

# Introduction

As a teacher of young children, you have the power to change children’s lives through what you do every day. The attention you give to the learning environment you create and your willingness to reflect on and address your own beliefs and teaching practices matter enormously. NAEYC’s position statement “Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education” says that

1. All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential.
2. All early childhood educators have a professional obligation to advance equity.
3. Early childhood educators need support to fulfill their mission.

Working to achieve equity in early childhood education settings involves a wide range of small- and large-scale actions and commitments by the field as a whole and by individual educators, from recognizing and understanding how structural inequities have limited children’s learning opportunities to being responsive to each child’s specific learning needs within the context of his culture, family structure, language, racial identity, gender, abilities and disabilities, religious beliefs, and economic class.

Early childhood educators play a critical role in the development of young children and must work to

- Create a caring, equitable community of engaged learners
- Establish two-way relationships that respect families’ expertise
- Ensure that all children are building foundational knowledge, vocabulary, and skills
- Use a range of teaching approaches to provide all children with the learning supports they need
- Observe, document, and assess children’s learning and development, acknowledging the potential for implicit bias based on their own experiences
- Advocate on behalf of young children, families, and the early childhood profession

Being an early childhood education professional also means a commitment to self-reflection, a willingness to respectfully listen to others’ perspectives without interruption or defensiveness, and continuous learning to improve practice.

The information that follows explaining what equity is and why it is important is adapted from a larger, more comprehensive supplement to the position statement on equity developed by NAEYC.

## Equity Is Not the Same as Equality

While both concepts are important, *equity* and *equality* are not the same. *Equity* means all children and families get the supports they need to develop their full intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, and physical potential. For teachers, equity builds on the widespread practice of meeting children where they are developmentally and extends the concept to consider all the unique strengths each child has and to intentionally ask how to build upon those strengths with activities, materials, and environments to maximize learning. Equitable teaching often includes working with families to create connections that extend and enrich learning.

Giving equal treatment 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 their needs. Attempting to achieve equality of opportunity without considering historic and present inequities is ineffective, unjust, and unfair. For teachers, it is important to keep in mind that what a child currently knows and is able to do is largely a reflection of the opportunities that child has had to learn—and not necessarily a good indicator of what the child is capable of learning.

## Why Equity Matters in Early Childhood

Early childhood education settings—including centers, family child care homes, and schools—are often children's first communities outside the home. 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.

## Why Now

The research base regarding the impact of implicit bias in early childhood settings is growing. 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 may lead to different expectations and treatment of children based on their race, gender, ability and disability, family structure and composition, body type, physical appearance, language, or social and economic status.

Implicit biases also result in differential judgments of children's play, aggressiveness, compliance, initiative, and abilities. These biases limit children's opportunities to reach their potential. They 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 and Latino children, especially boys.

There is growing awareness of the extraordinary ability that all young children have to learn, including learning multiple languages, engaging in critical thinking, and understanding many complex topics and ideas that researchers used to believe were too advanced for young children.



## About this Book

Advancing equity can seem overwhelming when you're an educator working every day with young children. You may have many different family languages within your classroom. Your background and experiences may be very different from that of children you teach. How do you adapt your teaching to give children the specific learning supports they each need?

Promoting equity in your classroom is within your reach, and this book will give you some of the tools you need. It focuses on what equity work can look like for teachers working with children ages 3 through 5 on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. Each contribution featured in this volume has been carefully selected because it embodies key messages from NAEYC's position statement on equity and offers inspiration for how you can implement many of those important ideas. You will find strategies and tips for how you can support the learning and development of each and every child in your classroom through intentional play opportunities and guided instructional supports. The chapters address a range of topics, including race, language, family structure, and ability, for you to explore and consider as you develop a strengths-based approach to teaching. The questions included at the beginning of each of the book's six sections invite you to evaluate how you might embed these ideas in your classroom, to reflect on the potential effects of implicit bias, and to think more deeply about how you can support diverse children and families.

The full scope of equity work cannot be addressed in a single book, and it is important to note that this collection does not cover the full breadth of topics discussed within the position statement. Consider this just one resource on your journey to teaching with an equity lens. NAEYC's position statement on equity, along with many more tools and resources, can be found at [NAEYC.org/equity](https://naeyc.org/equity).