward that which is familiar is a natural tendency rooted in evolutionary survival (Waxman, 2021); however, the negative evaluation and rejection of out-groups is harmful. Intentionality is required to disrupt the development of racism and bias in early childhood (e.g., Perszyk et al., 2019).

Criteria for Selecting Books

Through the books we choose and the ways we use them, adults set the stage for interactions with children and the

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meanings we convey. Educators can use books to encourage positive perspectives of diverse people, combatting early prejudice and stereotypical thinking. For example, a book that displays a multitude of children expressing different emotions validates that all groups experience and express a range of needs through their emotions. Thus, being intentional about selecting books that are developmentally appropriate (e.g., Dwyer & Neuman, 2008) and promote diversity, positive representations and inclusivity sets the stage for fostering anti-racism and anti-bias perspectives among young children. When selecting books, it is important to consider books that: (1) include diverse representations; (2) counteract stereotypes; and (3) facilitate conversations that promote inclusivity. Table 1 contains a list of exemplar books (Great First Eight Curriculum Development Team, 2022).

Represent a Range of Backgrounds

When choosing books for young children, educators should consider a diversity of characteristics and identities children may hold and encounter. This diversity includes varied representation of boys, girls, and non-binary characters, family structures, racial, ethnic, cultural, religious, and language backgrounds, and physical features such as skin color, facial features, hair textures, and hairstyles (e.g., Crisp et al., 2016). It is also important to consider the extent to which minoritized people are represented as characters in books.

Selecting books that include representations of people from various backgrounds gives children images of our world's diversity. A review of award-winning children's books, however, found that Black and Latine people were underrepresented in children's books relative to their population, while White males were overrepresented (Adukia et al., 2021). For minoritized children, representation is especially critical since "young children who do not see images of people similar to them… receive the message that they do not matter as much as the people whose images and languages are visible" (Derman-Sparks, 2013, p. 15). Representation at the linguistic level is also key to fostering anti-racist/anti-bias thinking by introducing children to books that feature multiple languages, gestures, pictures, and/or symbols (i.e., translanguaging) to show children linguistic repertoires for expressing ideas.

Books can teach children about diversity through images of salient differences, either with or without text that draws attention to these differences. With respect to skin color, for example, some books have text stating that all skin colors are good, whereas other books simply show that all skin colors are good by telling stories of main characters who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color having positive experiences. For example, books like *We're Different, We're the Same* (Kates & Mathieu, 1992) draw attention to facial features, hairstyles and hair textures. Conversely, books like *Whose Toes are Those?* (Asim & Pham, 2006) do not name the character's brown skin, dark brown hair and eyes, but the illustrations show these features in a positive and celebratory way. Both approaches are important as children gain information from what is said and what is seen (Bishop, 2012).

When deciding on books, educators should consider the extent to which books allow children to "see me" and "know you" by including representation of characters from a range of backgrounds. By selecting books that, collectively, have a representation of identities, educators provide children with opportunities to see and learn about people alike and different from themselves. We say "collectively" because it is fine—in fact healthy—to have a book that, for example, features only Black characters or features a family structure with a mom and dad. However, across a *collection* of books, there should be diversity in the backgrounds and families represented.
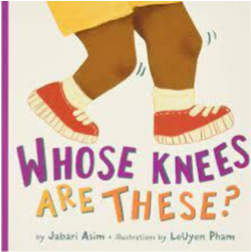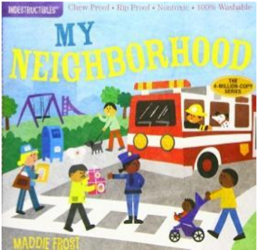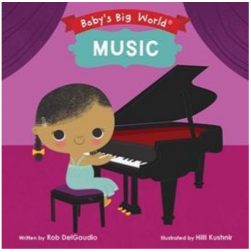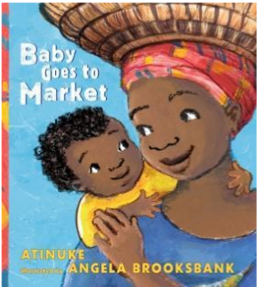
Counteract Stereotypical Representations

Deciding whether a book contains stereotypical representations requires that educators review the book closely to identify stereotypical ideas and images and hurtful behaviors directed at individuals' racialized, gendered, or other identities (e.g., Derman-Sparks et al., 2020) so that the book's pictures and content are accurate. Ideally, a collection of books should include representations that challenge biased images and concepts, rather than reinforce stereotypes. It may be unrealistic, however, to ensure that every book in the classroom is free of any stereotypes. For example, some books will include a nurturing mother figure, which can be considered stereotypical, but we would not want to eliminate all such books from the classroom. If books do contain content that may be considered stereotypical, these books may provide opportunities to engage in developmentally appropriate conversations with children that challenge the stereotypical portrayal.

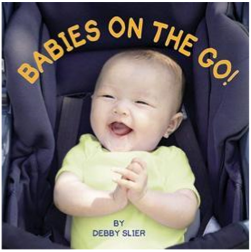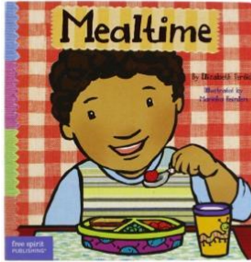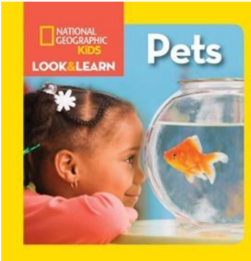### Facilitate Conversations on Inclusivity
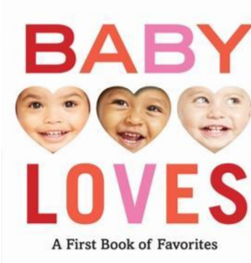
Books can promote anti-racism and anti-bias thinking and behaviors by stimulating positive conversations about the people and content depicted. From an anti-bias and anti-racist lens, book-shares (i.e., reading, looking at, and manipulating books) with infants and toddlers should include affirming language and positive images that highlight unique and special aspects of children's identities. Talking to children about the visual differences they already notice (e.g., Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2009; Waxman, 2021) helps

Table 1
Book Exemplars

Book	Description
	Whose Knees Are These? by Jabari Asim and LeUyen Pham (2006) *Whose Knees Are These?* features a brown-skinned child to support infants and toddlers learning about the parts of their bodies
	Global Babies by Global Fund for Children (2007) *Global Babies* includes diverse faces of babies from different countries in a celebration of global heritage
	My Neighborhood by Maddie Frost (2018) *My Neighborhood* promotes anti-bias with representations of characters from a range of backgrounds without stereotyping based on gender or racial/ethnic background
	Music by Rob DelGaudio and Hilli Kushnir (2020) *Music* encourages learning about musical concepts while introducing instruments, words, and representations of characters with multiple skin colors and hairstyles
	Baby Goes to Market by Atinuke and Angela Broosbank (2017) *Baby Goes to Market* provides an opportunity for learning about a familiar experience of food shopping in a Nigerian marketplace

(continued)

Table 1
Book Exemplars (*continued*)

Book	Description
	Babies on the Go! By Debby Slier (2013) *Babies on the Go!* introduces infants and toddlers to all the ways they can get around including diverse faces of babies engaging in the day-to-day wonders of their world
	Mealtime by Elizabeth Verdick and Marieka Heinlen (2011) *Mealtime* features diverse characters engaging in the prosocial experience of mealtime using simple text and illustrations
	Pets by Ruth A. Musgrave and Sanjida Rashid (2018) *Pets* introduces infants and toddlers to family pets with age-appropriate text and colorful photos of animals, children, and families
	Love Makes a Family by Sophie Beer (2018) *Love Makes a Family* encourages social–emotional learning utilizing the experience of loving families who may appear different but share the common bond of love
	Baby Loves: A First Book of Favorites by Abrams Appleseed (2019) *Baby Loves: A Book of First Favorites* promotes conversations using colorful pictures of objects, foods, and racially diverse infants and toddlers

to normalize these discussions outside of book-shares. For example: "*How many people are in this family? Some families are small and some are large.*"; "*See the beautiful curly brown hair. Where is your hair? Who do we know that has beautiful brown curly hair?*" Educators should select books that promote opportunities for conversations with children focused on elevating acceptance of self and others and developing a sense of belonging in relationships with one another.

It is imperative that educators are conscious about noticing opportunities for these conversations. A book with pictures of different babies, varying in skin tone, hair texture, or facial features provides an opportunity for dialogue about the diversity of people. For example, an educator may comment on physical differences of the children in the book (e.g., "*Look at all the beautiful babies. This baby has curly brown, Afro-puffs and brown skin. I see another baby that has blond pigtails and tan colored skin.*"). Describing skin tones with food names, however, is controversial. We suggest using colors that the children will recognize (e.g., brown, tan, beige) and/or adding a modifier to offer gradients in skin tones (e.g., dark brown, light brown).

Since typically developing infants and toddlers notice visual differences (e.g., Bar-Haim et al., 2006; Kelly et al., 2009; Waxman, 2021), talking to them about physical features normalizes differences and teaches children to appreciate diversity in others. Similarly, when educators notice book content reflecting Eurocentric middle-class values, they can offer additional perspectives (e.g., "*The family in this story lived in a big house, and all the children had their own room. Many families live in different kinds of homes and lots of children share rooms with their siblings or other people in their families.*"). Engaging in these kinds of conversations encourages anti-racist and anti-bias thinking among children.

Conclusion

Through book-sharing, early childhood educators have multiple opportunities to foster anti-racism and anti-bias in young children from the first years of life while also supporting children's emergent literacy. Exposure through books to positive and diverse representations of people can instill in children respect and appreciation for themselves and others who differ from them. By being intentional about selecting books for classroom libraries that are consistent with anti-racism and anti-bias perspectives, educators help to create kind and welcoming classroom communities.

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