

Difficult Conversations, Anti-bias Curriculum and the CEDS Approach

Our culture has a tendency to shy away from having *difficult conversations* with children. These *difficult conversations* are ones that can be perceived and experienced as awkward and scary; the kind of situations parents and adults want to skip through quickly or ignore altogether, if possible. As parents and adults, we want to protect our children from negativity, shame, fear, violence, etc., and when we enter a space to discuss challenging topics and themes, we arrive with our history, our perspective, our personal baggage. The children however, arrive with nothing but curiosity and wonder as they seek to find answers and make sense of what they see and hear. From the perspective of the child, a *difficult conversation* is just another question, just another chat, in a string of curious exchanges they have throughout their day.

Year after year, we are challenged, humored, and humbled as questions, stories, and conflicting ideas arise on subjects such as **death and dying, gender identity, reproduction, religion, anatomy, family structure, race, and skin color**. Here are some real life examples of questions and conversations that have been brought up by the children of CEDS:

Death and dying *“Was I dead before I was born?” “When is my grandma coming back?” “Ms. Jackie is going to die soon because she is 100 years old.”*

Media Exposure: *“People are dying in the street and dropping dead in the street from the virus.” “I saw people with signs on TV and outside. Were they mad?” “My Dad was watching the news and people were stealing things from the president.”*

Gender Identity: *“Girls aren’t supposed to have short hair.” “We are playing princesses so the boys can’t play with us.” “I don’t feel like a boy or a girl. I feel like I am nothing.”*

Reproduction: *“How did that baby get into your Mommy’s stomach? “When I have a baby, my tummy will keep it really warm.” (spoken by a male child)*

Religion: *“Ms. _____, you don’t need to take care of me because Jesus is going to do that.” “Is my grandma going to come back from the dead like Jesus did?”*

Anatomy: *“Why do girls make pee-pee out of their tushies?” “Why do you sit down when you pee?” (child asks another child), (teacher asks) “What do you think that Mommy is feeding the baby from her breast?” (child answers) “My mommy feeds the baby biscuits from her breasts!”*

Family Structure: *“I don’t understand why your Dad doesn’t live with you.” (Children looking at a book together) “That’s not a family! There is no Mom.”*

Race and skin color: *(spoken to a teacher with brown skin) “Where did you work before you were a teacher, like when you were a nanny?” “Hello Mr. _____!” (child mistakenly calls a brown-skinned facility worker by the name of a brown skinned teacher and confuses them because of their race)*

As children experience and witness life, it is our professional responsibility to help them make sense of their world in an age-appropriate way that keeps them feeling safe, but does not promote ignorance. Our school’s approach is to validate every conversation with every child as meaningful and important. We view their ideas and comments as worthy of collective thought and observation. Ideas about race, gender, identity, biology, and belief systems begin to form long before the children walk through the front doors of CEDS. Our job is to help them learn to think critically, to view the world from multiple perspectives, and to seek personal and collective understanding. Our job is not to teach the children *what* to think and learn, but *how* to think and learn. When we ignore children's questions and avoid difficult conversations we perpetuate a systemic problem. It teaches children that some things are ok to talk about and some things are not. Through our actions and responses, we must model for them that *all questions are good questions, that it is ok to talk about hard things and how they make us, and those around us feel, and that no matter what, we must respect and and celebrate our similarities and differences.*

At CEDS we want our students to grow in character and moral integrity while they are at our school. We emphasize kindness, respect, fairness, and equity so that no matter what future they inherit, they will be able to use their knowledge, compassion, and intellect to promote health, happiness, peace, and justice for *all* citizens.

Recently, you might be reading more opinions in the media about *teaching race in schools*. It has been interesting to see how the local community is navigating complex and conflicting vantage points on what is appropriate and what is not. From the perspective of our school, integrating anti bias/anti racist work into the curriculum is what CEDS has been doing for years! At the two to five year age level, anti-bias work looks a lot like what most loving, play-based, values-centered preschools have always looked like: lessons of how to be a kind, fair, and loving citizen permeate every classroom experience. Educating our students in how to practice kindness, respect, and empathy is not a political function, it is a human function. These fundamental social emotional growth points have always been the building blocks of the CEDS curriculum. They also happen to be the building blocks of anti-bias work and a just society. They pave the way for developing a vocabulary for expressing feelings, connecting to others, celebrating similarities and differences, and participating in empathic growth conversations later in life.

Identity: What makes *me* special? Where do I come from? How do I experience the world? What does my *family* structure *look* like? What does it *feel* like?

Diversity: What is my *community* like? How am I the same as my friends? How am I different? How many different types of people are in my school community? In my neighborhood?

Equity: What does it mean to be kind? Do we all have the same *feelings*? How do you show *empathy*? How can we be *fair* to ourselves, our friends, our teachers? How do we share materials and *responsibilities*? What does everyone need to be happy and healthy? Developing an understanding of individual needs vs. the whole class' needs. Looking for those who need help and lending a helping hand.

Justice: Making classroom agreements and rules for a *safe* classroom community, understanding how our actions connect to consequences. How do we fix a mistake or help someone feel better if we hurt them? How do we demonstrate *social responsibility*? If we read in a book or witness in real life someone being treated unfairly, we need to talk about how to help them so we can be *upstanders*, if we ignore what we see, we become *bystanders*.

Anti-bias & Anti-racist Curriculum: Observing children's misconceptions through their informal conversations and *play*. Plan activities that help children learn how to identify things that are unfair or untrue. Do they think and act as though everyone can play and participate? Does everyone have *access* to the

materials? Who might be feeling excluded or left out? Can everyone *connect* and relate to what we are discussing and learning about? Does everyone feel *welcome*?

As a community, we have essential values and beliefs that are the foundations of our program. Our collective beliefs lie in caring for one another, respecting others, and treating each other with kindness and empathy. We care deeply about everyone in our community and want every member to feel a sense of belonging. As the world changes around us, these values are never called into question. These values and beliefs are connected to our identity, our mission, our vision, and our goals; they are what make us CEDS.

This year has brought to the surface countless opportunities to see the inequities and bigotry that persist in our community. CEDS, like all individuals and organizations, has been given the opportunity to reflect on our practices, consider making adjustments, and research alternatives, if needed. CEDS has pioneered the effort to centralize discussions about fairness, equity, and kindness. This year we have been even more explicit and deliberate about tying these values to race. One of the many ways in which we are fulfilling our mission is through the work of our teachers who are experts in helping kids understand and navigate these concepts so that the children of CEDS are prepared to meet and shape the future.

As an educational institution, it is also our responsibility to regularly review our program and curriculum and evaluate how well we are meeting the goals of our mission. Like our dynamic and ever-changing emergent curriculum, our social and emotional curriculum must also evolve and change.