A LOOK AT RESEARCH ON PREJUDICE AND STEREOTYPES

A lot of research has been done on how children perceive difference, prejudice and stereotypes regarding race and gender. Looking at this research can help inform the work one does with children on all kinds of prejudice and stereotypes. Looking at this research can also help one think about how important it is to explore differences with children as they naturally have many questions. One also sees the importance of looking at prejudice and stereotypes before they lead to ongoing fears and discrimination.

Children are not born prejudiced. Prejudice is learned. Children naturally come to recognize differences. Then, because society is prejudiced, children pick up on the values and beliefs associated with those differences.

According to Stacey York, a nationally recognized expert in the field of early childhood multicultural education, the steps in the development of prejudice in children are:  

- **Awareness**: Being alert to, seeing, noticing and understanding differences.
- **Identification**: Naming, labeling and classifying people.
- **Attitude**: Thoughts and feelings that become an inclination or opinion toward another person or way of living in the world.
- **Preference**: Valuing, favoring and giving priority to a physical attribute, a person or a way of living over another, usually based on similarities and differences.
- **Prejudice**: Preconceived hostile attitude, opinion or feeling against a person, race or their way of being in the world without knowing them.

Education can help break this cycle of prejudice.

A FEW GENERAL FACTS BASED ON RESEARCH ON STEREOTYPES AND PREJUDICE

- **Student prejudice**: The National Study of Adolescent Health looked at how the school environment affected student health. Of all the measures examined from the type of school to class size to level of teacher training to percentage of students going on to college, only one variable had a consistent negative impact on adolescent mental health: belief that other students in their school were prejudiced.  
- **Diverse schools do matter**: Students who attend more diverse schools are more likely to exhibit greater levels of comfort interacting with members of racial groups different from their own. They are also more likely to live and work in diverse settings compared to their segregated peers.
- **Positive images do have an impact**: Children’s racial identity varies across groups and historical periods. Recent studies suggest that positive images of African-Americans in schools, families and community have changed African-American children’s image of themselves to a more positive, black-oriented identification.
- **Social groupings impact understanding and awareness**: For example, girls perceive gender discrimination more frequently than boys. Also, African-American and Latino/a children are more likely to be aware of stereotypes than European-American children.
- **Rigid vs. flexible classification systems**: Children with rigid classification systems in general form stronger stereotypes of both African-Americans and whites. In contrast to their peers with more flexible classification systems, they also have a harder time remembering stories that contradict those stereotypes.
- **Discussion helps**: African-American children whose parents discuss racial matters and civil rights with them tend to hold more positive attitudes about African-Americans.
**AGE-BY-AGE DEVELOPMENTS**
To see how this research relates to LGBT topics, examples of questions or statements that children may make at different ages are included in italics.

**TODDLERS**
- Young children’s natural curiosity will lead to questions about differences.\(^8\)
- They are learning the names of colors and will begin to apply this to skin color.\(^9\)
- Toddlers are sensitive to the feelings of the adults around them. If parents or caregivers are uncomfortable or fearful around people of other cultures, children will “catch” these feelings.\(^10\)

**THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS**
- At 2 the question was, “What’s that?” Now the question is, “Why? Why is her skin that color? Why are his eyes like that?”\(^11\)
- By age 3 or 4, most children have a rudimentary concept of race and can easily identify, match and label people by racial group.\(^12\)
- The timing, clarity and salience of racial awareness appears to be related to children’s contacts with people from different racial groups.\(^13\)
- Pre-schoolers can’t yet deal with multiple classifications, so may get confused about the names of racial groups and the actual color of their skin.\(^14\)
- Children may believe that because other parts of their body grow and change, skin color and other physical traits could also change.\(^15\)
- At this age children’s thinking is limited by their cognitive development, which can result in distortions and inconsistencies. For this reason, it is easy for them to believe stereotypes and form precursor prejudices.\(^16\)
- Most children say it is unfair to exclude someone from an activity because of his or her race or gender.\(^17\)
- By age 3, children are knowledgeable about gender stereotypes.\(^18\)
- By age 4 to 5, children not only engage in gender-appropriate behavior defined by socially prevailing norms, they also reinforce it among themselves without adult intervention.\(^19\)
- By age 4 or 5 children have knowledge of basic, concrete racial stereotypes.\(^20\)
- By age 4 to 5, children use racial reasons for refusing to interact with children different from themselves.\(^21\)
- European-American children have developed a positive association with the color white and the racial label “white.”\(^22\)
  - *Why do you have two dads?*
  - *Why don’t you match? (Question asked of a child who is of a different race than her moms.)*
  - *That’s a boy’s toy.*
  - *That’s a girl color.*

**KINDERGARTEN**
- Children continue to ask questions about physical differences, and they can begin to understand the explanations for these differences.\(^23\)
- Children can begin to identify stereotypes as they struggle to understand the difference between real and pretend.\(^24\)
By age 6 most children understand the concept of fair and unfair, and they often use these concepts as they try to deal with issues.25

Children can be very rule-bound and rigid in their behavior. They like to make rules and will get into conflicts of “fairness.”26

Children’s understanding of gender and racial behavior may be very rigid and traditional.27
  - Who’s that other man who brings you to school? Is he your uncle?
  - It’s not fair that you have two moms.
  - You can’t play with us. You’re a girl.
  - You can’t take care of the baby (a doll.) You’re a boy.

**THE EARLY PRIMARY YEARS**

- Children can consider multiple attributes at one time. They can now understand how one person can be a member of several different groups. For example, a person can be part of a family, a classroom, a culture and a race.28
- They acquire racial constancy. Children can now understand that a person’s skin color will not wash off or change but will remain the same as she grows up.29
- This is a good time for giving children accurate information so they can develop beyond “pre-school” ways of thinking.30
- Children are able to understand feelings of shame and pride and are aware of racism against their own group.31
- Research has found that as children went from pre-school through the early elementary years, they became more racially prejudiced. During this time children became increasingly focused on inter-group differences and had difficulty identifying individuals in other groups. However, in middle childhood (after age 7), prejudice declined as children’s cognitive skills increased, making them better able to contemplate and integrate multiple characteristics at once. Children also shifted from emphasizing inter-group differences to seeing similarities between groups. They were also more able to distinguish individuals in different groups and to see others’ points of view.32
  - Why are kids always asking how come I have two dads?
  - Why can’t my moms get married? Tasha and Samuel and Daniel’s parents are all married.

**AGES 9 – 10**

- Research indicates that by age 9 or 10 children have well-established racial and ethnic prejudices and these are highly resistant to change.33
- The proportion of children who show consciousness of stereotypes and that they may lead to discrimination increases with age (30 percent of 7-year-olds, 60 percent of 8-year-olds and 90 percent of 10-year-olds).34
- By age 10, children can recognize discriminatory actions that are both overt (e.g., name-calling) and covert (e.g., being suspected of wrongdoing) and they can understand that these actions may be caused by others’ social stereotypes.35
- Elementary-aged children are already well aware of societal attitudes toward different groups (e.g., housing patterns, dating and marriage mores). They can also think critically about these patterns where they have sufficient experience and active involvement in discussion and inquiry.36
  - Why don’t people like us? (Referring to an anti-gay newspaper headline.)
  - Why is it always moms and dads this, moms and dads that?
8 Barbara Biles, “Activities That Promote Racial and Cultural Awareness.” In C.M. Todd (Editor), *Family Child Care Connections*, 1994 (pp. 1, 4). Available at: [www.pbs.org/kcts/preciouschildren/diversity/read_activities.html](http://www.pbs.org/kcts/preciouschildren/diversity/read_activities.html).
17 Brown, 2005.
18 Brown, 2005.
21 Derman-Sparks, 1989
35 Aboud, 2005.