



STEREOTYPES AND TOKENISM

“Learning accurate information about cultures different from your own requires persistence, dedication, openness, and honesty. Exploring your own values, beliefs and traditions—and learning how they impact you and the way you engage with the world—are preliminary steps to be taken before understanding others. In taking such steps, you also become more aware of your own stereotypes, assumptions, and biases.” –Multicultural Principles, 26



WHAT ARE STEREOTYPES?

Stereotypes are assumptions “made about a person on the basis of his or her group membership without learning whether the individual fits those assumptions” (Head Start Multicultural Principles, 28). Stereotypes are common and influence how we see others. They are a form of bias—prejudice in favor or against an individual or group. Biases influence the way we act and may result in unequal access or opportunity for children and families. The lack of access is inequitable—unfair or unjust—in that some children and families are not afforded the same opportunities as others. Combatting stereotypes can reduce inequality and inequity in our society.

Reflection question: *Has someone ever made an assumption about you based on your culture, what you looked like, or something you like to do? What did it feel like?*

HOW CAN WE AVOID STEREOTYPES?

- Learn about people by interacting with them, listening to them, and asking questions.
- Treat each person as an individual. People within a culture differ in important ways, even though they may share important things, too.

CONSIDER WHY:

- When asked to look for “behavior that may become a potential challenge” in a video, early educators looked more often at the Black boy than the White boy or the girls. (Gilliam, et al, 2016)
- “Positive” stereotypes that imply children from some cultures are academically strong are harmful.

WHAT IS TOKENISM?

Tokenism is when culture is addressed in simplistic, superficial ways. Examples include:

- Assuming one person’s perspective on a culture represents the perspectives of all who share that culture
- Thinking of culture as foods, clothing, or traditions rather than as a living way of life

IS A “TOURIST APPROACH” TO CULTURE A TYPE OF TOKENISM?

- Yes! A “tourist approach” is a way of introducing children to only the most visible and obvious forms of a culture, like holidays, dress, and foods. In this approach, cultures are presented as “different” and “fun” rather than as ways of being. Often, traditional clothing and foods are emphasized, even if those are only worn or eaten on special occasions today.

Reflection question: *Why is tokenism inappropriate? How can it cause harm?*

EXAMPLES OF TOKENISM

Tokenism is when we include culture in simplistic ways. Examples include:

- Relying on one person to represent the perspectives of all who share that culture
- Having a special unit or theme on culture, but not integrating it throughout other units
- Sharing books from a culture that are only about traditional life in the culture and not representative of modern life

HOW CAN WE AVOID TOKENISM?

When we approach each culture as varied, meaningful, and important, we are less likely to include it in simplistic ways. We will thoughtfully and intentionally:

- Learn about cultures from multiple sources, including those with whom we work
- Integrate culture in meaningful ways throughout our practice, by providing ongoing opportunities for children and families to shape the curriculum and share their experiences, traditions, and values
- Provide varied learning materials that reflect diversity within and between cultures
- Present cultures as living ways of being, rather than as historical artifacts

CONSIDER WHAT IS MISSING WHEN:

- A curriculum includes one unit about culture and rarely addresses culture in other units. Each lesson in the unit describes the food, clothing, and traditions of a different culture (five lessons in total).
- A lesson about clothing explains that in Japan women wear kimonos and in India women wear saris, and only picture women in this traditional clothing.
- One family, who has roots in Mexico, shares aspects of their culture with the educator. The teacher assumes that other children, from different regions in Mexico and different parts of Central and South America, share the same culture and language.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON IMPLICIT BIAS YOU MIGHT LOOK AT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCE:

Front Porch Series: Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions, and Why We Should Care. January 2020. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/preschool-expulsions-suspensions-why-we-should-care>.

REFERENCES

Gilliam, W., A. Maupin, C. R. Reyes, M. Accavitti, F. Shic. 2016. *Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions*. Yale University Child Study Center.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2010. *Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five*. Washington, DC: Office of Head Start.