

# How to Create an Environment That Counteracts Stereotyping

by Alice Sterling Honig

- "Stereotyping" means having fixed, unchanging ideas about the characteristics of individuals in different groups. The ideas could be about almost anything in a person's world, for example, that "boys should never play with dolls or they will become sissies," or that "girls are too delicate to climb a tree." Gender is biologically based, but gender roles are constantly constructed, and by about age 2 or 3 children's play reveals gender differences.

A year-old baby looks up at the smiling, looming face of the stranger, approaching and cries mightily, because all faces different from a parent's face seem alien and frightening. The baby's brain tries to make sense of the world by pigeonholing experiences as safe or unsafe, familiar or unfamiliar. People from some cultures are taught, for example, that the right hand is to be used for eating and the left hand for toilet functions. If they see someone from a different culture group using both hands freely for eating, they may become shocked and even revolted and disparage and shun that person. People of one particular religious persuasion may "demonize" folks who have totally different beliefs as "heathens" or "pagans" and be willing even to torture and kill those who will not convert to what they consider the "true" religion.



Dr. Alice Sterling Honig is Professor Emerita of Child Development at Syracuse University. Courses taught include: Language and Cognitive Development; Infancy; Parenting; Crosscultural Study of the Child and Family; Eriksonian Theory; Prosocial and Moral Development; Observation and Assessment; Programs and Models in Early Childhood Education; and Theories of Child Development. She has published hundreds of articles and chapters, more than a dozen books, and narrated videos for caregivers and parents. She is director of the National Quality Infant/Toddler Caregiving workshop held annually at Syracuse University for 27 years. Her books include: *Playtime learning games for young children*; *Behavior guidance for infants and toddlers*; *Prosocial development in children* (with D. Wittmer); *Talking with your baby: Family as the first school* (with H. Brophy); and *Secure relationships: Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings*. Among Dr. Honig's awards are the Chancellor's Citation for Academic Excellence, and the Onondaga Woman of Achievement Award. As a licensed psychologist and therapist, she is a volunteer in leading groups on divorce and custody for the Mental Health Association.

By stereotyping, some folks take a lazy way of knowing others rather than learning who that individual person "really" is! Persons prone to stereotype are sure that they know the characteristics of every person in a group they approve of or in a group that they are scared of or repudiate. Stereotypes shape our thoughts and expectations. Research with a baby dressed in pink and labeled a "girl" showed that adults characterized the baby as more delicate, more scared; if the baby was dressed in blue and labeled a boy, then adults used words to suggest the baby was bolder, and more interested in a toy football.

Stereotypes start early! They include ideas children have learned from families, television, and communities about what are "appropriate" and what are "expected" behaviors for persons who differ in culture, ethnicity, religion, dress, speech patterns, and gender.

Some teachers also promote stereotypes. Researchers note that teachers are more uncomfortable about preschool boys choosing to play with "girl" toys than they are with girls choosing "boy" toys. Seeing a preschooler approach the dress-up corner and take up a pocketbook with a handle, a caregiver called out, "That is for little girls, honey!" Teachers also give more attention to boy toddlers, who often express more neediness and "rowdiness" (Wittmer & Honig, 1987; Chick, Heilman, Houser, & Hunter, 2002).

Early in life, stereotyping becomes a "convenient" way for small children to make sense of the world. Indeed, Maccoby and colleagues suggest that the rigid sex-role stereotyping that characterizes the same-sex playgroups of preschool boys and girls arises, as young children try to understand their world and determine who and what fits into a cognitive category.

*The four-year-old girls came to complain to Ms. Genia that the boys were hogging the block corner, and they did not have a chance to*

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

play with blocks. At circle time, the teacher talked with the children about taking turns and how the girls wanted a chance to build with blocks, too. The boys assured her that girls do not like blocks! When she explained that they really did want to play and had come to her to complain about not having time in the block corner, the boys seemed genuinely puzzled and surprised. Then they brightened up and decided, "OK. The girls can play with the blocks when we have outside playground time!" This solution, alas, did not resolve the girls' grievances.

Stereotyped gender role thinking about the appropriateness of certain toys is strongly visible beginning in preschool. The stereotyping of sex roles is sometimes aided by the boisterousness of boys' play as some little girls see it. "I am not inviting any boys to my five year old birthday party!" announced the child of a sociologist famous for sensitivity in cross-cultural research. "Boys play too rough!" she added. The father confided to me that he had always been so fair about beliefs, customs, and patterns of interactions of the peoples he studied. He was uncomfortable with his daughter's decision, but could not "force" her to invite boys. Examination of sex role differences across many studies shows that indeed boys, as a group, have higher activity and aggression levels than girls. But the rigidity of stereotyped play behaviors and name calling in some preschool environments challenges us to become more thoughtful in creating classroom atmospheres that promote more flexible thinking and interacting.

Since categorizations begin very early as a cognitive "short-hand" convenient way of thinking early in life, how can teachers and parents assist young children in changing their rigid concepts about groups of people, whether of different ethnicity, gender, or for example, those with special needs? In *Berenstain Bears, No Girls Allowed*, the boy cubs do not want Sister Bear around. She always beats them at baseball and other "boy" type games. The older boy cubs are upset because she boasts about being better, and they try to exclude her from their club. Should Papa Bear "force" the boy cubs to let her in their club? Although she is hopping mad, Sister Bear learns how important it is to be a good winner. This book shows a good win-win manner to resolve this problem.

## Becoming aware of our own stereotypes

Becoming aware of our own adult stereotypes is a first step in understanding how strong other people's stereotypes may be. Research shows that teachers interrupt preschool girls more

than boys. Teachers have been found to praise little girls far more than boys for good looks. One study showed that children at a summer camp ridiculed and rejected a fat child even more than they acted mean toward children with any other bodily condition, such as hearing loss or lack of mobility.

Some adults also unconsciously behave in more negative ways toward others who look too fat or too short. Sometimes a caregiver may be more impatient with a child dressed more ragged than other children or one who speaks with a "funny" drawl. Interviews in high schools reveal widespread use of cruel jibes and bullying when a peer is timid, physically weak, pimply, or "too" smart. Youths described their anguish, despair, and belief that teachers do not notice bullying and harassment of those ostracized as "different" (Garbarino & DeLara, 2002).

So our first line of defense to help create a classroom climate of acceptance for all the children is to think deeply about our own stereotypes and to keep our eyes open! Do we assume that a child who slurs speech or still wets his pants in preschool comes from a "bad" family in some way or "must" be a slower learner than other children? Do we give a lot more attention (although often negative!) to boys than to girls in the classroom, as many researchers show? As we increase our own awareness, we can become more attuned to unkind categorizations occurring in the classroom and can plan out helpful actions.

Some parents may simply be overwhelmed by daily tasks and not notice needs that teachers see clearly. A Head Start teacher working in a state with a warm climate told me quietly about a boy whom the children would not sit near because he "smelled" so bad. The rejection and isolation so saddened the little boy. A home visit revealed that mom was single and alcoholic. She did not have the strength to address this problem. The teacher bought a bar of soap for the boy and taught him how to wash and clean his clothes.

A teacher needs to be clear when a classroom problem of aversion or bullying is due to a personal difficulty or to stereotyping. It may take some sleuthing to figure out what is actually going on in the classroom. Observation is a teacher's first tool in gaining insights and information about social difficulties any children are having in the classroom. Many social interactions that are negative, for example, may be due to cultural differences or to interpersonal patterns of relating learned in the first years of life.

## Work valiantly to lessen the power of stereotyped cultural beliefs and taboos

Some culture groups stigmatize women strongly. A child care director called me with a problem. A child from a culture where males dominate very strongly was attending the University preschool. He hit little girls in the preschool class whenever he wanted a toy or felt contradicted. The teachers explained firmly and kindly that little girls and boys have equal rights in the class. He could not hit a girl, despite the cultural norm he had learned earlier. When cultural stereotypes are powerful yet inimical to fairness, a teacher needs to reaffirm gently and enforce firmly the idea that all persons deserve to be treated fairly and kindly, whether the person is male or female.

## The importance of attachment history

Bowlby and Ainsworth's pioneer work on Attachment Theory has resulted in dozens of studies that confirm how important secure attachment is for creating harmonious, cooperative relationships in the preschool classroom. Children who are insecurely attached to their primary caregivers in the first year of life often end up either as "bullies" or as "victims" in preschool (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). If caregivers want to create less stereotyping of some kids as "bad" and others as "good" in classrooms, the challenge may well be to create loving, warm, nurturing relationships with all the children. Once these intimate bonds have been developed, the child labeled as "bad" by peers can use a newly developing secure attachment to the teacher to behave in more cooperative ways that lessen the chances for stigmatization. The teacher will also work creatively with the whole class to lessen the stereotype that peers have conjured. Creating nurturing, intimate interactions that lure little ones into secure attachments is a technique to decrease stereotyping of certain children as the "bad kids" in the classroom (Honig, 2002).

## Modeling

How we talk about others impacts young children. We need to find the positives (and note them out loud) about every child in the classroom. Using the technique of the "Kindness Jar" is one way. Talk out loud each day as you note a kindly, thoughtful, or empathic response; hurry to write it down on a

piece of paper and add that paper to others in your "Kindness Jar." The kids catch on quickly!

## Integrated classrooms

Children who experience many different kinds of playmates in their nursery environment will find differences in accent, ethnicity, skin color, clothing, etc. much less important than the wonderful experience of having play partners they enjoy. An integrated classroom, where teachers have enough support staff to help children with special needs, provides a natural milieu for youngsters to become comfortable with a variety of others (Neugebauer & Wolf, 2004).

## Bibliotherapy

Storybooks can assist a teacher in promoting peer acceptance rather than stereotyping and rejection of "different" others. The book *Nick Joins In* tells the story of a wheelchair-bound child who saves the day in the gym when the ball gets stuck on some ceiling bars. He quickly wheels his chair to where the janitor keeps the long pole for opening high gym windows. With the pole, the children are able to get down the ball and the play goes on, thanks to Nick. In the story *Crow Boy*, a poor farmer's child walks miles to the Japanese village school, where the other children ostracize him for his "different" ways. When the teacher learns that the boy has the special ability to use a bird call to call down crows from the sky, the teacher realizes that he, too, misjudged this child and is then able to get the other children to admire the boy's special skill. Some picture books incite more compassion for those who are ridiculed for being different. Dr. Seuss's books featuring Horton the Elephant are admirable examples. In the book *Otto's Trunk*, an elephant with a trunk much smaller than the other preschooler elephants is jeered at and called "little squirt." Their scorn turns to admiration when Otto discovers a talent of his own — he can snort in different ways to create a menagerie. The high-spirited badger in *Best Friends for Frances* is grumpy that Albert and Harold, who are playing ball, say that "she is not much good" at baseball and "besides this is a no-girls game." Frances realizes that earlier in the day she had snubbed her little sister Gloria in much the same way, saying that she was "not much good" with a ball. So Frances goes home and offers to play as an accepting and helpful older sister with little Gloria. Next day, both sisters go off on a picnic. They carry a sign that says: "Best friends outing. NO BOYS." When Albert sees the sign AND the lusciously filled picnic hamper, he begins to realize there surely is a down side

# BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

to excluding girls from games! Little sister Gloria urges Frances to accept him (if he promises to catch a snake for her at the pond!). Once Albert promises that there will no longer be "no-girls" baseball games, Frances crosses off the words "NO BOYS" on her sign. Off the friends go to have a splendid adventurous afternoon on the hill by the pond. And Albert does catch a snake for Gloria! Reading picture books that increase empathy and decrease ostracizing others will increase class sensitivity to and acceptance of differences as a natural part of our wondrous human family.

## Reinforce children's interest in a variety of toys and activities

Teachers who encourage little girls who assert that they want to grow up to become doctors or soccer players are helping to decrease the stereotype that little girls mostly want to be ballerinas. Teachers can become participants in activities where both boys and girls share a variety of roles. Rather than passively standing by and watching while boys play "firechief" and girls dress up as "brides," teachers need actively to enter into the spirit of a pretend game. Personally involve both boys and girls to don the yellow dress-up clothes of fire fighters so that all the kids can "help put out a fire" and "save the kids in the burning house." Teachers can create group games that involve lots of activity (that preschool boys often do prefer) that require group helpfulness to keep the game going. Holding on the fringes of a parachute and running in a great circle, and then running inward to collapse the parachute and then out again to re-create the billowing circle, is one such game.

On the playground, it is helpful to have a large group swing. There, several children, boys and girls, need to pump energetically to keep the swing in motion as they all hang on firmly and work together as a "team" to keep the swing in motion. These cooperative activities are another way to ensure that the children will not always be playing in sex-stereotyped ways, but can cooperate in games together. A three-legged race, where two children side by side have their inner legs in one burlap sack, is a good game to pair a boy and girl together. The game becomes even more exciting, and cooperative, when each partner must help steady a large spoon with an egg on it while they hobble along as fast as they can in the race of three-legged partners. When teachers take preschoolers on a trip to a park or wooded area, then boys and girls together can search for leaves of different trees, catch grasshoppers gently, and try to spy frogs in a pond. On a trip to a supermarket, all the children can chime in to decide which peppers have the smoothest skin and which apples the

teacher should buy so that they can make applesauce together back at their center.

Cooking is another activity, where a boy or girl can be "chef" and help the team get ingredients together and make cookies or shred lettuce leaves for a salad or prepare peanut butter sandwiches for snack time for all. Caregivers can ask children at circle time what they want to be when they grow up, and then offer encouraging affirmation when children mention non-stereotypic vocations.

## Visit old age homes

Some children think of older women as "witches" and stereotype all older folks as incompetent and scary. A program that builds in regular visits to old age homes can help decrease this stereotype. Planning helps. When the children draw pictures, make collages, learn a group song to sing for the elderly, the smiles and appreciation they receive will help decrease stereotypes about "scary old people."

## Cross-age tutoring

Sometimes children show intolerance of children who are slower or younger or still in diapers in a preschool classroom. Set up buddy systems that involve children working together or teaching each other something one knows but the other child does not. Working together often creates a familiar comfortable feeling, and the child who stereotyped another as a "baby" for still sucking a thumb, for example, may forget the pejorative feeling while working together on a group project, such as drawing a wall mural with a sea theme that includes fishes, boats; swimmers, whales, and big waves.

## Use videos to decrease stereotypes

Many television programs reinforce sex-role and other stereotypes. Videos shown to preschoolers should be chosen carefully to counteract stereotyping! For example, "Finding Nemo" shows a father fish in a nurturing, caring role with his son, rather than as a macho male figure. If you tape television shows, select shows such as "Dragon Tales" which evenly treat the girl and boy protagonists as competent and friendly, rather than showing a predominant male figure.

## Invite moral mentors as visitors to the classroom

Invite people from different walks of society and different ethnic groups to visit the classroom. They may dress in

different clothes from their own country and explain different customs, such as a piñata at parties. They may play an instrument, such as a samisen, that the children have never seen. Although children may at first seem wary of folks who look different from themselves, their fascination with the visitor's stories, songs, and special offerings can dispel stereotypes the children may have had about another culture group.

Invite helpers, such as folks who fight fires or deliver mail. Children are very curious about jobs. An older teen who coaches handicapped kids in swimming would make a great moral mentor to invite to the classroom. Try to invite persons who defy ordinary stereotypes. Some preschoolers believe that only men can be doctors and only women can be nurses. Invite a female doctor and a male nurse to come talk about their jobs in the classroom.

Talk with the children about the difference between actions that are "morally" not okay such as deliberately hurting another person, or things that are socially not approved of, such as wearing socks on top of the head! Research shows that children whose parents hold more rigid views in confounding moral and social "rightness" show more stereotyping.

## Lure children to use a variety of toys

Arrange toys so that boys and girls find them attractive. Cheerfully and creatively engage groups in play with the toys despite the children's stereotypic belief that certain toys are only for boys or only for girls. During ongoing house-keeping play use ingenuity to suggest roles and responsibilities that cut across gender stereotypes (Honig, 2000).

## Talk with parents

During parent meetings, teachers will want to clarify the goal of having a classroom that accepts many different kinds of persons and abilities. Some parents may believe that it is "shameful" for a boy to wash dishes or clean up. Stay calm and gentle in describing the ways in which your classroom is trying to promote acceptance of others and acceptance of the many rich roles we can all play to make life happier and more peaceful with each other. Be sure to ask parents to share with you times they have observed their child being kind and playing well with children from different groups

and express your admiration of parents' values. Share your insights and techniques that have helped the children in your group to become more accepting and able to treat with respect and care peers who are different from them.

Although research shows that young boys do prefer more rough and tumble games and games with high activity level, and are often less verbal than little girls, teachers can use ingenuity to create many opportunities for enjoyable group games and imaginative pretend scenarios where the skills and active participation of both boys and girls enrich play for all. Sex role stereotyping is much less likely when children have had a good time playing together, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or typicality.

## References

- Berenstain, S., & Berenstain, J. (1986). *The Berenstain Bears, No Girls Allowed*. New York: Random House.
- Chick, K. A., Heilman-Houser, R.A., & Hunter, M. W. (2002). "The impact of child care on gender role development and gender stereotypes." *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 29(3),149-154.
- Garbarino, J., & DeLara, E. (Eds). (2002). *And words can hurt forever. How to protect adolescents from bullying, harassment and emotional violence*. New York: Free Press.
- Honig, A. S. (2000). "Psychosexual development in infants and young children: Implications for caregivers." *Young Children*, 55(5), 70-77.
- Honig, A. S. (2002). *Secure relationships: Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Neugebauer, B., & Wolf, D. P. (Eds.) (2004). *Connecting: Friendship in the lives of young children and their teachers*. Redmond, WA: Exchange Press.
- Sroufe, L. A., & Fleeson, J. (1986). Attachment and the construction of relationships. In W. W. Hartup & Z. Rubin (Eds.). *Relationships and development* (pp.51-71). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wittmer, A. S. A., & Honig, A. S. "Do boy toddlers bug teachers more?" *Canadian Children*, 12(1), 21-27.