

Helping Children Develop Empathy and a Sense of Social Justice

<https://www.easternct.edu/center-for-early-childhood-education/equity/empathy-and-social-justice.html>

About the Video

In this video, Vivian Paley explains the importance of supporting the development of children's empathy and sense of social justice from their earliest days.

Background Information

Vivian Paley believed there is no more important education than a social justice education. Over her long career as a Kindergarten teacher and author, she observed that young children have a keen sense of fairness and empathy—making early childhood the ideal time to engage in an anti-racist, social justice pedagogy. Paley believed children went to Kindergarten knowing three things: stories, how to play, and a sense of fairness. She tapped into this knowledge by developing social justice pedagogy that she called "doing stories." By asking children to dictate and then act out the stories they were originally doing in play, Paley found that children would consistently and pervasively act from a deep sense of empathy and justice. As children worked together, she found they would center (or re-center) their stories on equity and fairness. As an active observer of children "doing stories," Paley was able to highlight and support the decisions children made, helping to heighten their self-awareness and awareness of others. In this way, her work demonstrates how educators can and must teach young children on the complexities and importance of social justice. Not only is it age-appropriate to teach an anti-racist/social justice education in ECE, it is the ideal time to do so.



Discussion and Reflection Questions

1. What does "social justice" mean in a preschool classroom?
2. Why is it important to nurture empathy in a preschool setting?
3. What behaviors have you seen in young children that provide evidence of their natural kindness and understanding of fairness? How can you use those behaviors as an opportunity to engage in social justice education?
4. When you observe children engaged in play, what stories do you see they are playing? What opportunities do you see where you could point out children's choices and behaviors that demonstrate fairness or empathy?
5. How might you use children's books, puppets, or other tools and props to engage children in discussions on fairness and kindness?