



Tattoos and Piercings in Early Childhood Workplaces

Are Restrictive Dress Codes in Line with Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

by Heather Bernt-Santy

What do we know about typical child development? What do we know about the individual children in our care and classrooms right now? What do we know about their families and their cultures? Early childhood practitioners who are familiar with the three core considerations of developmentally appropriate practice, as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, will recognize these questions as those that should guide our decision making for our interactions and programs. But what role should these questions play in our decision making regarding staff dress codes?

When making decisions about curriculum, environments, interactions with children and expectations for children, it is vital that we are in alignment with the core values of our field. I would make a case for extending this consideration to dress code policies that prohibit early childhood practitioners from showing tattoos and non-traditional piercings. It is important that we maintain our commitment to reflecting children's lives and supporting their development in all aspects of our work—including our employee policies. One of the values of our field is to provide anti-bias education, a philosophy that reminds us that it is not the existence of difference that can affect children's development, but unfair practices because of differences. Dress codes that force the invisibility of tattoos and piercings can not only impact children's social and emotional development, but can also affect their cognitive and language development. *Omitted experiences* can be as impactful as *experi-*

ences. Using the three core considerations of developmentally appropriate practice as a guide, a case can be made for embracing the body art of our staff members.

First Core Consideration

The first step toward providing developmentally appropriate programming is to consider what we know about child development. What do we need to know about the typical characteristics, abilities and needs of children at this specific age? How do we take that knowledge and make decisions that foster healthy development and support children's learning? Of course, we would ask these questions as we planned curriculum, arranged classrooms or child care home environments or worked to assess children's development. This first core consideration should also extend to our decision making from an administrative point



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of view, and that includes our employee policies. A strong case can be made that in considering the developmental needs of children from birth to 8 years, changing our dress code policies to be inclusive of people with tattoos and piercings is a step in the right direction.

Perhaps the most important aspect of young children's development that could be supported (or hindered) by employee policies concerning tattoos and piercings in the workplace is their social and emotional development. In recent years, more attention has been paid to the value of intentional support and intervention in this developmental domain, as research has continued to highlight its importance for children's long term well-being.

What do we know about typical development in the early years? What do we need to take into consideration when making decisions that can impact children's social/emotional development? Let's start with Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. Children in early childhood programs will likely be working through the stages of autonomy vs. self-doubt, when they need to be supported in their development of confidence and self-worth and initiative vs. guilt, and when they need to be supported in their developing abilities. While conversations about these stages tend to focus on things such as self-help skills, decision making and idea exploration, they could be extended to include elements of identity formation. If a child in the autonomy vs self-doubt stage spends hours and days of her life in a setting where her family culture is invisible, she receives a powerful message that she is not as valuable or worthy as those who are regularly represented. A child who is working through the initiative vs guilt stage and never sees or interacts with others who look like their important adults may develop a sense of shame about his family.

Tattoos and piercings can also prompt rich language experiences for young children. Almost every tattoo represents a story or has meaning for the person who chose it. How many times have we heard or read that the more rich vocabulary children are exposed to in their early years, the better their reading skills will be? How many times have we lamented the language and vocabulary deficit faced by young children living in poverty? When we select books to read to and with young children, what is a major deciding factor? Vocabulary! New words! Tattoos also open avenues for supporting language development in this way.

One of my tattoos is a lyric from the Joni Mitchell song Chelsea Morning: "The sun poured in like butterscotch and stuck to all my senses." Another is a Fiona Apple lyric: "This mind, this body and this voice cannot be stifled." A third is a Native American symbol of "thunderbird," created as part of a fundraiser for water protectors in North Dakota. Imagine if a child asked me to talk about the pictures on my skin! I could provide many rich experiences in an area we know needs our intention in early childhood. When I am required to cover these tattoos, these opportunities are lost.

Second Core Consideration

The second aspect of developmentally appropriate program planning is to consider what we know about the individual children in our programs. While knowing general child development is important, we must also consider how to incorporate what we have learned about each child we see into our planning and decision making.

A child whose parent (or other important adult) has tattoos, purple hair or nontraditional piercings needs to see her family represented in her early child-

hood program. There are several ways that restrictive dress codes and biased attitudes about these forms of expression work against that child's healthy identity development.

Children who see their families reflected positively in their early childhood settings learn that they belong. They receive a message of affirmation and acceptance that is critical to their development as a unique individual. Children who do not have adults in their lives with tattoos and piercings also benefit from this visibility. They learn that the world is a positive place with many different kinds of people, who can all learn from and connect with each other. We will have both of these types of children in our programs and we need to be sure that we are ready. This means examining our conversations, attitudes and practices to avoid situations like these:

- Hillary, who hears one of her teachers say to another that people with tattoos have likely been, or will be, in prison. Hillary's mom has full sleeve tattoos and a leg tattoo and is a respected professor at the local university. She has never been in prison.
- Thomas, who writes on his arm with a marker in an effort to look like his tattooed dad, is scolded and told to wash it off because "tattoos are not nice."
- Rachel, whose mom is a goth with spiked purple hair, a septum piercing and several tattoos, is told to "come away from those people" when she moves to the playground fence to watch a group of high school students who look like her mom.

Imagine if these teachers had been given the opportunity to work alongside people who look different from them. Imagine if they had been given the gift of diversity before working with



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individual children like Hillary, Thomas and Rachel. How different and more intentional might their responses have been. What a gift to those children!

Children like Hillary, Thomas and Rachel cannot separate their sense of self from their families. When they come to us, they bring those ties with them. We have a tremendous responsibility to ensure that they know they are welcome. We can do that by welcoming staff who look like their families whenever possible.

Third Core Consideration

The third aspect of children's lives that we must consider in our efforts to provide developmentally appropriate

experiences is to consider the social and cultural contexts the children live in. The reality is that we will care for children whose families have tattoos, nontraditional piercings and “non-natural” hair colors. Dress codes that prohibit these types of personal expression are not only based on outdated social norms, they may work against our efforts to develop positive relationships with these children and their families.

While bias against those with tattoos, nontraditional piercings or unusual hair color may be based on outdated social norms, dress code prohibitions are usually rooted in concern about perception. What about the concern that potential customers may not see the value of this inclusion? I invite you

consider current concerns about the low numbers of men working in early childhood programs. Articles have been written, podcasts recorded and conference workshops presented on the value of recruiting and maintaining a male presence in the early childhood workforce, and yet I can tell you from my experience as a child care center director, there will be customer concern about this inclusion. I had requests that male teachers never be alone with children, that they never change diapers and that they not hug or hold children. As a field, we know that including men in our workforce benefits children and families from both a social and cultural perspective. We believe that the pros outweigh the cons presented by potential customer concern and trust in our ability to articulate our rationale.

It is time we take the same risk, to see similar benefits, with the diversity that a tattooed or pierced workforce provides.

The demand presented to our field in NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct that "above all, we shall not harm children" requires that we measure all decisions made in our work with young children and their families very intentionally. If we accept that children's identities are formed and impacted in our programs, then we must examine how their families and cultures are represented, or not represented, in our programs. Dress code policies that undermine this representation are at odds with the proclaimed values of our profession.

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