Alabama's Standards *for* Early Learning and Development

APPENDIX EIGHT

ADVANCING EQUITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (NAEYC)

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF Early Childhood Education

In partnership with

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Position Statement

Adopted by the NAEYC National Governing Board April 2019

APPENDIX EIGHT

Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education

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. Thus, all early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity. They can do this best when they are effectively supported by the early learning settings in which they work and when they and their wider communities embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities.

#EquityinECE

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NAEYC Position Statement

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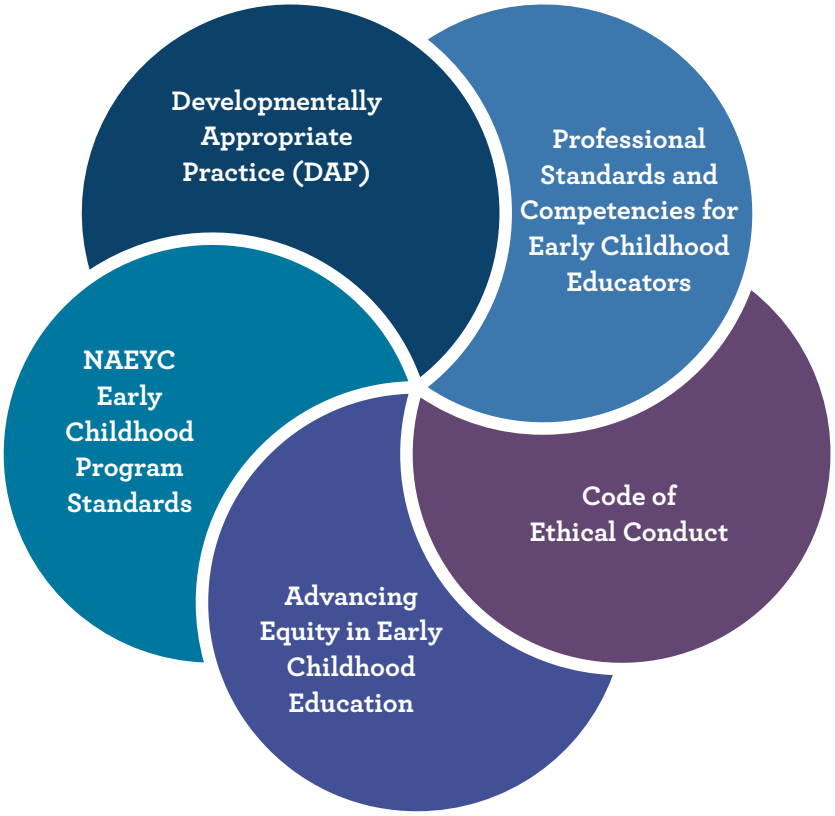
Purpose

This position statement is one of five foundational documents NAEYC has developed in collaboration with the early childhood profession. With its specific focus on advancing equity in early childhood education, this statement complements and supports the other foundational documents that (1) define developmentally appropriate practice, (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 that respect the dignity and worth of each individual. The statements are built upon a growing body of research and professional knowledge that underscores the complex and critical ways in which early childhood educators promote early learning through their relationships—with children, families, and colleagues—that are embedded in a broader societal context of inequities in which implicit and explicit bias are pervasive.

NAEYC's Foundational Documents



Purpose CONTINUED

Advancing equity in early childhood education requires understanding 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, sexual orientation, ability and disability, language, national origin, indigenous heritage, 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 inherent in public and private systems nationwide, including in early childhood education.

No single individual, leader, or organization has all the answers related to equity. NAEYC presents this statement after significant reflection and with humility and awareness of our own history and 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 nurture a more diverse and inclusive generation of young children who thrive through their experiences of equitable learning opportunities in early learning programs. 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 the systems of privilege and oppression in which we operate and based on 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.

This position statement outlines steps needed to

1. provide high-quality early learning programs that build on each child's unique 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.

The document begins with the statement of NAEYC's position regarding the importance of equity in early childhood education. It then provides recommendations for advancing equity, beginning with recommendations for self-reflection that apply to everyone. Specific recommendations are also provided for early childhood educators; administrators of schools, centers, family child care homes, and other early childhood education settings; facilitators of educator preparation and professional development in higher education and other spheres; and public policymakers. The recommendations are followed by a synthesis of current early childhood education research through the lenses of equity and NAEYC core values; this discussion of evidence identifies principles of child development and learning and how they are impacted by social-cultural contexts.

Position

All children have the right to **equitable learning opportunities** that enable them to 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 accord privilege to some and are unjust to others. 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 equitably distribute learning opportunities by helping **all** children experience responsive interactions that nurture their full range of social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and linguistic abilities; that reflect and model fundamental principles of fairness and justice; and that help them accomplish the goals of anti-bias education. 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 across diverse backgrounds;
- increasingly recognize and have language to describe unfairness (injustice) and understand that unfairness hurts;
- have the will and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.[1]

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 ignore or fear them.

When early childhood educators use inclusive teaching approaches, they demonstrate that they respect 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 help children 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—that may affect their decision making related to children.

To effectively advance equity and embrace diversity and full inclusion, early childhood educators need work settings that also embrace these goals—not only for the children and families served but also for the educators themselves. Early childhood educators should be well prepared in their professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions to teach in diverse, inclusive settings. They also need to be supported by, and to advocate for, equity- and diversity-focused public policies. Each of these areas is addressed more fully in the recommendations below. Although the primary focus of this statement is on equitable learning opportunities for young children, we stress that such opportunities depend on equitable treatment of early childhood educators as well. We make these recommendations understanding the critical importance of building a recognized early childhood profession and a system with sufficient funding to ensure that all its members receive equitable compensation and professional recognition that reflect the importance of their work.

Recognizing that both institutional and interpersonal systems must change, our recommendations begin with a focus on individual reflection. Across all roles and settings, advancing equity requires a dedication to self-reflection, a willingness to respectfully listen to others' perspectives without interruption or defensiveness, and a commitment to continuous learning to improve practice. Members of groups that have historically enjoyed advantages must be willing to recognize the often-unintended consequences of ignorance, action, and inaction and how they may contribute to perpetuating existing systems of privilege. It is also important to recognize the many reactions associated with marginalization that begin in early childhood and range from internalization to resistance.[2]

The following general recommendations apply to everyone involved in any aspect of early childhood education.

Recommendations for Everyone

1. **Build awareness and understanding of your culture, personal beliefs, values, and biases.** Recognize that everyone holds some types of bias based on their personal background and experiences. Even if you think of yourself as unbiased, reflect on the impacts of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression affecting you and the people around you. Identify where your varied social identities have provided strengths and understandings based on your experiences of both injustice and privilege.
2. **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.
3. **Take responsibility for biased actions, even if unintended, and actively work to repair the harm.** When you commit a biased action, be ready and willing to be held accountable. Resist the urge to become defensive, especially as 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.
4. **Acknowledge and seek to understand structural inequities and their impact over time.** Take action when outcomes vary significantly by social identities (e.g., lopsided achievement test scores, number and frequency of suspensions or expulsions that disproportionately target African American and Latino boys, or engagement with certain materials and activities by gender). Look deeper at how your expectations, practices, curriculum, and/or policies may contribute (perhaps unwittingly) to inequitable outcomes for children and take steps to change them.
5. **View your 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, their families, and others.
6. **Recognize that the professional knowledge base is changing.** There is growing awareness of the limitations of child development theories and research based primarily on a normative perspective of White, middle-class children without disabilities educated in predominantly English-language schools.[3, 4] Keep up to date professionally as more strengths-based approaches to research and practice are articulated and as 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 Educators[5]

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. Celebrate diversity by acknowledging similarities and differences and provide perspectives that recognize beauty and value across differences.
2. **Recognize each child's unique strengths and support the full inclusion of all children—given differences in culture, family structure, language, racial identity, gender, abilities and disabilities, religious beliefs, or economic class.** Help children get to know, recognize, and support one another as valued members of the community. Take care that no one feels bullied, invisible, or unnoticed.
3. **Develop trusting relationships with children and nurture relationships among them while building on their knowledge and skills.** Embrace children's cultural experiences and the languages and customs that shape their 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 of all genders, with and without disabilities, 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 and 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.** Doing this builds on the funds of knowledge that children and families bring as members of their cultures and communities while also sparking children's interest and engagement. Recognizing the community as a context for learning can model citizen engagement.
6. **Actively promote children's agency.** Provide each child with opportunities for rich, engaging play and opportunities to make choices in planning and carrying out activities. 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 but achievable goals for each child. Build on children's strengths and interests to affirm their identities and 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 Standard Academic English they are expected to use in school.[6]
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 particular concepts or skills. Differentiating support in a strengths-based way is the most equitable approach because it helps to meet each child's needs.
10. **Consider how your own biases (implicit and explicit) may be contributing to your interactions and the messages you are sending children.** Also reflect on whether biases may contribute to your understanding of a situation. How might they be affecting your judgment of a child's behavior, especially a behavior you find negative or challenging? What messages do children take from your verbal and nonverbal cues about themselves and other children? 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 education and health professionals as needed. 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, languages (including dialects), and culture. Gather information about the hopes and expectations families have for their children's behavior, learning, and development so that you can support their goals.
2. **Uphold every family's right to make decisions for and with their children.** If a family's desire appears to conflict with your professional knowledge or presents an ethical dilemma, work with the family to learn more, identify common goals, and strive to establish mutually acceptable strategies.
3. **Be curious, making time to learn about the families with whom you work.** This includes learning about their languages, customs, activities, values, and beliefs so you can provide a culturally and linguistically responsive and sustaining learning environment. It requires intentionally reaching out to families who, for a range of reasons, may not initiate or respond to traditional approaches (e.g., 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 intentional and responsive supports.** Ask families how they would like to be involved and what supports may be helpful. Families may face challenges (e.g., fear due to immigration status, less flexibility during the workday, child care or transportation issues) that may require a variety of approaches to building engagement. Recognize that it is your responsibility as an educator 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. Make sure families of emergent bilinguals 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.

Observe, Document, and Assess Children's Learning and Development

1. **Recognize the potential of your own culture and background affecting your judgment when observing, documenting, and assessing children's behavior, learning, or development.** Approach a child's confusing or challenging behavior as an opportunity for inquiry. Consider whether these may be behaviors that work well for the child's own home or community context but differ or conflict with your family culture and/or the culture of your setting. How can you adapt your own expectations and learning environment to incorporate each child's cultural way of being? Also, consider the societal and structural perspectives: How might poverty, trauma, inequities, and other adverse conditions affect how children negotiate and respond to their world? How can you help each 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 as many of the children's home languages as possible. If you are required to use an assessment tool that has not been established as reliable or valid 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. Seek to change what you can about your own behaviors to support that child instead of expecting the child to 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 against unfair policies or practices and challenge biased perspectives.** Work to embed fair and equitable 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 a professional responsibility 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 will look different in different settings because they reflect the values, beliefs, and practices of specific children, families, and communities.
2. **Take proactive steps with measurable goals to recruit and retain educators and leaders who reflect the diversity of children and families served and who meet professional expectations.** All children benefit from a diverse teaching and leadership staff, but it is especially important for children whose social identities have historically 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 agencies or organizations that can assist with translation and interpretation services. Avoid using the children themselves as translators as much as possible. Families may also be able to identify someone they are comfortable including in conversations.
4. **Ensure 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 and disability. 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 some 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 regarding equity issues.** Include opportunities for all individuals to reflect about their own cultural attitudes and behaviors as well as to uncover and change actions that reflect implicit bias and microaggressions toward children, families, school 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 network of resources available to all children and families.
8. **Establish clear protocols for dealing with children's challenging behaviors and provide teaching staff with consultation and support to address them effectively and equitably.** To consider potential effects of implicit bias, regularly collect and assess data regarding 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. Consider and address factors that create barriers to diversified participation (e.g., time of meetings, location of meetings, languages in which meetings are conducted).

Recommendations for those Facilitating Educator Preparation and Professional Development

1. **Prepare current and prospective early childhood educators to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children.** Ensure that prospective educators understand the historical and systemic issues that have created structural inequities in society, including in early childhood education. Ensure that their preparation and field experiences provide opportunities to work effectively with diverse populations.
2. **Prepare prospective early childhood educators to meet the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators** (formerly NAEYC's Professional Preparation Standards). Ensure that curriculum and field experiences reflect a focus on diversity, full inclusion, and equity within each of the competencies to cultivate culturally and linguistically responsive practices.
3. **Work with students, community leaders, and public officials to address 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 (e.g., limited public transit), financial constraints (e.g., student loans, tuition balances, outstanding bookstore bills), course scheduling during the working day, lack of child care, and the like. Design educational programs that put students' needs first and take identified barriers into account while also working to remove those barriers (e.g., loan forgiveness programs, evening and weekend courses, extended bus or train service, child care services aligned with course and professional development offerings).
4. **Implement transfer and articulation 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 and disability, 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 both children and adults.
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. **Use an equity lens to consider policy impacts on all children and on the bonds between them and their families.** Work to change any policy that either directly or through unintended negative consequences undermines children's physical and emotional well-being or weakens the bonds between children and their families.
2. **Increase financing for high-quality early learning services.** Ensure that there are 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 workforce. See the NASEM report *Transforming the Financing of Early Care and Education* for more details.[7]
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 the principles of equity across all aspects of education, including curriculum, instruction, full inclusion, family engagement, program design, and delivery.
4. **Make sure policies promote the use of authentic assessments that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for the children being assessed and use valid and reliable tools designed for a purpose consistent with the intent of the assessment.** Assessments should be tied to children's daily activities, supported by professional development, and inclusive of families; they should be purposefully used to make sound decisions about teaching and learning, to identify significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and to help programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.
5. **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.
6. **Include community-based programs and family child care homes in state funding systems for early childhood education.** Ensure that these systems equitably support community-based programs and engage community members and families in activist and leadership roles. Support the educators who work in community-based programs so they can meet high-quality standards while allowing families to choose the best setting for their needs.
7. **Ensure sufficient funding for, access to, and supports for children, teachers, and administrators to respond to children's behaviors that others find challenging.** Mental health supports and prevention-oriented interventions can help meet each child's needs, including mental health challenges, without stigmatization, and eliminate the use of suspensions and expulsions across all early childhood settings.
8. **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 by educators working with infants and toddlers, who are disproportionately women of color. Including educators working with infants and toddlers in compensation policies is a fundamental matter of equity.
9. **Incorporate the science of toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) into federal and state policies and programs.** Trauma-informed care and healing-centered approaches can support resilience and help mitigate the effects of toxic stress and ACEs, which affect children of all social groups but disproportionately affect children of marginalized groups.
10. **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.
11. **Set a goal of reducing the US child poverty rate by half within a decade.** A 2019 National Academies of Sciences report provides a consensus approach to achieving this goal through 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.[8]

The Evidence for this Position Statement

The recommendations are based on a set of principles that synthesize current early childhood education research through the lenses of equity and NAEYC's core values.[9]

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Principles of Child Development and Learning

1. **Early childhood (birth through 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.[10, 11, 12]

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.**[13] This creates richly varied and complex social identities (related to race, gender, culture, language, ability and disability, and indigenous heritage identities, among others). 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 them are treated.[14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19] 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.[20, 21, 22]

4. **Learning is a social process profoundly shaped by culture, social interactions, and language.**[23, 24] From early infancy, children are hardwired to seek human interaction.[25] They construct knowledge through their interactions with people and their environment, and they make meaning of their experiences through a cultural lens.[26, 27]

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.[28] 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.[29, 30, 31]

6. **Families are the primary context for children's development and learning.**[32] Family relationships precede and endure long after children's relationships with early childhood educators have ended. 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.[33] 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.[34] It also means actively working to support and sustain family languages and cultures.[35] 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.[36]

7. **Learning, emotions, and memory are inextricably interconnected in brain processing networks.**[37] 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. Connections to life experiences and sense of mastery and belonging are especially important for young children.

8. **Toxic stress and anxiety can undermine learning.**[38] 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 have a negative impact on all aspects of learning and development.[39, 40] Protective factors that promote resilience in the face of adversity include supportive adult–child relationships, a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control, opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacity, cultural traditions, and sources of faith and hope.[41]

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.**[42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47] That is, teaching practices, curricula, and learning environments are meaningful and engaging for every child and lead to challenging and achievable goals.

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.[48]

The Social-Cultural Context of Child Development and Learning

It is essential to understand that child development and learning occur within a social-cultural, political, and historical context.[49] 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.[50] 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 the ways in which society has granted or denied privilege to people based on certain aspects of their identity. Whiteness, for example, confers privilege, as does being male. Other aspects of identity that society tends to favor with easier access to power structures include being able-bodied, US born, Christian, heterosexual, cisgender, thin, educated, and economically advantaged.[51] Conversely, other aspects of identity tend to be associated with societal oppression, experienced, for example, by those who are members of indigenous societies and those who do not speak fluent, standard English. By naming such privilege and acknowledging the intersection of privilege and oppression, the intent is not to blame those who have benefited, but to acknowledge that privilege exists and that the benefits are unfairly distributed in ways that 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.[52]

Few men enter the field of early childhood education, reflecting the historic marginalization of women's social and economic roles—which has had a particularly strong impact on women of color. Comprising primarily women, the early childhood workforce is typically characterized by low wages.[53] 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.[54] Systemic barriers limit upward mobility, even when degrees and qualifications are obtained.[55] 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 and gender match between teachers and children can be particularly beneficial for children of color without being detrimental to other children.[56, 57, 58, 59]

The professional research and knowledge base is largely grounded in a dominant Western scientific-cultural model that is but "one perspective on reality and carries with it its own biases and assumptions."[60] 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 impact[61] on all aspects of system delivery, including professional development, curriculum, assessment, early learning standards,[62] and accountability systems.

The research base regarding the impact of implicit bias in early childhood settings is growing.[63] 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 and disability, 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 expulsion, beginning in preschool, for African American children, especially boys. Studies of multiple racial and ethnic subgroups in different contexts point to the complexity of the implicit bias phenomenon, with different levels and types of bias received by different subgroups.[64] 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.[65]

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, 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.

Find additional resources to help bring the statement to life at

NAEYC.org/equity

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 economy.[66] 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.

Join NAEYC to work with others committed to advancing equity in early childhood education; learn more at

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Acknowledgements

NAEYC appreciates the work of the Developmentally Appropriate Practice/Diversity and Equity Workgroup and the Early Learning Systems Committee, who participated in the development of this statement (asterisk denotes service in both groups): Elisa Huss-Hage (Chair),* Iliana Alanís,* Chris Amirault,* Amy Blessing, Garnett S. Booker III, Dina C. Castro,* Lillian Durán, Isauro M. Escamilla Calan,* Linda M. Espinosa, Kelly Hantak,* Iheoma U. Iruka, Tamara Johnson,* Sarah LeMoine, Megan Pamela Ruth Madison,* Ben Mardell, Lauren E. Mueller, Krista Murphy,* Bridget Murray,* Alissa Mwenelupembe,* Hakim Rashid, Aisha Ray, Jeanne L. Reid, Shannon Riley-Ayers,* Christine M. Snyder,* Jan Stevenson,* Crystal Swank,* Ruby Takanishi, Tarajean Yazzie-Mintz,* and Marlene Zepeda.

The workgroup and committee were primarily supported by staff members Barbara Willer, Lauren Hogan, and Marica Cox Mitchell. NAEYC also acknowledges the support of the Bainum Family Foundation toward this project. Finally, NAEYC thanks the many NAEYC members and others who provided input and feedback as this statement was developed.

Definitions of Key Terms

ability—The means or skills to do something. In this position statement, we use the term "ability" more broadly than the traditional focus on cognition or psychometric properties to apply across all domains of development. We focus and build on each child's abilities, strengths, and interests, acknowledging disabilities and developmental delays while avoiding ableism (see also *ableism* and *disability* below).

ableism—A systemic form of oppression deeply embedded in society that devalues disabilities through structures based on implicit assumptions about standards of physical, intellectual, and emotional normalcy.[67, 68]

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.[69, 70]

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. Implicit biases reflect an individual's socialization and experiences within broader systemic structures that work to perpetuate existing systems of privilege and oppression. An **anti-bias** approach to education explicitly works to end all forms of bias and discrimination.[71]

classism—A systemic form of oppression deeply embedded in society that tends to assign greater value to middle and upper socioeconomic status and devalue the "working" class.

culture—The patterns of beliefs, practices, and traditions associated with a group of people. Culture is increasingly understood as inseparable from development.[72, 73] 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.

disability and developmental delay—Legally defined for young children under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), disabilities include intellectual disability; hearing, speech or language, visual, and/or orthopedic impairment; autism; and traumatic brain injury. Under IDEA, states define developmental delays to include delays in physical, cognitive, communication, social or emotional, or adaptive development. These legal definitions are important for determining access to early intervention and early childhood special education services. The consequences of the definition can vary based on the degree to which they are seen as variations in children's assets or the degree to which they are seen as deficits.[74] (See also *ableism* and *ability*, above.)

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. The terms *diverse* and *diversity* are sometimes used as euphemisms for *non-White*. NAEYC specifically rejects this usage, which implies that Whiteness is the norm against which diversity is defined.

equity—The state that would be achieved if individuals fared the same way in society regardless of race, gender, class, language, disability, or any other social or cultural characteristic. In practice, equity means all children and families receive necessary supports in a timely fashion so they can develop their full intellectual, social, and physical potential.

Equity is not the same as *equality*. Equal treatment given to individuals at unequal starting points is inequitable. Instead of equal treatment, NAEYC aims for equal opportunity. This requires considering individuals' and groups' starting points, then distributing resources equitably (not equally) to meet needs. Attempting to achieve equality of opportunity without considering historic and present inequities is ineffective, unjust, and unfair.[75]

equitable learning opportunities—Learning opportunities that not only help each child thrive by building on each one's unique set of individual and family strengths—including cultural background, language(s), abilities and disabilities, 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.[76]

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 fluid and expansive. **Cisgender** individuals develop a gender identity that matches their legal designation. **Transgender** individuals are those whose gender identity and/or expression differs from cultural expectations based on their legal designation at birth.[77]

historical trauma—"The cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences."[78] 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.

inclusion—Embodied by the values, policies, and practices that support the right of every infant and young child and their family, regardless of ability, to participate in a broad range of activities and contexts as full members of families, communities, and society. The desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to help them reach their full potential.[79] Although the traditional focus of inclusion has been on addressing the exclusion of children with disabilities, full inclusion seeks to promote justice by ensuring equitable participation of all historically marginalized children.[80]

intersectionality—The overlapping and interdependent systems of oppression 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 structural inequity that can arise for members of multiple marginalized groups.

LGBTQIA+—An acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, 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, or environmental messages that implicitly contain a negative stereotype or are in some way dehumanizing or othering. These hidden messages serve to invalidate the recipients' group identity, to question their experience, to threaten them, or to demean them on a personal or group level. Microaggressions may result from implicit or explicit biases. People who commit microaggressions may view their remarks as casual observations or even compliments and may not recognize the harm they can cause.[81]

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. Such norms wrongly suggest that all other races and sexual orientations are outside the norm or are less preferable. Art activities focused on filling out a family tree, with designated spaces for "mommy," "daddy," "grandma," and "grandpa," for example, may assume a two-parent, heterosexual household as the normative family structure. (While some research-based norms provide guidance regarding healthy child development and appropriate educational activities and expectations, these norms have too often been derived through research that has only or primarily included nonrepresentative samples of children or has been conducted primarily by nonrepresentative researchers. Additional research, by a more representative selection of researchers and theorists, 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.

race—A social-political construct that categorizes and ranks groups of human beings on the basis of skin color and other physical features. The scientific consensus is that using the social construct of race to divide humans into distinct and different groups has no biological basis.[82]

racism—A belief that some races are superior or inferior to others. Racism operates at a systemic level through deeply embedded structural and institutional policies that have favored Whiteness at the expense of other groups. On an individual level, racism can be seen in both explicit and implicit prejudice and discrimination. Both individual and institutional acts of bias work to maintain power and privilege in the hands of some over others.[83]

resilience—The ability to overcome serious hardship or adverse experiences. For children, resilience is promoted through such protective factors as supportive relationships, adaptive skill building, and positive experiences.[84]

sexism—A belief that some gender identities are superior or inferior to others. Sexism operates at a systemic level through deeply embedded structural and institutional policies that have assigned power and prestige to cisgender men and caring and nurturing roles with little economic reward to cisgender women, to the detriment of all.

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.

structural inequities—The systemic disadvantage of one or more social groups compared to systemic advantage for 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.[85]

White fragility—A concept based on the observation that White people in North America and other parts of the world live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress, heightening their expectations for racial comfort and lowering their ability to tolerate racial stress. Even small amounts of racial stress can be intolerable to White people and can trigger defensive actions designed to restore the previous equilibrium and comfort.[86]

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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