



Diversity in the Early Years



ACCEPTING AND RESPECTING DIVERSITY IN A PRESCHOOL SETTING: STEPS TOWARDS CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

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What do we mean by diversity and inclusion?

Diversity refers to the traits and characteristics that makes one unique which should be accepted and respected. Conflicts arise when diversities are neglected and treated as others; it gets resolved when diversities are accepted, respected and included. Therefore, inclusion of diversities is extremely significant for sustaining any organisation or structure. Inclusion refers to the attitude, behaviour and social norms of welcoming everyone irrespective of differences and inclusive environment therefore is a place where everyone feels welcomed.

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What does diversity look like in a preschool setting?

Diversity in a preschool classroom resembles to a colourful canvas where young children from diverse cultural backgrounds come together to play, learn and grow. In the context of a preschool classroom, diversity can be observed by understanding multiple dimensions—in terms of—identity, behaviour, interests and abilities etc.

- ◆ **Diversity influenced by culture** includes food habit, dressing styles, looks, colour, religion, beliefs, languages etc.
- ◆ **Diversity of interest** includes sports, studies, subjects, games, likes and dislikes etc.
- ◆ **Diversity of abilities** is physical, mental, intellectual, social, cognitive, creative skills etc.
- ◆ **Diversity of personalities** involves introvert, extrovert, shy, outspoken etc.
- ◆ **Diversity of identities** includes race, caste, nationality, sex, gender, class, personal and family experiences etc.

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Why diversity should be addressed in preschools?

Evidence shows that children become aware of—cultural, race, gender, class and physical differences—at very early age. They begin noticing differences and similarities as a part of their natural developmental process which influence both positive and negative attitudes and preferences with respect to diversity, including gender, disability and ethnicity. Typically, children come to the preschool with a general awareness of difference. It is preschool teacher's responsibility to recognize and understand this awareness, and to promote diversity within the preschool settings. As we all live in a diverse world, and therefore, accepting and respecting diversity and using an inclusive approach is essential to the provision of high-quality preschool practice. A preschool environment (including management and teachers) which accept and respect diversity of cultural influence and behave responsibly without favouritism has immense impact over children as a role model. However, this also brings a lot of new opportunities and challenges for preschool teachers who aim to create healthy and inclusive learning environments in their classrooms.

The next section of this article focuses on some of the key considerations for creating an inclusive physical environment in a preschool.

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How to create an inclusive physical environment in a preschool?

A preschool environment is not only physical (infrastructure, building, furniture, materials etc) but is psychological too. It plays a pivotal role in building each child's individual as well as group identity. The physical environment at preschool gives first impression about the school and help in understanding the families that diversity is valued and respected.

Appropriate displays can promote awareness about the issue and help in breaking down the misconceptions about the differences. To provide a rich and diverse inclusive environment, it is crucial to address the issues related to diversity and inclusion through every aspect of the preschool programme. Some of the key considerations in this context are:

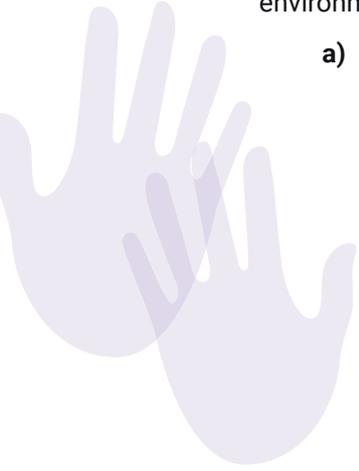
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- a) **Friendly school infrastructure:** Availability of services such as – ramps, wheelchairs, handrails, tactile path etc. – must be put in place to support different physical abilities and needs. Arrangement of indoor space, furniture, display and decoration must inspire and facilitate safe access, and independent learning for children.
 - b) **Preschool teacher's disposition:** Teacher should be well informed, trained, sensitive, respectful, and responsive towards the diverse abilities and needs of young children.
 - c) **Curriculum and pedagogy:** The curriculum should be relatable to the child by incorporating funds of cultural knowledge and day to day experiences. Pedagogy should be flexible for different abilities and designed in such a way that child feels accepted, welcomed, inspired and encouraged to voice own thought and put forward question without any hesitation.
 - d) **Multilingual approach:** Multilingual approach is best suitable in inclusive environment to address linguistic needs of young children where children can freely express themselves in their language.
 - e) **Play and learning material:** The play learning materials should be free from any kind of biased attitude and discrimination (gender, colour etc).

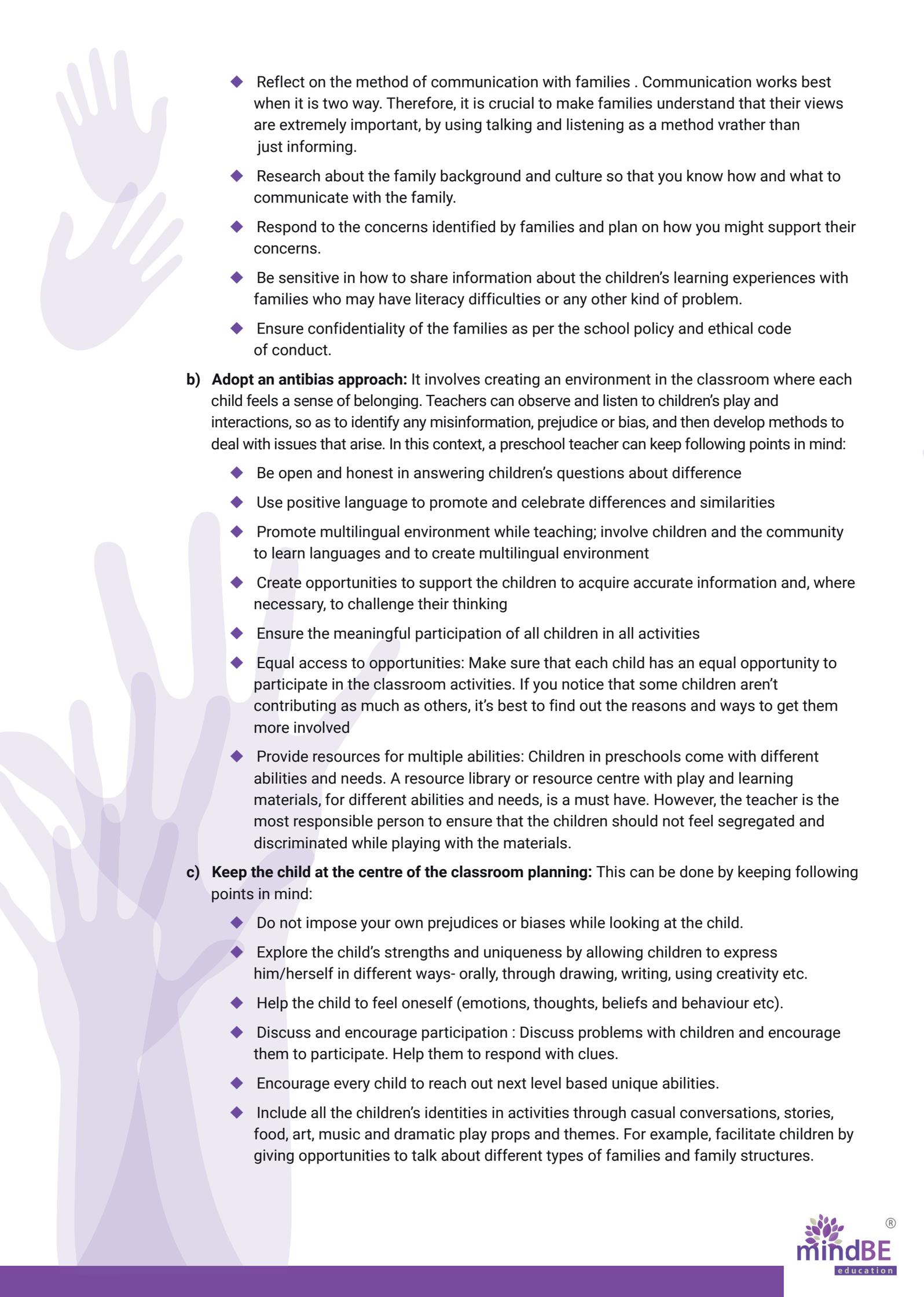
These are some of the key considerations related to the overall physical environment to ensure diversity and inclusion of all children. Next comes the learning environment and role of preschool teacher in promoting diversity. The next section of the article highlights a range of practical strategies for preschool teachers to focus on to encourage inclusion and diversity. These strategies have been identified from a careful review of the available evidence.

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What is the role of preschool teacher in bringing diversity and inclusiveness in preschool learning environment?

To promote an unbiased attitude and inclusive learning environment, it is important for preschool teachers to understand their own culture and behaviour so that they can better understand the child's behaviour and family background which is deep rooted in cultural values and beliefs. In this context, some of the key practical ideas which a preschool teacher can adopt for creating an inclusive learning environment are:

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- a) **Working in partnership with families:** This is one of the most pivotal aspect for understanding and accepting diversity in preschool. It can provide a means to educate families and communities about the importance of inclusion and diversity. Preschool teacher has a key role to play in working with parents to support their children; this includes identifying learning needs and responding quickly to any concerns. Some of the key pointers which can help in building partnerships with the families include:
 - ◆ Reflect on the method of communication with families . Communication works best when it is two way. Therefore, it is crucial to make families understand that their views are extremely important, by using talking and listening as a method vrather than just informing.

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 - ◆ Research about the family background and culture so that you know how and what to communicate with the family.
 - ◆ Respond to the concerns identified by families and plan on how you might support their concerns.
 - ◆ Be sensitive in how to share information about the children’s learning experiences with families who may have literacy difficulties or any other kind of problem.
 - ◆ Ensure confidentiality of the families as per the school policy and ethical code of conduct.

b) Adopt an antibias approach: It involves creating an environment in the classroom where each child feels a sense of belonging. Teachers can observe and listen to children’s play and interactions, so as to identify any misinformation, prejudice or bias, and then develop methods to deal with issues that arise. In this context, a preschool teacher can keep following points in mind:

- ◆ Be open and honest in answering children’s questions about difference
- ◆ Use positive language to promote and celebrate differences and similarities
- ◆ Promote multilingual environment while teaching; involve children and the community to learn languages and to create multilingual environment
- ◆ Create opportunities to support the children to acquire accurate information and, where necessary, to challenge their thinking
- ◆ Ensure the meaningful participation of all children in all activities
- ◆ Equal access to opportunities: Make sure that each child has an equal opportunity to participate in the classroom activities. If you notice that some children aren’t contributing as much as others, it’s best to find out the reasons and ways to get them more involved
- ◆ Provide resources for multiple abilities: Children in preschools come with different abilities and needs. A resource library or resource centre with play and learning materials, for different abilities and needs, is a must have. However, the teacher is the most responsible person to ensure that the children should not feel segregated and discriminated while playing with the materials.

c) Keep the child at the centre of the classroom planning: This can be done by keeping following points in mind:

- ◆ Do not impose your own prejudices or biases while looking at the child.
- ◆ Explore the child’s strengths and uniqueness by allowing children to express him/herself in different ways- orally, through drawing, writing, using creativity etc.
- ◆ Help the child to feel oneself (emotions, thoughts, beliefs and behaviour etc).
- ◆ Discuss and encourage participation : Discuss problems with children and encourage them to participate. Help them to respond with clues.
- ◆ Encourage every child to reach out next level based unique abilities.
- ◆ Include all the children’s identities in activities through casual conversations, stories, food, art, music and dramatic play props and themes. For example, facilitate children by giving opportunities to talk about different types of families and family structures.

d) **Go for intentional teaching:** Engage children with specific purpose, plan accordingly and practice. While teaching purposefully behave as a model to inspire children to inculcate responsive behaviour. Some of the strategies that can encourage children to realize own thought process and develop empathy towards others so that children can accept, and respect diversity are:

- ◆ Allow children to express their thoughts, views, comments, ideas: Help children with multiple approaches like- drawing, painting, singing, writing, speaking, rhyming, and playing etc; because all children are unique in expressing. Commentary of action during activity and 'self-talk' can be used as a tool to give children words to their thoughts.
- ◆ Discourage negative behaviour firmly and encourage positive desirable behaviour by acknowledgement. For instance, if one child says or does something hurtful to another child whom they perceive as different, then it is needed to confront the child about what was said by giving appropriate information and ensuring that the child realize the hurt caused. Telling a child, it is 'not nice or good' to say a particular thing –without giving the child an appropriate clarification as to why that is the case – will not change the child's attitude.

d) **Think critically and reflect:** It is important to constantly reflect upon your own thoughts and behaviour towards differences, to nurture the attitude of inclusiveness. In this context, some of the key points which can be kept in mind are:

- ◆ Confront stereotypical ideas or terms: these should be challenged on the spot to avoid any kind of discrimination
- ◆ Use clear explanations and language when discussing about discrimination or racism with children.
- ◆ Support children to understand why a particular behaviour is unfair and to realize how stereotyping can hurt people.

Apart from these key considerations, a preschool teacher can plan some specific activities to support children's culture and experiences and teach children the skills they need to succeed in a global society.

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Some activities that value diversity and facilitate inclusive environment

A classroom that practice and celebrate diversity reflects its inclusiveness through the activities they plan, books they read, materials they use and goodness that spread through behaviours and actions. Some activities and materials are suggested below that value diversity and can be integrated in the curriculum which children can learn through experiencing them:

ACTIVITY NAME	MATERIAL REQUIRED	INSTRUCTION/POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND
Tell a story	A book library consists of varieties of books	Use any book from the library that depict pictures and stories from different cultural experiences. Read the story from the book. At the end, ask children to imagine what comes to their minds regarding the various people in the story. Allow children to recognize particular characteristics (such as gender, race, class, or age) with specific roles from the story. Discuss and challenge stereotypes while children share their views.

ACTIVITY NAME	MATERIAL REQUIRED	INSTRUCTION/POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND
Play with toys	Variety of toys	Create a multicultural toy museum in the classroom to help children acquainted about different cultures. Let them freely explore and play with the toys. The colourfulness of the toys attracts children to love them.
Diversity bingo	Bingo cards	In each square of the bingo card, place an image of something from a specific culture. To play, hold up one of the large set of pictures. Ask children what the picture is and what culture it comes from. <i>Note: Bingo cards should be with images that relate to a specific culture and a large set of picture cards with the same images as those on the bingo cards</i>
Let's ready for fancy dress show	Clothing for various cultures	Have children try on the various items of clothing and discuss the culture that wears each one and why/how that style of clothing was created. Place the items in the dramatic play area so that children can wear the clothing as part of their play scenarios.
Music for everyone	None	Ask each child to get the details about the music from their family of origin (parents can write a page about it and handover to children). Collate the details by children and explain about each culture and how music plays a role in their cultures and celebrating traditions.
Let's celebrate	Use festival appropriate materials	Celebrate various cultural festival with support from families and communities. This help children to understand and value different cultural festivals and also to have fun.
Let's have a trip	None	Take children out to explore the culture, heritage, backgrounds and traditions of each child and family within the context of their community.
Be in a team	Football	Games like- football, basketball, etc develop sense of team spirit while approaching a common goal or target. Teacher can encourage children to play in team and help in understanding other perspectives in case the conflict arises.

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Conclusions

Valuing diversity is the need of contemporary world for sustainability. It should begin from early childhood. Therefore, preschool setting is the most fundamental platform for providing an environment that allows children to explore diversity through developmentally appropriate toys, books, music, and activities. Since, all children have right to learn and develop to best of their ability, preschools are bound to be responsible for providing diverse learning experiences to the young children along with parents and communities. In this context, the role of a preschool teacher is significant to demonstrate sensitivity, inclusiveness and respect towards all cultures.