Reducing Stereotypes and Promoting Inclusivity in Childhood
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Road map
1. Why do children develop stereotypes?
2. What are the consequences?
3. What can schools do about it?
Millions of children around the world experience unfair treatment, but children are also perpetrators of interpersonal discrimination. Child development research can help us understand where stereotypes and discrimination come from and how to reduce them.

Misconception #1

“Prejudice is an adult problem, children are colorblind”

Children pay attention to other people’s race (and other identities) from very early in life.

What happens when?

- **Infancy** - Recognize gender, race
- **Preschool** - Gender, race stereotypes start
- **Elementary** - Wealth/poverty, sexual orientation stereotypes start
- **Middle School** - Stereotypes depend on peer group expectations
- **High School** - Identity development - Stereotypes depend on peers and self
Misconception #2

“Children only learn stereotypes if their parents are biased”

Parents and caregivers have a very important influence on children’s beliefs, but they are not the only source.

Why do children develop stereotypes?

Children sift through conflicting messages and adopt the beliefs that fit their experiences and interpretation of the world.

Misconception #3

“Talking about diversity with students is a nice ‘add on’, but it’s not that important for academic outcomes”

Promoting inclusivity provides students with social skills they’ll need to succeed now and in the future.
Why should we promote inclusivity?

**More strengths**
- Perspective taking
- Empathy
- Personal identity
- Resistance to social pressure
- Communication skills
- Conflict resolution skills
- Academic achievement

**Fewer risks**
- Behavioral problems
- Dropout
- Stress and anxiety

These strengths help students in the present, and give them a crucial foundation for future academic, civic, and workplace success.

What kinds of discrimination do children face?
What does bias look like in childhood?

Verbal
- Teasing, name-calling, sexual comments, threatening

Physical
- Hitting, kicking, spitting, tripping, destroying property, hand gestures

Social
- Leaving someone out on purpose, telling others not to be friends, spreading rumors, embarrassing

How common are these experiences?

70% of racial or ethnic minority adolescents have experienced discrimination from peers because of their race or ethnicity
- 10% say this happens frequently

80% of LGB adolescents have experienced discrimination from peers because of their sexual orientation
- 10% avoid going to school because of safety concerns

Where does this happen?

Most instances of peer discrimination happen at school
Students say it happens out of sight of teachers and staff (e.g., playground, hallway, cafeteria)
What are the consequences?

Experiencing discrimination puts students at elevated risk for:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Social withdrawal
- Depression
- Academic disengagement
- Classroom behavioral problems
- Skipping school
- Drops in grades

What can schools do about it?

Stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are not inevitable.

Schools play an important role in promoting inclusivity!

What can schools do about it?

Schools can:
1. Establish a safe and inclusive environment
2. Seriously consider representation
3. Encourage friendships between students of diverse backgrounds
Establish an inclusive environment

Policy Level
- Add gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. to anti-bullying policies
- Decrease less-monitored spaces (e.g., playground, hallway, cafeteria)

Will it work?
Research Example: When schools add protections for LGBTQ students to their anti-bullying policies:
- LGBTQ students hear fewer homophobic remarks, feel safer
- Non-LGBTQ students more likely to say excluding someone who is LGBTQ is unfair
- Teachers and staff more likely to intervene to stop bias-based bullying

Establish an inclusive environment

Training Level
- Train teachers and staff to recognize discrimination in childhood, and what to do if they see it
- Encourage students to speak up if they see discrimination
Will it work?

Research Example #1: When students know that teachers will take action against discrimination:
- Racial and ethnic minority students experience less name-calling, teasing, social exclusion

Research Example #2: When students do intervene to stop bias-based bullying:
- They are generally successful within 10 seconds

Yes!

Seriously consider representation

Policy Level
- Consider whether students in schools, classes, and after-school activities are as diverse as the communities they serve

An issue with a long history

- Many districts are "re-segregating"
  - Across the country, schools today are as segregated as they were in the 70s
- African-American and Latinx students are especially likely to attend schools where over 90% of students are the same race or ethnicity
- The states with the most highly segregated schools are:
  - California, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, New York, Texas
Will it work?

Yes!

Research Example: In schools with greater racial and ethnic diversity, African-American, Latinx, Asian-American, and European-American students:

- Experience less exclusion and harassment
- Feel less lonely
- Feel more safe

Seriously consider representation

Curriculum Level

- Integrate discussions about gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. directly into the curriculum

Won’t pointing out differences make students biased?

No!

Many adults have this worry, however:

- Children already notice differences between people
- They need caring adults to help them understand their social world
- Constructive conversations about race, religion, etc., do not make students prejudiced
Will it work?

Yes!

Research Example #1: Students who have more conversations about recognizing different cultural perspectives:
• Express less ethnic and religious prejudice

Research Example #2: Teachers are more likely to launch these conversations:
• When they feel their colleagues and administrators support them

Encourage friendships

Policy and Curriculum Level
• Provide opportunities for students to work with peers who differ from them in gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.
  — e.g., class assignments, after-school clubs

How do I do that?

Make sure:
1. The interaction is cooperative (not competitive)
2. Students of all backgrounds “come in” with equal status
3. The whole group is working together on a shared goal
4. Students know that adults support friendship formation
Will it work?

Yes!

Research has shown that friendships between students of different backgrounds are extremely effective at reducing stereotypes and prejudice:

• This works for students of all ages
• In schools with all levels of diversity
• Friendships promote inclusivity by increasing perspective-taking and reducing anxiety

Final thoughts

There are many ways for schools to help reduce stereotypes and promote inclusivity.

Now is the best time to start!

Questions?

Take a look at the Extra Resources handout
Reach out any time: laura.elenbaas@rochester.edu

Have a specific question you’d like to explore in your school or district?
Consider contacting a researcher!
DON'T FORGET to fill out the SURVEY and RATE THIS SESSION by using the CONVENTION APP.