

Trans Awareness Week

BY ERIN CETERA

As many of us continue our work on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, it becomes clear that complexity exists, even in preschools and other early childhood programs. Families rely on early childhood professionals to accept and educate their children; children rely on teachers to understand, care for, and protect them. Teachers rely on their colleagues and administrators to support them and work together to discuss and decipher the complex issues that emerge.

What happens when circumstances arise that challenge teachers' personal beliefs? In some cases, when children's expressed desires conflict with the ideas of the adults around them, the adults are called on to check themselves. They must acknowledge the external, societal influences on themselves, families, the classroom community, and their programs. Then they have to determine a course of action that is caring and inclusive.

As a program director, I was called on to support a team of teachers as they navigated a developing relationship with a gender nonconforming preschooler's family. The child had a gender-neutral name (we'll use Jamie), and the family had not responded to the question asking for a binary gender designation in the enrollment paperwork. The teachers referred to the child as a boy but had expressed confusion and, to be honest, some judgment about the hairstyles and clothes that the child wore to preschool.

The teachers' discomfort came to a head on Picture Day. Jamie arrived with braids and barrettes, wearing a skirt and tights. As the preschool had a drive-through drop-off routine and program assistants who helped children out of cars, the teachers had not spoken directly to the child's mother as they arrived. They called me to ask what they should do. Uncertain about the question, I asked them about their concerns, which they framed as wondering if Jamie's outfit were one the parents would want to be photographed.

It quickly became clear that their concern was limited to Jamie's outfit. It centered around the teachers' personal beliefs, which were biased about gender and sexuality. After quickly reviewing the communications about Picture Day, and remembering that retakes were always an option, I determined that we should trust that the parents knew it was Picture Day and move on without calling them.

Later, the teachers and I reflected on what happened and the bigger issues we discovered we needed to understand. We considered the child's needs, the family's needs, and those of the teachers and their colleagues within our program. Some of our thoughts and questions included:

- What is the program's mission? Is there a statement about non-discrimination or inclusivity? How is that interpreted and lived in the classroom and program?
- What are our personal beliefs about gender and sexuality? Are they in line with the program's expressed mission and policies? If not, what do we do about that?
- Do all children feel supported and affirmed in our classrooms?
- What can and should families expect from program staff around sensitive issues, especially as they begin to know one another?
- How can administrators support staff, so they have enough time and the required knowledge to build trusting relationships with families?

- What classroom practices support the inclusion of all children and families? Do we have current practices that should be evaluated and changed to ensure inclusion?
- What administrative practices do we currently have that lead to exclusion or do not actively support every family's sense of inclusion?

As we met and talked, it became clear that our assumptions about gender and sexuality were equity issues. The labels we use can be inclusive or exclusive. One classroom practice that was eliminated almost immediately was calling children to activities by gender (e.g., "It's time for all the girls to come to the door."). There are so many other ways to refer to groups of children; calling them by name is preferred, but not always practical. Try "children," "class," or "everyone."

We also agreed to reconsider the practice of required drive-through drop-off and pick-up. While the convenience was desired by many ([and may be the best practice during the pandemic](#)), encouraging children's important adults to join the teachers and children in the classrooms at the beginning or end of each day made it easier to develop friendly relationships. When those relationships exist, conversations about sensitive subjects become easier.

For more ideas and tips, these articles may be helpful, [Using Gender-Inclusive Language with Children & Families](#) and [Good Morning, Boys and Girls](#). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) also provides [guidance for supporting families of gender nonconforming children](#), along with research about [Gender Identity and Expression in the Early Childhood Classroom](#).

[The McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership is dedicated to empowering early childhood leaders so they can positively impact outcomes for children and families.](#) No child should have to choose between being themselves and pleasing their teachers. For more information about transgender children and youth and being an ally, visit [PFLAG](#) and [GLAAD](#).

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