

# ECT Interviews

## Early Childhood Director Desire J. Ford on... Celebrating Compassion and Cultures in the Classroom

**Early Childhood Today:** Desire, how do the teachers in your program encourage children to be kind and compassionate toward one another?

**Desire Ford:** First of all, we want teachers to understand how our own underlying values and behaviors determine the beliefs and behaviors of the classroom community. When teachers believe in racial and cultural diversity, in kindness and compassion, then the classroom environment actively encourages the development of these and other positive social values.

The classroom teacher also models empathy through her positive interactions, her warm responses, and her meaningful relationships with the children. This helps them develop a positive image of themselves and their world, which must happen before they can extend kindness and compassion to others.

**ECT:** Are there specific strategies teachers use in the classroom to advance these characteristics?

**Ford:** We encourage teachers to make a habit of walking around the classroom to compliment the children individually on the kindness and compassion of their interactions with others. Teachers have group discussions about behavior, where they model appropriate ways to express anger. They also announce individual children's compassionate acts at morning meeting.

We also focus on the concept of reciprocity with children. We want them to consider: What if that were me? How would I feel? What would I want others to do if that were me? So, after reading stories to children, we invite them to pretend to be different characters in the story and say what they would say. This makes it easier for children to



understand how another child is feeling in a classroom situation.

**ECT:** How do you help children resolve the inevitable disputes and misunderstandings that arise?

**Ford:** We do not permit fighting in our program. We explain to children that friends don't hurt each other's bodies or feelings. If a conflict arises, the children are taught to talk to one another to solve the problem, or to seek teacher help if needed.

When there is a conflict between two children, both children are called away from the situation for a mini-conference with the teacher. In front of

**Desire Ford** is the director of the River Park Nursery School, located in New York City. The school was founded in 1967. Desire has been working in the program since 1969.

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one another, each tells the teacher what is going on. The teacher models listening behavior, then asks leading questions to reveal all the information, summarizes or rephrases what is said, and interprets (explains the underlying thoughts and feelings of each child to the other). Although the teacher asks both children what other ways they can think of to solve the problem, it is the teacher who decides the best strategy and the fairest solution. Sometimes just a reminder about listening to one another is all that is needed.

unique and important, they come to accept that this is true of others as well. This idea of exploring similarities and differences occurs in other curriculum areas around the room. One of our science projects involves comparing the growth of beans: black-eyed peas, pinto beans, black beans, red beans. The children discover that although the beans differ widely in their physical appearance, and the shape of the leaves may vary, the growth pattern itself remains the same.

### **When teachers believe in racial and cultural diversity, in kindness and compassion, the classroom environment actively encourages the development of these and other positive social values.**

You know, we also help children define humor as a way of preventing conflict. Defining what is funny is important because in the classroom, laughter may or may not be an appropriate social response. Laughter can be a sign of disrespect or dismissal, signaling “You’re not important. I don’t have to listen to you.” So the teacher needs to set limits. Hurting people, whether it is their body or their feelings, is not fun or funny. Violence and destruction are not funny. The toys that we allow in the classroom, the kinds of books and stories we share, the dramatic play that is both encouraged and discouraged all help us communicate to children the values and styles of interaction that we support.

**ECT: Certainly, helping children learn and understand more about one another helps build harmony in the classroom. What programs do you have in place to help children learn more about one another’s cultures and traditions?**

**Ford:** River Park Nursery School was founded on the idea that each child is a unique individual, a valued and productive member of society, and that all groups of people, regardless of their cultural affiliation, make valuable contributions to our society and belong to one worldwide community.

We define culture as those characteristics which identify and separate one group of people from another—for example, language, music, food. We believe that children who embark on an exploration of their own culture as well as of other cultures (including those people who face daily special intellectual, emotional, or physical challenges) are more likely to develop a broader worldview than children who do not have this opportunity.

Our cultural studies program begins with an exploration of children as unique individuals and members of a specific cultural community. For example, each person has a face, but each face is special, with unique characteristics—this color eyes, that particular nose, this set of lips. When children feel they are valued because they are each

Throughout the year we engage children in many different activities that help them learn more about one another’s cultures and backgrounds, including participating in birthday celebrations, making “me” and “family” books, cooking, singing in other languages, and sharing during morning and afternoon meetings. Since River Park is a parent cooperative, our parents are actively involved in our program and are a wonderful resource for cultural enrichment activities.

**ECT: How do you avoid stereotyping as you explore other cultures?**

**Ford:** Young children need more than stereotyped references such as skin color to identify themselves and different cultural communities. For example, Africans, Caribbeans, and people from India may look similar in skin color, but information about each group varies greatly. To avoid racial and ethnic stereotyping, a broad range of cultural information is shared with the children when we explore peoples of the world. Our program offers in-school, hands-on experiences, including ethnic foods to see and taste, clothing to dress up in, artifacts to explore, songs to sing in particular languages, and folk stories to enjoy. Sometimes we attend performances of ethnic music, story, and dance.

**ECT: Since we live in a new world, with fears of terrorism and general mistrust so prevalent, how do you help children manage their anxieties?**

**Ford:** It’s true that the unpredictable nature of the violence and terror produces feelings of mistrust, and the level of anxiety rises. One way to counteract this is to rely on the positive relationships and mutual trust created in the classroom. Rules established to govern behavior are already in place, and therefore behavior of the group toward one another is fairly predictable. Hopefully, the trust, safety, security, and predictability that the teacher has helped establish within the classroom community will lessen the anxiety created by the unknown. **ECT**

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