

Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education

A Position Statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children

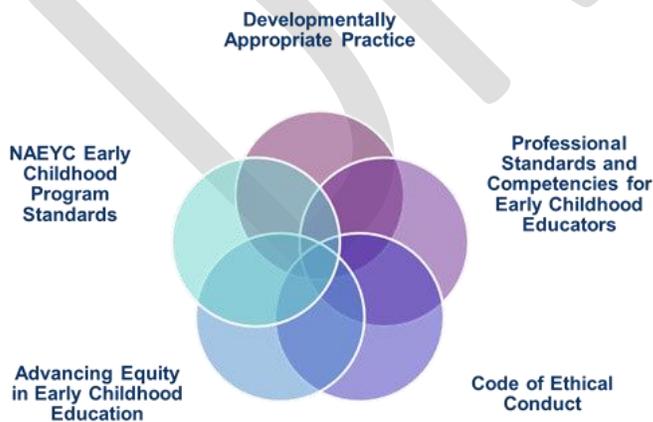
All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. As a result, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they, the early learning settings in which they work, and their wider communities embrace diversity and inclusivity as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities.

Purpose

This position statement is one of five foundational documents NAEYC has developed on behalf of the early childhood profession. With its specific focus on advancing *equity*¹ in early childhood education, this statement complements and supports the other foundational documents that (1) define developmentally appropriate practice (revision underway), (2) set [professional standards and competencies](#) for early childhood educators, (3) define the profession's [code of ethics](#), and (4) outline [standards](#) for early learning programs.

These foundational statements are grounded in NAEYC's core values that emphasize *diversity* and inclusion and respect the dignity and worth of each individual. The statements are built upon a growing body of research and professional knowledge that underscore the complex and critical ways in which early childhood educators promote early learning through relationships—with children, families, and colleagues—that are embedded in a broader societal context rife with implicit and explicit *bias*.

Advancing equity in early childhood education requires understanding of



¹ See definitions for words identified in bold italic, page 14.

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this broader societal context, these biases, and the ways in which historical and current inequities have shaped the profession, as they have shaped our nation. The biases we refer to here are based on **race**, class, **culture**, gender, sex, **ability**, language, religion, and other identities. They are rooted in our nation’s social, political, economic, and educational structures. Precisely because these biases are both individual and institutional, addressing **structural inequities** requires attention to both *interpersonal* dynamics—the day-to-day relationships and interactions at the core of early childhood education practice—and *systemic* influences—the uneven distribution of power and **privilege** ingrained in public and private systems nationwide.

No single individual or organization can hold all the answers related to equity. NAEYC presents this statement after significant reflection, and with humility and awareness of our own limitations, in keeping with our core belief in continuous quality improvement. In this statement, we share our commitment to becoming a more diverse, high-performing, and inclusive organization serving a more diverse, high-performing, and inclusive profession. Our goal is to help a more diverse and inclusive generation of young children thrive through the provision of equitable learning opportunities. We commit—both individually and collectively—to continuous learning based on personally reflecting on how our beliefs and actions have been shaped by our experiences of privilege and oppression and respectfully listening to others’ perspectives. Although this statement may be useful to an international audience, we caution that it is based on the context of early childhood education within the United States. In the spirit of learning we have included a list of definitions of terms, many of which are referenced in the document, as well as others that are often used in equity discussions. These definitions begin on page 17.

Position

All children have the right to *equitable learning opportunities* that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society. Advancing the right to equitable learning opportunities requires recognizing and dismantling the systems of bias that have privileged those with one or more certain and often unearned attributes (see Table 1. page 12). Achieving the goal of advancing the full inclusion of all individuals across all social identities will take sustained efforts far beyond those of early childhood educators alone. Early childhood educators, however, have a unique opportunity and obligation to advance equity. With the support of the early education system as a whole, they can create early learning environments that reflect and model fundamental principles of fairness and justice, that equitably distribute learning opportunities, and that accomplish the goals of anti-bias education. In these environments, each child will

- demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities;
- express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring human connections;
- increasingly recognize and have language to describe unfairness;

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- understand that unfairness hurts; and
- have the will and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions¹.

Early childhood education settings—including centers, family child care homes, and schools—are often among children’s first communities beyond their families. These settings offer important contexts for children’s learning. They should be environments in which children learn that they are valued by others, learn how to treat others with fairness and respect, and learn how to embrace human differences rather than fear them.

When early childhood educators use inclusive teaching approaches, they demonstrate respect for diversity and value all children’s strengths. Early childhood educators can model humility and a willingness to learn by being accountable for any negative impacts of their own biases on their interactions with children and their families. They can work to ensure that all children have equitable access to the learning environment, the materials, and the adult–child and child–child interactions that children deserve so they can thrive. Early childhood educators can recognize and support each child’s unique strengths, seeking through personal and collective reflection to avoid biases—explicit or implicit.

To effectively advance equity and embrace diversity and inclusivity, early childhood educators need workplaces that support these goals. They need to be well prepared in their professional knowledge and skills to teach in diverse, inclusive settings. They also need to be supported by, and to advocate for, equity- and diversity-focused public policies.

Across all roles and settings, advancing equity begins with the individual. It requires dedication to self-reflection, willingness to respectfully listen to others’ perspectives without interruption or defensiveness, and a commitment to continuous learning. Members of groups that have historically enjoyed advantages need to be willing to recognize the often-unintended consequences of ignorance, action, and inaction and the ways they perpetuate existing systems of privilege. It is also important to recognize the range of reactions associated with *marginalization*, from internalization to resistance². This initial set of recommendations applies to everyone involved in any aspect of early childhood education.

1. **Build awareness and understanding of your culture, personal beliefs, values, and biases.** Reflect on the impacts of *racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia*, and other systems of *oppression* in your own life. Identify where your varied social identities have provided deep strengths and understandings, based on your experiences of both injustice and privilege.
2. **Acknowledge and seek to understand structural inequities and their impact over time.** Be attentive when outcomes (for example, achievement test scores, number and frequency of suspensions or expulsions, or engagement with certain materials and activities) vary significantly by social identities. Look deeper at how your expectations,

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practices, curriculum, and/or policies may contribute (perhaps unwittingly) to inequitable results for children and take steps to change them.

3. **Recognize the power and benefits of diversity and inclusivity.** Carefully observe and listen to others (children, families, colleagues). Expand your knowledge by considering diverse experiences and perspectives without generalizing or stereotyping.
4. **Take responsibility for biased actions, even if unintended, and actively work to repair the harm.** If you commit a biased action, be ready and willing to be held accountable. Resist the urge for defensiveness, especially if you are a member of a privileged group. Before making judgments, take responsibility for recognizing what you don't know or understand, and use the opportunity to learn and reflect. Be willing to constructively share feedback and discuss alternative approaches when observing potentially biased actions by others.
5. **View the commitment to cultural responsiveness as an ongoing process.** It is not a one-time matter of mastering knowledge of customs and practices, but an enduring responsibility to learn and reflect based on direct experiences with children and others.
6. **Recognize that the professional knowledge base is changing.** There is growing awareness of the limitations of child development theories and research that have been based primarily on a *normative* perspective of white, middle-class children in families educated in predominantly Anglo-American schools. Keep up to date professionally as more strengths-based approaches to research and practice are articulated and narrowly defined normative approaches to child development and learning are questioned. Be willing to challenge the use of outdated or narrowly defined approaches—for example, in curriculum, assessment policies and practices, or early learning standards. Seek information from families and communities about their social and cultural beliefs and practices to supplement your knowledge.

Recommendations for early childhood educators²

Create a caring, equitable community of engaged learners

1. **Uphold the unique value and dignity of each child and family.** Ensure that all children see themselves and their daily experiences, as well as the daily lives of others within and beyond their community, positively reflected in the design and implementation of pedagogy, curriculum, learning environment, interactions, and materials.

² Note: These recommendations reflect the essential responsibilities of early childhood educators identified in Power to the [Profession \(link\)](#) and the *Professional Standards and Competencies of Early Childhood Educators (link)*. This statement does not duplicate these documents but lifts specific elements using an equity lens. Standards 1, 4, and 5 of the *Standards and Competencies* are reflected under the heading “Create a caring equitable community of learners.” Standards 2 and 3 are reflected in the similarly named headings. Standard 6 is reflected in the initial recommendations on [page 3](#) as well as the advocacy recommendations. Readers are encouraged to refer to these additional documents for further information regarding expectations for the knowledge, skills, and competencies of all early childhood educators.

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- 2. Recognize each child’s unique strengths and support the inclusion of all children—given differences in culture, family structure, language, racial identity, gender, abilities, and economic class.** Help children recognize and support each other as valued members of the community. Take care that no one feels invisible or unnoticed.
- 3. Develop trusting relationships with children that build on their knowledge and skills.** Embrace children’s cultural contexts and the languages and customs that shape their experiences and learning. Treat each child with respect. Eliminate language or behavior that is stereotypical, demeaning, exclusionary, or judgmental.
- 4. Consider the developmental, cultural, and linguistic appropriateness of the learning environment and your teaching practices for each child.** Offer meaningful, relevant, and appropriately challenging activities across all interests and abilities. Children should see themselves and their families, languages, and cultures regularly and meaningfully reflected in the environment and learning materials. Counter common *stereotypes* and misinformation. Remember that the learning environment and its materials reflect what you do or do not value by what is present and what is omitted.
- 5. Involve children, families, and the community in the design and implementation of learning activities.** This builds on the *funds of knowledge* that children and families bring as members of their cultures and communities. It also sparks children’s interest and engagement. Recognizing the community as a context for learning can model citizen engagement.
- 6. Actively promote children’s agency.** Provide all children with opportunities for rich, engaging play. Use open-ended activities that encourage children to work together and solve problems to support learning across all areas of development and curriculum.
- 7. Scaffold children’s learning to achieve meaningful goals.** Set challenging, achievable goals for all children. Build on their strengths and interests to help them gain new skills, understanding, and vocabulary. Provide supports as needed while you communicate—both verbally and nonverbally—your authentic confidence in each child’s ability to achieve these goals.
- 8. Design and implement learning activities using language(s) that the children understand.** Support the development of children’s first languages while simultaneously promoting proficiency in English. Similarly, recognize and support dialectal differences as children gain proficiency in the dialect they are expected to use in school.
- 9. Recognize and be prepared to provide different levels of support to different children depending on what they need.** For example, some children may need more attention at certain times or more support for learning a particular concept or skill. Differentiating support in a strengths-based way is the most equitable approach because each child’s needs are met.
- 10. Consider how your own biases (implicit and explicit) may be contributing to your interactions and relationships with particular children.** Also reflect on whether biases may contribute to your understanding of a situation. How might they be affecting your

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judgment of a child’s behavior, especially of a negative or challenging behavior? Recognize that all relationships are reciprocal, and thus that your behavior impacts that of children.

- 11. Use multi-tiered systems of support.** Collaborate with early childhood special educators and other allied professionals as needed, and facilitate each professional establishing a relationship with each child to foster success and maximize potential.

Establish reciprocal relationships with families

- 1. Embrace the primary role of families in children’s development and learning.** Recognize and acknowledge family members based on how families define their members and their roles. Seek to learn about and honor each family’s child-rearing values, language (including dialects), and culture. Gather information about the hopes and expectations that families have for their children’s behavior, learning, and development, and work together to align as much as is possible and appropriate.
- 2. Uphold every family’s right to make decisions for and with their children.** If a family’s desire conflicts with your professional ethical obligations, work with the family to identify common goals and mutually acceptable strategies.
- 3. Avoid stereotypes, taking time to learn about the families with whom you work.** This includes learning their languages, customs, activities, values, and beliefs so you can provide a culturally and linguistically responsive learning environment. It requires intentionally reaching out to families who, for a range of reasons, may not initiate or respond to traditional approaches (i.e., paper and pencil/electronic surveys, invitations to open houses, parent-teacher conferences) to interact with educators.
- 4. Maintain consistently high expectations for family involvement, being open to multiple and varied forms of engagement and providing conscious and responsive supports.** Ask families how they would like to be involved and what supports may be helpful. Families may face challenges (for example, fear due to immigration status, less flexibility during the workday, or child care and transportation issues) that may require creative approaches to building engagement. Recognize that, as an educator, it is your responsibility to find ways to connect with families successfully so that you can provide the most culturally and linguistically sustaining learning environment for each child.
- 5. Communicate the value of multilingualism to all families.** All children benefit from the social and cognitive advantages of multilingualism and multiliteracy. For emergent bilinguals, make sure families understand the academic benefits and the significance of supporting their child’s home language as English is introduced through the early childhood program, to ensure their children develop into fully bilingual and biliterate adults.

Assess children’s learning and development

- 1. Recognize the potential of your own preferences, culture, and biases affecting your judgment when observing, documenting, and assessing children’s behavior, learning, or development.** Approach a child’s confusing and/or challenging behavior as an opportunity for inquiry. What might be the impact of poverty, trauma, inequity, and other

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adverse conditions on children's negotiation of and response to their world? How can you help the child build resilience?

- 2. Use authentic assessments that seek to identify children's strengths and provide a well-rounded picture of development.** For children whose first language is not English, conduct assessments in all the child's languages (if at all possible). When the decision regarding an assessment tool is made by others, and its reliability and validity has not been established for the characteristics of a given child, recognize the limitations of the findings and strive to make sure they are not used as a key factor in high-stakes decisions.
- 3. Focus on strengths.** Develop the skill to observe a child's environment from the child's perspective and seek to change what you can about your own behaviors to support that child instead of expecting that the child change first. Recognize that it is often easier to focus on what a child *isn't* doing compared with peers than it is to see what that child *can* do in a given context (or could do with support).

Advocate on behalf of young children, families, and the early childhood profession

- 1. Speak out regarding unfair policies or practices and challenge biased perspectives.** Work to embed anti-bias approaches in all aspects of early childhood program delivery, including standards, assessments, curriculum, and personnel practices.
- 2. Look for ways to work collectively with others who are committed to equity.** Consider it part of your professional responsibilities to help challenge and change policies, laws, systems, and institutional practices that keep social inequities in place.

Recommendations for administrators of schools, centers, family child care homes, and other early childhood education settings

- 1. Provide high-quality early learning services that demonstrate a commitment to equitable outcomes for all children.** Arrange budgets to equitably meet the needs of children and staff. Recognize that "high-quality" programs—because they reflect the values, beliefs, and practices of specific children, families, and communities—will look different in different settings.
- 2. Take proactive steps with measurable goals to recruit and retain educators and leaders who meet professional expectations and reflect the diversity of children and families served.** All children benefit from a diverse teaching and leadership staff, but it is especially important for children whose social identities have been marginalized to see people like them as teachers and leaders.
- 3. Employ staff who speak the languages of the children and families served.** When many languages are spoken by the families served, establish relationships with interpreters who can assist in communicating with families. Avoid using the children themselves as translators as much as possible; instead, reach out to your community to find speakers of the languages spoken by families.

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- 4. Ensure, as much as possible, that any formal assessment tools are designed and validated for use with the children being assessed.** Key characteristics to consider include age, culture, language, social and economic status, and ability. Assessors should also be proficient in the language and culture in which the assessment is conducted. If appropriate assessment tools are not available for all children, interpret the results considering these limitations.
- 5. Recognize the value of serving a diverse group of children and strive to increase the range of diversity among those served.** Race, ethnicity, language, and social and economic status are dimensions by which early childhood education settings have historically been segregated.
- 6. Provide regular time and space to foster a learning community among administrators and staff.** Include opportunities for reflection and learning about cultural respect and responsiveness, including potential instances of implicit bias and *microaggressions* toward children, families, and/or staff and administrators.
- 7. Establish collaborative relationships with other social service agencies and providers within the community.** Support and give voice to diverse perspectives to strengthen the web of resources available to all children and families.
- 8. Establish clear protocols for dealing with children’s challenging behaviors and provide teaching staff consultation and support to address them effectively and equitably.** To consider potential effects of implicit bias, regularly assess whether certain policies and procedures, including curriculum and instructional practices, have differential impacts on different groups of children. Set a goal of immediately limiting and ultimately eliminating suspensions and expulsions by ensuring appropriate supports for teachers, children, and families.
- 9. Create meaningful, ongoing opportunities for multiple voices with diverse perspectives to engage in leadership and decision-making.** Recognize that implicit biases have often resulted in limited opportunities for members of marginalized groups.

Recommendations for higher education faculty, administrators, and others facilitating professional development

- 1. Prepare current and prospective early childhood educators to enact an anti-bias approach to teaching.** Ensure that prospective educators’ preparation and field experiences provide opportunities to work effectively with diverse populations in all their responsibilities as early childhood educators.
- 2. Prepare prospective early childhood educators to meet the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators** (formerly NAEYC’s Professional Preparation Standards [link](#)). Ensure that curriculum and field experiences reflect a focus on diversity, inclusivity, and equity within each of the competencies to cultivate culturally and linguistically responsive practices.

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- 3. Work with students, community leaders, and public officials to identify the structural and logistical barriers to educational attainment in the specific community you serve.** Pay special attention to assumptions about academic skill attainment in communities with inadequate public schools, transportation barriers (such as limited public transit), financial constraints (such as student loans and outstanding bookstore bills), scheduling during the working day, lack of child care, and the like. Then, design educational programs that put students' needs first. Take those barriers into account, while simultaneously advocating for changes that remove the barriers (e.g., loan forgiveness programs, evening courses, extended bus or train service, child care services aligned with course and PD offerings, and so on).
- 4. Implement transfer and matriculation policies that recognize and award credits for students' previous early childhood courses and degrees as well as demonstrated competency through prior work experience.** This will support a wide range of students in advancing their postsecondary credentials.
- 5. Work actively to foster a sense of belonging, community, and support among first-generation college students.** Cohorts and facilitated support from first-generation graduates can be especially useful.
- 6. Set and achieve measurable goals to recruit and retain a representative faculty across multiple dimensions.** Consider establishing goals related to race, ethnicity, age, language, ability, gender, and sexual orientation, among others.
- 7. Provide regular time and space to foster a learning community among administrators, faculty, and staff.** Create opportunities for reflection and learning about cultural respect and responsiveness, including potential instances of implicit bias and microaggressions toward children and/or families.
- 8. Ensure that all professional standards, career pathways, articulation, advisory structures, data collection, and financing systems in state professional development systems are subjected to review.** Assess whether each of the system's policies supports workforce diversity by reflecting the children and families served and offering equitable access to professional development. Determine whether these systems serve to increase compensation parity across early childhood education settings and sectors, birth through age 8.

Recommendations for public policymakers

- 1. Consider policies' impacts on all children and the bonds between them and their families.** Reject any policy that undermines children's physical and emotional well-being or weakens the bonds between them and their families.
- 2. Increase financing for high-quality early learning services.** Ensure sufficient resources to make high-quality early childhood education universally accessible. Every setting should have the resources it requires to meet the needs of its children and families. This includes ensuring equitable access to high-quality higher education and compensation for a qualified

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workforce. See the NASEM report, *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education*,³ for more details.

- 3. Revise early learning standards to ensure that they reflect the culturally diverse settings in which educators practice.** Provide ongoing, in-depth staff development on how to use standards in diverse classrooms. Quality rating and improvement systems should further reflect the principles of equity in all aspects, including curriculum, instruction, inclusivity, family engagement, program design, and delivery.
- 4. Increase opportunities for families to choose early childhood programs that serve diverse populations of children.** Incentivize these choices and seek to provide supports, such as transportation. These supports will help to reduce the segregation of programs (primarily by race, language, ability, and class), which reflects segregated housing patterns and fuels persistent discrimination and inequities.
- 5. Include community-based programs, such as family child care homes, in state funding systems for early childhood education.** Ensure that these systems equitably support community-based programs and the educators who work in them so the programs can meet high-quality standards, while allowing families to choose the setting that best meets their needs.
- 6. Ensure sufficient funding for, access to, and supports for children, teachers, and administrators to respond to challenging behaviors.** These supports include mental health and prevention-oriented interventions in early education in order to meet all children's needs and eliminate the use of suspensions and expulsions across all early childhood settings.
- 7. Establish comparable compensation (including benefits) across settings for early childhood educators with comparable qualifications, experience, and responsibilities.** Focusing only on comparable compensation for those working in pre-K settings will deepen disparities felt primarily by educators of color working with infants and toddlers. Including educators working with children from birth in compensation policies is a fundamental question of equity.
- 8. Incorporate the science of toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) into federal and state policies and programs.** Healing-centered approaches can support resilience and help mitigate the effects of toxic stress and ACEs, which affect children of all social groups but which disproportionately affect children of marginalized groups.
- 9. Promote national, state, and local policies that promote and support multilingualism for all children.** This can include funding for early learning dual-language immersion programs, early childhood educator professional development for teaching and supporting emergent bilinguals, and the inclusion of multi/dual language promotion in quality rating and improvement systems.
- 10. Set a goal of cutting the US child poverty rate in half within a decade.** This will drive specific policies such as supporting families' financial well-being and stability, ensuring universal child health insurance, and providing universal access to early care and education.

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The evidence for this position statement

The recommendations above are based on a set of principles that synthesize current early childhood education research through the lenses of equity and NAEYC's core values.⁴ (See page 21 for references.)

Principles of child development and learning

- 1. Early childhood (birth to age 8) is a uniquely valuable and vulnerable time in the human life cycle.** The early childhood years lay the foundation and create trajectories for all later learning and development.^{5,6,7}
- 2. Each individual—child, family member, and early educator—is unique.** Each has dignity and value and is equally worthy of respect. Embracing and including multiple perspectives as a result of diverse lived experiences is valuable and enriching for all.
- 3. Each individual belongs to multiple social and cultural groups.**⁸ This creates richly varied and complex social identities (see Table 1. on page 15). Children learn the socially constructed meanings of these identities early in life, in part by recognizing how they and others who share or do not share certain characteristics are treated.^{9,10,11,12,13} Early childhood educators and early childhood programs in centers, homes, and schools play a critical role in fostering children's development of positive social identities.^{14,15,16}
- 4. Learning is a social process profoundly shaped by culture, social interactions, and language.**^{17,18} From early infancy, children are hardwired to seek human interaction.¹⁹ They construct knowledge through their interactions with people and their environment, and they make meaning of their experiences through a cultural lens.^{20,21}
- 5. Language and communication are essential to the learning process.** Young children who are exposed to multiple linguistic contexts can learn multiple languages, which carries many cognitive, cultural, economic, and social advantages.²² This process is facilitated when children's first language is recognized as an asset and supported by competent speakers through rich, frequent, child-directed language as the second language is introduced, also through rich, meaningful child-directed language.^{23,24,25}
- 6. Families are the primary context for children's development and learning.**²⁶ Family relationships precede and endure long after relationships with early childhood educators. Early childhood educators are responsible for partnering with families to ensure consistent relationships between school and home. This includes recognizing families as experts about their children and respecting their languages and cultures.²⁷ It means learning as much as possible about families' cultures in order to incorporate their funds of knowledge into the curriculum, teaching practices, and learning environment.²⁸ It means actively working to support and sustain family languages and cultures.²⁹ Finally, it means recognizing and addressing the ways in which early childhood educators' own biases can affect their work with families, to ensure that all families receive the same acknowledgment, support, and respect.³⁰

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- 7. Learning, emotions, and memory are inextricably interconnected in brain processing networks.**³¹ Positive emotions and a sense of security promote memory and learning. Learning is also facilitated when the learner perceives the content and skills as useful because of their connection to personal motivations and interests.
- 8. Toxic stress and anxiety can undermine learning.**³² They activate the “fight or flight” regions of the brain instead of the prefrontal cortex associated with higher order thinking. Poverty and other adverse childhood experiences are major sources of toxic stress and can negatively impact all aspects of learning and development.^{33,34}
- 9. Children’s learning is facilitated when teaching practices, curricula, and learning environments build on children’s strengths and are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for each child.**^{35,36,37,38}
- 10. Reflective practice is required to achieve equitable learning opportunities.** Self-awareness, humility, respect, and a willingness to learn are key to becoming a teacher who equitably and effectively supports all children and families.³⁹

Principles in context

It is essential to understand that these principles of child development and learning occur within a specific social-cultural, political, and historical context.⁴⁰ Within that context, each person’s experiences may vary based on their social identities and the intersection of these identities. Social identities bring with them socially constructed meanings that reflect biases targeted to marginalized groups, resulting in differential experiences of privilege and injustice.⁴¹ These systems can change over time, although many have remained stubbornly rooted in our national ethos.

Traditionally, the dominant narrative in the United States—in our history, scientific research, education, and other social policy and media—has reflected biases that have favored those who are white, male, able-bodied, standard-English speaking, Christian, US born, non-indigenous, heterosexual, cisgender, adult/middle-aged, thin, educated, and/or economically advantaged.⁴² As a result, deeply embedded systems of privilege have benefited members of these groups while oppressing others. By naming such privilege, the intent is not to blame those who have benefited, but to acknowledge that privilege exists, is unfairly distributed, and must be addressed.

Dominant social biases are rooted in the social, political, and economic structures of the United States. Powerful messages—conveyed through the media, symbols, attitudes, and actions—continue to reflect and promote both explicit and implicit bias. These biases, with effects across generations, stem from a national history too often ignored or denied—including trauma inflicted through slavery, genocide, sexual exploitation, segregation, incarceration, exclusion, and forced relocation. Deeply embedded biases maintain systems of privilege and result in structural inequities that grant greater access, opportunity, and power to some at the expense of others.⁴³

The status of those providing early childhood education reflects the historic marginalization of women’s social and economic roles, with particular impact on women of color. Most of the

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early childhood workforce earns low wages and is primarily female.⁴⁴ It is also stratified, with fewer women of color and immigrant women having access to higher education opportunities that lead to the educational qualifications required for higher-paying roles.⁴⁵ Systemic barriers limit upward mobility even when degrees and qualifications are obtained.⁴⁶ As a result, children are typically taught by white, middle-class women, with women of color assisting rather than leading. Some evidence, especially with elementary-grade children, suggests that a racial match between teachers and children can be particularly beneficial for children of color (without being detrimental to White children).^{47, 48, 49, 50}

The professional research and knowledge base is largely grounded in a dominant Western scientific-cultural model that, as noted in *How People Learn II* (2018, p. 317), is but “one perspective on reality and carries with it its own biases and assumptions.” These shortcomings of the knowledge base reflect the historical issues of access to higher levels of scholarship for individuals of color and the need to expand the pipeline of researchers who bring different lived experiences across multiple social identities. It is important to consider these biases and their impact⁵¹ on all aspects of system delivery, including professional development, curriculum, assessment, early learning standards⁵², and accountability systems.

The research base regarding the impact of implicit bias in early childhood settings is growing.⁵³ Teachers of young children—like all people—are not immune to such bias. Even among teachers who do not believe they hold any explicit biases, implicit biases are associated with differential judgments about and treatment of children by race, gender, ability, body type, physical appearance, and social, economic, and language status—all of which limit children’s opportunities to reach their potential. Implicit biases also result in differential judgments of children’s play, aggressiveness, compliance, initiative, and abilities. These biases are associated with lower rates of achievement and assignment to “gifted” services and disproportionately higher rates of suspension and expulsions, beginning in preschool, for African American children, especially boys. Looking at a multiple racial and ethnic subgroups in different contexts, some research is pointing to the complexity of the implicit bias phenomenon, with different levels and types of bias received by different subgroups.⁵⁴ Children’s expression of implicit bias has also been found to vary across countries, although some preference for Whites was found even in nations with few White or Black residents.⁵⁵

By recognizing and addressing these patterns of inequity, society will benefit from tapping the potential of children whose families and communities have been systematically marginalized and oppressed. Early childhood educators, early learning settings, higher education and professional development systems, and public policy all have important roles in forging a new path for the future. By eliminating systemic biases and the structures that sustain them, and by advancing equity and embracing diversity and inclusivity, we can strengthen our democracy as we realize the full potential of all young children—and therefore of the next generation of leaders and activists.

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Conclusion

A large and well-established body of knowledge demonstrates that high-quality early childhood programs promote children’s opportunities for lifelong success and that public investments in such programs generate savings that benefit the economy⁵⁶. As a result, in the United States and around the world, leaders across all political persuasions are making greater investments in early childhood services with broad public support. But more remains to be done.

We must build on these investments and work to advance equity in early childhood education by ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all young children. This position statement outlines steps needed to (1) provide high-quality early learning programs that build on each child’s unique set of individual and family strengths, cultural background, language(s), abilities, and experiences and (2) eliminate differences in educational outcomes as a result of who children are, where they live, and what resources their families have. All children deserve the opportunity to reach their full potential.

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Table 1.

Social Identities and Historically Rooted, Ongoing Societal Privilege and Oppression

Social Identity	Recipients of Societal Privilege	Targets of Societal Oppression
Race	White	People of color Biracial and multiracial people and families
Ethnicity/Heritage	European American “Melting pot”	All other defined or recognizable ethnicities
Language	English	Spanish Arabic
Gender/gender expression	Male	Female All nontraditional gender expressions
Economic class (in childhood, now)	Middle class or wealthy	Poor or working class
Religious beliefs	Christian or Christian tradition	Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, pagan, atheist, and others
Age	Productive adults (ages 20–45 for women, 20–60 for men)	Children, adolescents, women over 45, men over 60
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	All nonheterosexual orientations
Education	College degree Fluent in academic English	High school or less Less than fluent in academic English
Body type/size	Slim, fit Medium height for women, tall for men	Large, overweight Very short or very tall
Able self (physical, mental, emotional)	Healthy Functional, no apparent disability	Any form of physical, mental, or emotional difference in ability
Family structure (in childhood, now)	Married Parent with 1–3 biological children	Unmarried Single parent; divorced; adoptive, foster, or blended family

Adapted from My Social Identities Portrait, in Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves, Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 31.

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Definition of Key Terms

Ability—The means or skills to do something. In this position statement, we have chosen the term “ability” rather than disability and use it more broadly than its traditional focus on cognition or psychometric properties. Acknowledging the legal definition of disability under the ADA as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity, and the importance of early intervention for children with developmental delays, we focus and build on each child’s abilities, strengths, and interests.

Agency—A person’s ability to make choices and influence events. In this position statement, we emphasize each child’s agency, especially a child’s ability to make choices and influence events in the context of learning activities, also referred to as autonomy or child-directed learning. See Adair 2014 and *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* 2009.

Bias—Attitudes or stereotypes that favor one group over another. **Explicit biases** are *conscious* beliefs and stereotypes that affect one’s understanding, actions, and decisions; **implicit biases** also affect one’s understanding, actions, and decisions but in an unconscious manner. An **anti-bias** approach to education explicitly works to end all forms of bias and discrimination (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010).

Culture—The patterns of beliefs, practices, and traditions associated with a particular group of people. Culture is increasingly understood as inseparable from development (Reid, Kagan, & Scott-Little 2017; Rogoff 2003). Individuals both learn from and contribute to the culture of the groups to which they belong. Cultures evolve over time, reflecting the lived experiences of their members in particular times and places.

Diversity—Variation among individuals, as well as within and across groups of individuals, in terms of their backgrounds and lived experiences. These experiences are related to social identities, including race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, social and economic status, religion, ability status, and country of origin. “Diverse” or “diversity” are sometimes used as euphemisms for “nonwhite.” NAEYC specifically rejects this usage as it implies that whiteness is the norm against which diversity is defined.

Equity—The state that would be achieved if the way an individual fares in society were no longer predictable by race, gender, class, language or any other social/cultural characteristic. Equity in practice means each student and family receiving necessary supports in a timely fashion so they can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential. Advancing equity requires remediating differences in outcomes that can be traced to biased treatment (by people or by systems) of individuals because of their social identities.

Equity is not the same as *equality*. Equal treatment given to individuals at unequal starting points is inequitable. Instead of equal treatment, we aim for equal opportunity. This requires considering individuals’ and groups’ starting points, then distributing resources equitably (not equally) to meet

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needs. Attempting to achieve equality of opportunity without consideration of historic and present inequities is ineffective, unjust, and unfair. (See the National Equity Project resource for NAEYC training and forthcoming publication.)

Equitable learning opportunities—Learning opportunities that not only help each child thrive by building on each child’s unique set of individual and family strengths—including cultural background, language(s), ability, and experiences—but also are designed to eliminate differences in outcomes that are a result of past and present inequities in society.

Funds of knowledge—Essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge embedded in the daily practices and routines of families (González, Moll, & Amanti 2005).

Gender identity—A social concept that reflects how individuals identify themselves. Traditionally viewed as a binary category of male/female linked to an individual’s sex, gender identity is viewed by current science as a fluid and expansive concept (Gender Justice in Early Childhood 2017).

Historical trauma—“The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (Brave Heart 2003, 7). Examples of historical trauma include the multigenerational effects of white supremacy reflected in colonization, genocide, slavery, sexual exploitation, forced relocation, and incarceration based on race or ethnicity.

Intersectionality—The overlapping and interdependent identities of an individual across, for example, race, gender, ability, and social status. Intersectionality encourages us to embrace and celebrate individuals’ multiple social identities. It also highlights the complex and cumulative effects of different forms of discrimination and disadvantage that can arise for members of multiple marginalized groups.

LGBTQIA+—An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more, reflecting the expansive and fluid concepts of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.

Marginalization—The process by which specific social groups are pushed to the edges or margins of society. Marginalized groups are treated as less important or inferior through policies or practices that reduce their members’ economic, social, and political power.

Microaggressions—“Everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely on their marginalized group membership. These hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment” (Sue et al. 2007, 271). Microaggressions can result from implicit or explicit biases.

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Norm, Normative—The definition of certain actions, identities, and outcomes as the standard (“the norm” or “normal”), with everything else as outside the norm. For example, the terms “white normativity” or “heteronormative” refer to instances in which whiteness and heterosexuality are considered “normal” or “preferred.” This wrongly suggests that all other races and sexual orientations are outside the norm or less preferable. Art activities focused on Father’s Day, for example, assume a two-parent, heterosexual household as the normative family structure. (While there are some research-based norms that provide guidance regarding healthy child development and appropriate educational activities and expectations, these norms have too often been derived through research that only or primarily includes unrepresentative samples of children. Additional research is needed to develop new norms that will support equitably educating all children.)

Oppression—The systematic and prolonged mistreatment of a group of people.

Privilege—Unearned advantages that result from being a member of a socially preferred or dominant social identity group. Because it is deeply embedded, privilege is often invisible to those who experience it without ongoing self-reflection. Privilege is the opposite of marginalization or oppression that results from racism and other forms of bias (see below).

Race—A social construct that categorizes and ranks groups of human beings on the basis of skin color and other physical features. The scientific consensus is that the social construct of race as a way to divide humans into distinct and different groups has no biological basis (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010).

Racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and other forms of bias—Prejudice and discrimination expressed on the basis of social identity group membership (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, abilities). This includes both individual acts of bias and structural or institutional policies and practices in which biases are evident in the past and present. Individual and institutional acts of bias maintain power and privilege in the hands of some over others (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010).

Stereotype—Any depiction of a person or group of people that makes them appear less than fully human, unique, or individual or that reinforces misinformation about that person or group (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010).

Structural inequities—The systemic disadvantage of one social group compared to other groups with whom they coexist; the term encompasses policy, law, governance, and culture and refers to race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity, class, sexual orientation, and other domains (NASEM 2017).

White fragility—A concept based on the observation that White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. As a result, expectations for racial comfort are heightened and the ability to tolerate racial stress is lowered. Even small amounts of racial stress are intolerable and trigger defensive actions designed to restore the previous equilibrium and comfort (DiAngelo 2018).

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Xenophobia—Attitudes, prejudices, or actions that reject, exclude, or vilify individuals as foreigners or outsiders. Although often targeted at migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons, xenophobia is not limited to these individuals but may be applied to others on the basis of assumptions.

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