

Family Development

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College of Education, Center for Family and Community Partnerships



Focus on Diversity

Investigating multicultural awareness

In this issue:

Delving into Diversity: Going beneath the surface

You Think You Know Us - Think Again:
Being careful with assumptions based on stereotypes

Classroom Conversations: Helping children understand and value differences

Rethinking Classroom Celebrations:
Alternative ways to honor customs and cultures

Teaching Young Children About Diversity:
Creating a classroom community that honors diversity

Introduction

With pronounced demographic changes in the population of the United States over the past ten to fifteen years, many teachers have found themselves in schools and classrooms which mirror society's transformation. The University of New Mexico's Family Development Program is committed to building bridges between school and home in order for children to flourish. A critical challenge teachers have is to understand and respect their students' families, their

folkways, and culture. No matter how sensitive teachers might be to other cultures, bias in their approach to children and curriculum may still occur. To complicate the situation even more there are no universal guidelines or solutions that help a teacher to deal with ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity in the classroom. We present this Journal as a resource with the hope that it will stimulate discussion among teachers and families. ♥

Delving into Diversity

by Paula Steele

We talk of celebrating cultural diversity. Perhaps we make an attempt by recognizing various ethnic holidays. Or we engage in art activities from different lands. We try cooking foods or asking parents to bring in dishes from their kitchens, typical of their home cooking. And probably we do these things with an expectation in mind. We think we know what a particular culture is like.

So if we have some Mexican heritage children in class we'll read about César Chávez and expect to eat enchiladas. Our students from Viet Nam, well, what do we know about Viet Nam really, except we fought a contentious war there. Oh, and they probably eat rice and vegetables. As for a personality—who is a famous Vietnamese person? We might have a Native American or two, or several, in class. Wouldn't weaving be great?! And we can make fry bread. February is Black History month, so we know that talking about Martin Luther King, Jr. will handle that ethnic group. We'll read some books, but we won't really know or understand who we're reading about. For that matter, what about the white children in our classes? How do we celebrate their various cultures? Do they even have a culture?

Maybe a good place to start is to gain an understanding of what cultural diversity is, why it's a topic of import, and why it's something to celebrate. The intent here is to help get beyond surface recognition to go deeper into the meaning and the broad implications. What effect does our understanding, or lack of it, have on how we respond and interact with a variety of people? What unknown assumptions do we have that affect how we bring diversity into the classroom? Let's look at culture and diversity as topics that when more consciously explored, can

be elements of the classroom experience that help all students, and their families, feel included.

Every culture has its values, beliefs, and ways of relating which are most frequently transmitted within the family setting. Just as one learns a language without conscious effort, so too are culture cues absorbed into the fabric of one's being. For this reason it is important to consider that any given way of responding to a situation is one of many possible ways. It is neither better nor worse than another cultural response. What matters is that one begins to have an awareness that a response that fits you individually, in the context of family, or in the dominant societal culture, is not necessarily a fitting response for someone else. And it's important for teachers to double-check their reactions to a situation. Consider that a family practice you question could be a cultural norm. Perhaps if you think about it as different, rather than wrong, you'll be more comfortable approaching the family with questions about their ways.

Sonia Nieto, of the University of Massachusetts, defines culture as:

“...the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created and shared by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors (... a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and/or religion), and how these are transformed by those who share them.

Culture includes more than language, ethnicity, and race. Social class and gender also play a role in explaining cultural differences. The “...*group of people bound together...*” may in its simplest terms be a family with its own set of values and traditions.



In thinking about cultural diversity Isaura Barrera, of the University of New Mexico, suggests that we question such assumptions as:

- ♥ **People have an innate culture they are born with and that defines who they are, mentally and socially.** This assumption leads to labeling and stereotyping. For example, the stereotype that Asians are quiet, studious, and good at math puts undue pressure on individuals to live up to a stereotype that may not fit them at all. Furthermore, it lumps all Asians into one ethnic category, rather than recognizing that Japanese, Koreans, Cambodians, etc. are distinct ethnic entities.
- ♥ **Ethnic identity defines specific behavioral and language characteristics.** This assumes that there is a set of group-defined characteristics. Yet, someone who defines himself as Navajo and does not observe traditional Navajo practices or speak Navajo is not the same as a Navajo who lives on the reservation and does.
- ♥ **Cultural diversity is the “problem,” a risk factor that must somehow be lessened or reduced.** This assumption limits a teacher’s ability to respect diverse practices and to see their potential as positive resources. It is not cultural diversity that is the problem. How one responds to it and whether accommodations are made can make the difference.

Now, think back to the first paragraph. There are lots of assumptions. A meaningful connection between the celebration and the celebrated is lacking. Perhaps what is

needed is to first connect with the parents and families of the kiddos in class to gain a clearer understanding of who they are. Then that information and knowledge can be integrated into everyday practice in the classroom setting.

This could pose a challenge. You may find that your beliefs and those of another family’s are in opposition. You may find that your idea of developmentally appropriate practice is confronted. What do you do then? Forge ahead with your own agenda? Do you try to make the parent understand your point of view? Do you accept and respect another way of being and value that family’s point of view? These are questions to be pondered. And they are points of consideration for discussion with the families of the children in your care.

Now that assumptions are being questioned, turn a critical eye towards curricula, assessment practices, instructional strategies, and materials to ensure that the diverse heritages of students are included. In this way, you can more readily assure that the identities of all students are valued, not just the ones with whom you can easily connect. You will, in effect, be celebrating cultural diversity in a deeper way by focusing on students’ abilities and differences in the daily celebration that is learning. ♥

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You Think You Know Us – Think Again

by Diana Montoya

When we think of culture we often think of celebrations, food, dress, traditions, and customs that identify a particular ethnic group. It is easy to make assumptions about families based on these visible characteristics. Often, we may assign a group of people to the same cultural box. We might think that because a number of families have Hispanic surnames, they will have the same expectations. But we can't lump all families into one ethnic box and assume that they think, dress, and prepare food based on our stereotypical understanding.

It is important for people who work with families and their children to get to know their individual family folkways as well as their cultural expressions. We must recognize that they come to our classrooms with traditions that are unique to their particular families. Just because families share a cultural heritage, does not mean that their celebrations will be uniformly the same. One family may engage in the tradition of making *cascaras* for Easter while another does not. Some families are comfortable with having their child bask in the limelight, while others believe that children should take a more modest position in the classroom.

These aspects of family life are an integral component of the child's background. The family rules that are guidelines for behavior are developed in tandem with beliefs. Roles defined within the home may emerge differently within every family. As each family develops its own set of beliefs, traditions, and ways of being, it is essential for caregivers and teachers to talk with parents. Let them know about your program. Ask if there are any aspects of it that may be counter to their interests or their beliefs in child rearing. Invite them to educate you about their folkways so that you can better connect with them and with the child. You will be letting the family know that you honor their expertise.

I'd like to share a few personal examples of how easy it is to make assumptions and of the impact that can have.

I was born and raised in Denver, Colorado in a Hispanic family. We shared many of the traditions one thinks of as common to the Hispanic culture. I learned how to make tortillas. We listened to *rancheras* at parties and celebrations. Social gatherings took place often and included extended family. However, English was the dominant language in my community; consequently I learned very little Spanish. When I moved to New Mexico I was surprised to find that many of my new acquaintances expected me to speak Spanish. I felt ashamed that I couldn't.

When I married my husband, whose family is from New Mexico, I felt that we were the perfect cultural match since we're both Hispanic. Yet, I continually discovered that our family traditions were very different. And, of course, his were wrong! It took me twenty-five years to recognize that they were really just different, and no less valid. I had made assumptions based on my personal background that all Hispanics shared the same traditions. I had put us into one cultural box.

Even people who share a cultural history make assumptions about each other. So it's especially important for those who don't share a cultural heritage to be sensitive to differences that may arise. When we presume to know about others' cultural and family backgrounds we may find that we cause discomfort for families and for ourselves. Getting to know individual families and building a relationship with them can give us insights to their rules and traditions. We may not understand or agree with them, but by respecting their customs, it opens us to different perspectives and a new way to look at their world.

By honoring the families of the children we care for we can more readily establish a partnership that is based on our mutual desire for their children's success. ♥

Classroom Conversations

by Ellen Biderman

A teacher overheard the following conversation among children playing in the sandbox.

Joey: Wow, your hair is really fuzzy; my mom says I'm lucky to have such nice straight hair.

Alisha: Well, I gotta daddy and you don't got one.

Joey: You talk funny.

Susan: I had a hamburger for lunch yesterday.

Joey: I don't eat meat.

Alisha: NEVER?

Joey: Never.

Susan and Alisha: WOW, that's weird!

As the children continued playing, the teacher felt lucky that she didn't have to intervene. She knew that would have required a potentially difficult conversation about differences. Instead, she vowed to focus a lesson on how everyone is alike and can get along with one another. But is it enough to only teach children how all people are alike and should be nice to each other?

In fact, this teacher missed a "teachable moment" to help children understand differences and counter emerging biases. In 1989, Louise Derman-Sparks and a group of teachers at Pacific Oaks College in California formed the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force. As a result of their work, the National Association for the Education of Young Children published the Anti-Bias Curriculum. Thus began an ongoing and important discussion among parents and teachers of young children about responding to children's questions concerning race, gender, and other diversities.

The Anti-Bias Curriculum provides an active, problem-solving approach to challenging prejudice, stereotyping, and bias in our society. It is not merely about multicultural awareness but focuses on changing behaviors and attitudes. It is based on the value that differences are good and includes specific techniques and content. The four main objectives of anti-bias education are to foster in each child the ability to:

- ♥ construct a confident self-identity;
- ♥ confront and challenge inequality and injustice;
- ♥ engage in comfortable, empathetic interactions with people from diverse backgrounds; and
- ♥ be a critical thinker.

Many educators believe that children are colorblind and unaware of differences. In fact, youngsters as early as



age two are aware of gender, followed by skin color, hair color, disabilities, and ethnic identity. We take pride when children sort colors, shapes, and letters. We even ask them to put value on their distinctions (i.e. my favorite color is purple). It follows that children also are able to categorize and place value according to skin color, hair texture, eye shape, and more. However, they can base these values about differences on limited information, or worse, misinformation, such as the notion that one type of hair is better than another. Children can easily form stereotypes or negative attitudes about those they perceive as "other." And these can become biases embedded in children's subconscious, thus forming the beginnings of prejudice.

It is important that children understand that while all people share commonalities, there are also real differences in looks and lifestyle. When we tell our children "we are really all alike" we may be implying that similarities are the only acceptable traits. It is easy to say, "I don't think of you as different from me." But we are not all alike. To ignore the truth that lies in difference can be very insulting to those who are in the minority.

The teacher in our example worried that pointing out differences among children would lead to the development of prejudice. In fact, children don't need teachers to point out differences; they already observe them. They have many theories about race that often develop from an artificial norm established by the social group that has the most power and privilege. This "elite" group defines others as inferior based on their differences compared to them. Youngsters form ideas about their own identity, and attitudes about others, from observation and social experiences.

Children need help understanding why certain differences make them feel uncomfortable. Parents and teachers should give accurate, developmentally appropriate information about differences. We should encourage children's honest questions and enable them to feel pride in their individual looks and cultural orientation without judging others. Helping children learn about prejudice can be particularly delicate if a child's parents or siblings have not given accurate or non-judgmental information to the child. As teachers, we are challenged to instruct children about diversity while still being sensitive to how we show respect for the child's family.

The teacher hearing the sandbox conversation had several options. She could and did ignore the conversation. However, this response does not help to alleviate discriminatory behavior. She also could have said, "Joey doesn't mean his hair is better." But that would only have served to excuse Joey's remarks. He wouldn't understand that what he said was hurtful and why. What's more, he wouldn't have understood that hair texture is an example of an artificial difference that can be used to judge others.

She also had some proactive alternatives. The first was to provide developmentally appropriate activities. In this case, with four-year-olds, she could take photos of each child's hair to show the variety of hair represented in the classroom. She could start a unit on foods and what people eat, inviting families to share favorite recipes. And because Joey has two moms, she could read books that address different kinds of families. Integrating these activities into the classroom throughout the year makes diversity a natural part of life.

Finally, she could confront what is being said. If Joey had said he thinks that people with fuzzy hair are bad or dirty, the teacher has a responsibility to answer directly with real information. In any case, she could bring up the fact that there are those who think fuzzy-haired people are not as good as straight-haired people and work to counter an opinion that is rooted in prejudice.

Bias is not fair, and children have very strong feelings about fairness. Thus, implementing an anti-bias approach in the classroom builds on the child's developing understanding of fairness. A major task of young children is learning to take another's point of view—to understand that others think differently than they do. Teachers can nurture this development of empathy by creating a rich, anti-bias environment. Such an environment should include diverse information about all kinds of people through books, songs, posters, food, dress-up clothes, games, speakers and guests, as well as open, honest discussions about the human experience. For example, we know that all people eat, play, dress, work, and have homes. Exploring these topics throughout the year can

allow children to understand that differences arise not from what is right or wrong, but from tradition, environment, genetics, and more. Implementing an anti-bias curriculum cuts across all activities in the classroom and is multi-dimensional. As the example showed, many issues can come up in one simple conversation.

To fully implement an anti-bias approach, teachers need time and support—time to evaluate materials; time to observe children's play and interaction patterns; and then time to plan changes to increase diversity in the environment. Teachers also need support from colleagues and parents. They need to engage the colleagues and the parents they work with in an on-going discussion about their responsibility to assure that children can fully develop to their potential, be comfortable with who they are, and be able to stand up for fairness for themselves and others.

The most challenging part of education in a diverse society is acknowledging that we, as teachers, view the world through our own cultural lens as well. In the opening example, the teacher may believe that meat is a primary source of protein and vegetarians live an unhealthy lifestyle that can affect children's ability to concentrate. Realizing this, she could try to understand why families choose this lifestyle; it could be personal preference or religious belief. Then, based on her new understanding and her relationship with the family, she can develop an ongoing curriculum about food and culture.

Reflecting on our cultural assumptions and perspectives, identifying and owning our biases, and working to change them is hard work. This requires us to become constant learners ourselves. However, the time we spend will allow us to become anti-bias educators and enrich our teaching and relationships with families. ♥

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A Reason to Celebrate

by Dorothy Kerwin

Holidays can be a time to learn and connect and broaden our cultural experiences or they can be a time of stress, frustration, and alienation. In the classroom, it is important to think about which holidays you celebrate, how you celebrate them, and why. Many people enjoy celebrating holidays because they can be a magical time of joy that connects us with friends and families, our cultural roots, and spiritual values. But we must remember: different cultures celebrate different holidays; the same holiday may be celebrated in many different ways; in some families, holidays are not celebrated at all. When we honor these differences with well-planned, developmentally appropriate activities, we create a sense of inclusion that enriches the lives of the entire school community.

Holidays provide a wonderful opportunity to build relationships with families. In the beginning of the school year, gather input from families about how they feel holidays should be celebrated through the use of surveys, meetings, and/or informal conversations. You may receive diverse responses that differ from your own ideas. With dialog and understanding, this can be a good opportunity for sharing, listening, and resolving differences. When a family does not celebrate any holidays, ask them for suggestions on how to best meet their child's needs during times of festivities.

Families are wonderful resources. Ask if a family member would be willing to teach a craft or cook a recipe with the class. When people share personal traditions students learn about other cultural celebrations. As Wendy Wyman, a long-time early childhood educator observes, "When you respect a family, you will respect their culture."



As you consider which holidays to celebrate, remember that for a young child to feel valued, it is important that her home life be reflected in the classroom. All holidays need not be celebrated, but each child should have at least one of her family holidays or traditions recognized. Give each holiday equal weight and avoid the pitfall of making some holidays seem "normal" and some holidays seem "exotic." By law, religious symbols must be used as instructional tools, not as decorations. If you are interested in celebrating a holiday that is not part of your community, make sure that you do your research so that accurate information is shared. Whenever possible, try to gather information from people who celebrate that tradition and invite them to participate.

Be open to combining holidays to create a unifying celebration. Some classrooms celebrate the theme of 'light' throughout the December holidays. Activities include making and/or decorating candles, having a bonfire, studying and reading books about the sun and the moon, as well as sharing ways different cultures include light in their holiday practices.

Another way to include festivities in your classroom is to create celebrations with your students that are meaningful to them. These can include anything from Backwards Day or Pajama Day, to a beach party in January, to celebrating the first rainfall of the year, to a welcoming ceremony for when a new student joins the classroom.

Some curricula use holidays as a way to learn about other cultures. This approach often fails to give an accurate representation of how people live. If someone from outer space were to drop in on Halloween, how would they perceive our society? These portrayals are often how stereotypes are perpetuated. Or they can provide

the opportunity to question and explore stereotypes. With older children, it can be helpful to discuss different perspectives that other cultures might have of a holiday such as Thanksgiving. With younger children's undeveloped sense of time, it is more developmentally appropriate to concentrate on the theme of thankfulness behind the Thanksgiving holiday rather than its history.

It is amazing how many master teachers forget their knowledge of developmentally appropriate practices in the excitement of holiday festivities. Ask yourself the purpose of each activity and try not to get caught up in creating holiday products. Use holiday items to explore math and science inquiries. For example, cut open pumpkins and gourds. How are they alike? How are they different? Describe the scent. Count the seeds. Bring in boughs and pinecones from different kinds of evergreens to examine. Keep activities simple and inexpensive for your sake, and the sake of families. Do not forget activities that are always popular such as stories, poems, and songs. Try adding holiday colors and scents to playdough to create a calming, yet festive feeling that meets the children's needs.

Classroom celebrations can take many forms from elaborate festivals, to holidays by habit, to focusing on themes

such as caring, friendship, fairness, and justice. These can be celebrated throughout the school year and contribute to an inclusive classroom community.

The challenge for teachers is to examine their holiday practices and make conscious choices. When they welcome families, avoid stereotypes, and keep activities focused on children's needs, holidays can be a reason to celebrate. ♥

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In a world where kids have access to stimulation from the Internet, video games, and TV on a near-constant basis, it sometimes takes creative techniques to teach kids a given subject. Teachers are pressed to come up with innovative ways to communicate information to students, and to develop projects that will interest kids and keep them learning.

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Janet Escobedo received a grant for her project involving sand trays to enhance reading skills. Escobedo is a teacher at an elementary school in Rio Rancho. Over 300 students utilized a sand tray and a baggie of articles, such as feathers, rocks, figurines, shells and cars to "build a world" and tell a story about their world. As a result of Ms. Escobedo's project, reading scores increased dramatically compared to non-participating students. In addition, Escobedo's students learned to be more respectful of others.

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Teaching Young Children About Diversity

by Lois Vermilya

Be the change you wish to create.

Mahatma Gandhi

As teachers we have to be deliberate in making choices for a classroom approach that helps children understand prejudice. It can be a tough issue because we sometimes lack confidence for how to talk about it with children. We also know how difficult it is to address hurtful remarks given the fact that racism or sexism are rarely confronted with real honesty in our larger society. These realities make it even more important that we teach our children about tolerance when they are young. We have to help them learn how damaging prejudice is both through our words and through our actions. We also have to provide them with lots of ways to explore differences so that they can develop empathy for others while gaining new skills to live in a diverse world.

What are practical things we can do to help children understand diversity?

Here are some guidelines drawn together from some of the experts in the field. These can help you send messages to children about your respect for who they are and your belief in the importance of honoring everyone.

Create a sense of community that expresses openness and respect

♥ **It's important to ensure that children feel safe in expressing their ideas and views.** We want to create opportunities for children to ask questions openly, make observations, and then be willing to discuss challenging issues with them as they arise.

♥ **We can't ignore diversity concerns when they come up.** There's too much at stake. And taking no action is in fact, an action. It's better to address inappropriate remarks right away. We can respond with understanding while also helping children think about how they are different from and similar to others.

♥ **We also have to support children when they are victims of prejudice.** They need to be able to count on us for emotional support. We can use these moments to help children learn how to stand up for themselves in ways that promote understanding.

♥ **How we behave impacts how open children will be.** We have to be careful with our own attitudes. This requires us to examine our own biases and actions that show our discomfort about differences. We need to model principles of anti-bias if we want children to learn to do the same.



Be intentional about how your learning environment honors diversity

♥ **Children receive strong messages about their own identity and develop attitudes toward who they are, based on what they see around them.** One way to help them feel positive about their own racial and cultural background is to reflect diversity in their surroundings. It is important to display images of all the children and families in your program. If your group of children is not diverse, special sensitivity to showing images of children from your community or state helps them see differences.

♥ **Teachers need to choose images that are culturally appropriate and historically accurate.** Photos brought in by the children and their families are great choices. We have to be careful, however, to not use materials and visuals that promote stereotypes. Parents can be helpful in working with you to think through these choices. We want to make sure that the images reflect the richness of the culture. While traditional dress may honor special occasions, it is also important to include everyday images of people to show the diversity of roles in gender and daily life.

♥ **Take extra care to include different family configurations, including interracial families, single**



parent families, blended families, as well as others. Be sure to include different age groups too, all the way from infants to the elderly.

♥ **There are a lot of wonderful materials we can choose to celebrate the many rich traditions of cultures throughout the world.** Try to keep expanding your selections of music, musical instruments, artwork, fabric to decorate, and play materials for the learning areas. Have a keen eye for how your materials introduce children to another culture or express things that are important from their own family background.

Evaluate children's books with extra care about the messages they send

Louise Derman-Sparks in the Anti-Bias Curriculum provides a good checklist that helps us analyze children's books to be aware of how they do or don't promote understanding of diversity. These guidelines heighten our sensitivity to hidden messages about racism and sexism that sometimes go unnoticed.

♥ **Check the illustrations:** Look for tokenism: consider if the portrayal of minority characters look accurate or whether they all have the same facial features except for color. Look for stereotypes (a negative generalization about a particular group): for example, all scientists are funny-looking, white males with glasses and lab coats. Look hard at the pictures. Who's doing what? Is it only the boys who climb the trees, while the girls wait on the ground?

♥ **Check the storyline:** Be especially careful to evaluate if behaviors of the dominant culture become the stan-

dard of success for all. People have different ideas of what success looks like. Ensure that you present a variety of success stories from a garage mechanic to an astronaut. Look to see how problems are resolved. Or are they even resolved; if so, who resolves them?

♥ **Look at the lifestyles:** Evaluate how people are portrayed to decide if it helps children learn about diversity. Does the story portray Native Americans as one undistinguished collective rather than paying attention to specific Indian Nation characteristics? Be careful with over-simplification that can sometimes make people from different cultural backgrounds simply look quaint as in depictions of Mexicans in oversized sombreros and serapes.

♥ **Weigh the relationships between people:** Look to see who possesses power and who doesn't. Check to see who is given the supporting or subservient roles. Evaluate how family relationships are portrayed. Do the parents share an equal role in family dynamics?

♥ **Consider the author's or illustrator's background and perspective:** Know who the author and illustrator are. Does the storyline flow from personal experience or is a white person writing Black or Hispanic stories? Also decide what they are trying to say, both with the story and the pictures. Does it promote diversity and celebrate cultural differences or does it reinforce negative stereotypes?

♥ **Watch for loaded words:** Words with offensive overtones are considered loaded. Words like "savage, primitive, lazy, superstitious, backwards" often can be racist. Look carefully for language and adjectives that demean or exclude girls, women, and minority people. For example firemen instead of firefighters, or assuming that the accepted term is Hispanic, Latino, or Chicano when they might prefer one over another or simply their country of origin.

♥ **Consider the effects on a child's self-image:** As you read the book, imagine the children in your class – think about how boys and girls, as well as those from different cultural backgrounds, are represented. Will the story have a positive effect for every child? If not, don't read it.

Teaching children about diversity takes time and care. It means that we have to be learners ourselves so that we consider the harm that prejudice creates, even when

unintentional. There are many opportunities to nurture a world that celebrates differences. Our daily acts are what create our children's future. ♥

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- ♥ Emergent Curriculum: Following the Child's Lead
- ♥ Early Language, Early Literacy
- ♥ Discovering Together through Play
- ♥ The Role of Play in Developing Literacy
- ♥ Using Recycled Materials in Music and Art
- ♥ Outdoor Learning in Nature
- ♥ Early Childhood Math and Science with GEMS
- ♥ Managing the Learning Environment

Child Development

- ♥ Child Development from Birth through Age 5
- ♥ Understanding Children's Behavior and Temperament
- ♥ Developing a Sense of Responsibility in Children
- ♥ Intentional Discipline
- ♥ How Witnessing Violence Affects Young Children, Part I
- ♥ How Witnessing Violence Affects Young Children, Part II

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