



Alaafia Kids Tidbits

Does Your Child's School Make the Grade?

Making Sure "Multiculturalism" Works

Even though it seems that one school year just ended, September will be upon us before you know it. In this article, we provide some benchmarks that schools should meet if they are "multicultural." Whether your child is just beginning school, returning to the same school, or starting at a different school, these benchmarks are a good way to be sure that your child's biraciality and multiethnicity is

recognized, respected, and even celebrated.

Why Does It Matter?

There's no doubt that it's absolute critical that your child feel at ease in his or her learning environment. If not, it will be difficult to progress academically and socially. Your child's school doesn't have to be perfect, but there are things that will aid your child's integration into the school setting.

Guidelines for All Age

Groups

Here are some tips for starters:

- Make sure "multicultural" isn't boxed into only five categories (white, black, Native American, Asian, Latino).

This is as true for forms with a race check-off box AND for teachers who "teach"

(Contd. on page 2)



Alaafia Kids Company

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Points of Interest:

- ☺ Bob Marley
- ☺ The Colors of Us
- ☺ The Culture C.O.O.P
- ☺ Anansi Advice
- ☺ Literacy in Young Children

Inside this issue:

Anansi Answers	3
Spotlight on an Alaafia Kid: Bob Marley	5
Nurturing Little Readers and Writers: 3-4 year olds	6
Surfing the Web	10
Book Nook	10

Multicultural Summer Fun

Celebrate National Anti-Boredom Month Educationally!

Did you know that July is National Anti-Boredom Month? We were a little surprised to discover this because we al-

ways seem to have too much to do all year long. However, for those who are looking for ways to beat the heat in be-

tween July 4th parties, vacations, summer camps, and family reunions, we suggest a few ways to spend
(contd. on page 4)

Nurturing Little Readers and Writers: 3-4 year olds

Surfing the Web 10

Book Nook 10

multiculturalism. Make them aware that YOUR child fits into more than one of those boxes! If you are raising your child to claim both (or all) of his/her heritages, make it known right from the start.

- *Check out the Diversity Curriculum and Programs at the School*

Be sure that those five racial categories mentioned previously are not presented as the five cultures of the world. We know that the confusion between RACE and CULTURE occurs all the time. It's a dangerous game that we all need to eradicate wherever we see it. Ask how multiraciality is addressed in the diversity programs and what mechanisms and outlets students have to deal with issues surrounding their multiraciality, such as possible racial remarks made by others or social rejection.

Preschool and Elementary Schools

Look carefully at the school to see how well it measures up! How well does it answer these questions:

- *Does the program involve some kind of conflict resolution?*

Even three year olds may need help in learning to play with and accept children who look different from them. Regular role-playing and follow-up discussions may be all that's needed to eliminate future problems. Books, music and videos about diverse children may help, too.

- *Are there visual images of multiracial children and their families in the learning environment?*

Very young children who cannot read or write depend on pictures to help them understand their world. Pictures may help them communicate as well. If you don't see pictures like these, bring in some and ask that a diversity display be put up

somewhere in the classroom.

- *Is artistic play an important part of the educational program?*

Children love arts and crafts! Use this fact to incorporate diversity education among young children. Play with skin-tone paper, crayons, clay, and paints to create all kinds of people. In the process children get the message that natural differences are okay! All of these multicultural arts and crafts supplies are available at Alaafia Kids. Please let your school or childcare center know that Alaafia Kids offers bulk discounts on these products. Alaafia Kids also produces a series of coloring-story books and puzzles that celebrate multiraciality and heritage. Accompanying lesson plans are available FREE of charge. Please tell your child's teacher about these great resources!

Middle and High Schools

There are many things that older children and adolescents can do to learn about and appreciate their multiraciality. When done in a school setting, everyone develops a greater social awareness. Here are some ideas that you can inquire about at your child's school, or suggest that they be done.

- *Does the school invite multiracial individuals to school to speak?*

Begin discussions with the student body as a whole. Maybe Colin Powell or Tiger Woods, can't make it in, but there are plenty multiracial people out there! Then have school debates and discussions on some of the issues raised. Contact Alaafia Kids at Jeanne@AlaafiaKids.com for some ideas and leads.

- *Is there a school-wide Family Tree Program in place?*

This can be an ongoing project for everyone that can result in a gallery of photos and family facts to display. Because of our nation's "melting pot" history, even some of the "caucasian" students may discover a few surprises!

- *Do courses feature biracial individuals throughout the year?*

There are plenty of famous folks in history that are multiracial or part of mixed families. Frederick Douglass and Pocohantas come to mind. Students could research more themselves and report back with their discoveries. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in January or African American history Month in February are two occasions to highlight these individuals.

Conclusion

All of these school-based experiences from preschool through high school will increase awareness and acceptance of mixed race individuals in our society. They will make it easier for your child to become a part of the social fabric. If these activities and others like them are not already in place, you can be an active parent and suggest them. Volunteer to organize them! Your continued presence at school will help administrators and teachers see that a diversity program and curriculum are needed to make the school year be successful and rewarding for everyone.



Anansi Answers

Dear Anansi,

Please help! I am really at wit's end. I am an African American man married to a white woman. Although my in-laws weren't thrilled about my marrying their daughter, we all seemed to be civil to each other at least. But now, we have two beautiful children. My parents love them dearly and babysit frequently, come over, host us for extended stays at their home, etc. But my wife's parents refuse to acknowledge our children! What can I do to cross the intergenerational and inter-racial divide?

Carl S., New York, NY

Dear Carl,

This is a sticky situation that you need to remedy as soon as possible. To help your own children form their identities as mixed race individuals, you need to surround them with ALL members of their extended family. This may take some time, but it will be worth it.

You can encourage your wife to talk with them and try to get her parents to come around. Remind them that your children are their flesh and blood, too. If your wife knows a family friend whose opinion matters to her parents, she could ask him/her to intervene. Send family photos often to your parents, and have pictures of the grandparents around your home, too. Request that your wife invite them over frequently. An endearing child is hard to ignore for long.

Good Luck! *Anansi*

(Contd. from p. 1)

time with your children, do something fun, and learn about other cultures, too.

Making Masks (for ages 4+)

There is something about making masks that children (and some adults!) love. We have made so many that we thought our children would be uninterested in yet another mask project. But we have never found this to be the case. Masks have a mystique about them goes all the way back in time, in terms of world history and in terms of a person's history. (Note, for example, how even very young babies adore Peek-a-boo where hands serve as the mask.) For this activity, you can get some mask books from the library or find some pictures on the Internet. Or, simply wing it and use your imagination!

Materials: cardboard backing, skin-tone paper (available from *Alaafia Kids Company Arts and Crafts Page*), cord or elastic, paint or colored paper, decorating materials (beads, feathers, etc.) scissors, glue (Craft Paper available from *Alaafia Kids Company* is also good for decorating)

Procedure:

1. Trace a large shape (bigger than a face) on the skin tone paper. It can be an oval, circle, triangle, diamond, or some combination.
2. Draw eye holes, and, if desired, a hole for the nose and a semicircle for the mouth.
3. Cut out the shape and then trace it on to the cardboard. Cut out the shape and holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth.

4. Glue the paper shape on to the cardboard backing.
5. Make two holes where the ears should be for tying a cord or elastic. Use the wearer's head to guide placement and length of cord/elastic. Attach the cord/elastic.
6. Decorate as desired! Enjoy them by acting out a short play.

Making Drums (for ages 4+)

Children love to bang...just bang! Alaafia Kids have even more reason to bang on drums because for many it's a part of their heritage. Meet their need to bang by making this drum out of things around the house and garage.

Materials: metal can or heavy carpet or poster tube, old beach ball or large piece of rubber, heavy sealing tape, medium gauge wire, wire crimps, decorating materials (colored paper, acrylic paints, feathers, beads, etc.)

1. Take the top and bottom off of the can (if using a can).
2. Size the rubber/beach ball to extend 4-5 inches over the top of the can or tube. Cut it out.
3. Tape it down temporarily, but leave space on the ends for inserting the wire in holes that you make every 4-5 inches around the circumference of the rubber or plastic.

(Contd. on page 5)

1. Pierce holes with the wire, then "tie" the wire by twisting it to stay in place.
2. Extend the wire to go over the bottom of the tube or can. Turn the wire under and take it in place.
3. Decorate your drum any way you like!
4. With the masks, add music to a short show that you put on in celebration of National Anti-Boredom Month.

Then think about what you can do during the dog days of August...

Spotlight on an Alaafia Kid: **Bob Marley**

There's no question that Bob Marley is the Leader of Jamaican Reggae. There's also no question that Bob Marley's music influenced countless musicians and musical genres and will probably do so for some time to come. But did you know that Bob is an *Alaafia Kid*?

Bob was born in a small Jamaican village called Nine Miles in 1945. His mother, Cedella, was Jamaican. His father was Norval Marley, a white British Naval Officer. The Marley family did not approve of the marriage between Norval and Cedella, so Norval was an absentee father while Bob lived on the island. Norval died before Bob became really successful.

Bob recorded his first record in Kingston, Jamaica, when he was just 16! And you know the rest of the story....

Some things that we want to mention about Bob that may not be too well-known concern his religion and his peace activism. Bob was a very spiritual person. He grew and maintained his dreadlocks, for example, because of his relig-

ion. During one concert, he had the Prime Minister of Jamaica and the leading political opponent shake hands on stage, marking his mark on history forever. Bob won the United Nation's Peace Medal for that. Bob also led the Zimbabwe Independence celebrations in 1980.

Bob died of cancer while he was still just a kid at age 36. However, he lives on forever through his music. This is one of our favorite lyrics because it sings about the need for multiracial acceptance if we are to have real peace in this world:

Until the philosophy which hold one race

Superior and another inferior
Is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned

Everywhere is war, me say war"

- Bob Marley,
"War"

NOTE: You can find some great reggae music for kids on our [Multicultural Music Page](#).



Nurturing Little Readers and Writers Part II: 3-5 Year Olds

In Part I of this series, we outlined all kinds of ways that parents can put their children on a fast-track to literacy, even newborn infants. The major points of that article (see the May/June 2005 Alaafia Kids Tidbits Newsletter for details) apply to three- and four-year old children, too. The difference is that with older children, we should increase the complexity of the literacy activities that we do with them on a regular basis. In this second part of the Nurturing Little Readers and Writers series, we will take a closer look at the abilities of three- to four-year olds and suggest activities that are appropriate for them.

Introduction

By age three, most children are well on their way at mastering the basic grammatical rules of a language (or languages, if they been bi- or trilingual since birth as our children have). Although this process is considered to be complete in the fifth year of life, we should talk to our preschoolers about things with a greater complexity than you used with younger children. Do not hesitate to use a complexity *almost* equal to that which we would normally use when speaking with an adult. They are absorbing so much at this time so feed their minds with information! Simplify if your children are close to reaching their frustration levels. Of course, simplify your descriptions and explanations if you truly believe that your child is learning-challenged in some way. Ask a learning specialist for advice if necessary.

Spontaneous Literacy Activities to Engage in When the Moment Arises

Every moment you are with your children should be viewed as an opportunity to assist them in their literacy journey. This does not mean that you put their noses to the grindstone with pencil to paper. No! In fact, at age three to four, certainly have pencil and paper avail-

able to them at all times, but go easy on the worksheets, if you use them at all!

- What we do mean is to talk to your children about whatever it is you're doing at the time. You may think this is too obvious to even be worth mentioning. But I witness so many silent parents and children at times when lively discussions are warranted. They are not only registering and reinforcing the rules of grammar while talking and listening, but they are also developing their "background" knowledge base. In effect, you're providing some of the "content" that your children need to become proficient readers and writers. Research shows that children with a greater knowledge base at an early age learn to read and write much faster and more easily than their peers who lack a broad knowledge base. You can do these literacy activities while shopping, while putting gas in the car, while passing a construction site, while eating at a restaurant, etc. The list is really endless!
- In the same spirit as the first point, expose your children to new experiences. Attend events at your public library such as puppet shows and hands-on demonstrations. Find out if your community has a children's theatre and join, as actors and spectators. Visit the children's areas at local museums and art galleries. If you participate in a sport or exercise program, engage your child in it, too, if feasible. While engaging in these new experiences, talk with your children. Explain what's going on. Ask "why" questions.
- You have opportunity to teach your children new words every time you are doing something new. One sign that it is a new word is when your children repeat the

word. Repeat it often back-and-forth until you think your children have it. Then practice it at least twice more in the next few days. Children need exposure to something new at least three times before it becomes a part of them.

Using big, bright pictures and illustrations in books and magazines is also very useful at this age. Always begin by asking your children what they see or know first. Then give several minutes for your children to respond. If your children seem stumped, ask action questions such as "What is she doing?" or "Why is he running?" or something appropriate about a particular picture to prompt them. Then give them more wait time! In our experiences children often know something but may have trouble verbalizing it. Assist them by providing clues. If the picture shows something very new to your children, choose one or two major words associated with the picture, label the object or action, and repeat over the next three days.

Another useful activity in building background knowledge is to explain how to use objects and their mechanism of action. For example, a conventional toaster or mixer are usually very interesting devices. Likewise, a blow dryer or fan usually attracts a great deal of interest. *Please use caution around electrical devices.*

An added plus in doing these kinds of explanations is that you have the opportunity to teach process words (first, then, after, etc.) that are abstract words that have no direct object correlation. Knowing how to use these

words is important when using abstract thinking. Although children are not considered to be able to think abstractly until they are at least seven, you may stimulate this process through early exposure at any time, as long as your children do not seem frustrated. Furthermore, talking about mechanisms of action or processes (such as making a cake or planting a garden) provides you with the opportunity to work on cause-and-effect terminology and critical thinking. In effect, you're teaching literacy without even a pencil or paper! With broad background knowledge, and mental concepts followed by words, children will have an easier time learning how to read and write.

- Don't forget to play with language! Spontaneous rhyming is a great activity especially when you're just learning new words. Use familiar words to acquaint children with new words belonging to the same "word family." For example, *book*, *cook*, and *hook* are in the same word family. When making a cake or installing some clothes hooks, play with this rhyme scheme by making up tongue twisters such as "The cook in the book has a hook" or something even sillier such as "Harry the hook is happy with the cookbook." Try to say them fast and encourage your children to do the same! Make up new tongue twisters using the same words on different occasions doing the same activity.

Encouraging Reading in Your Three- to Four-Year Old

We cannot emphasize enough how important it is to read to your child! Read all kinds of books: fiction, nonfiction, fairy tales, etc. Read favorite books over and over again until your

(Contd. on p. 8)

children (not you!) get tired of them. Soon your child will be repeating phrases and even sentences while you are reading. At this age it is permissible to point to words while reading them, sometimes. You are basically doing this as a way to solidify the printed word-oral word correspondence.

We do not recommend this technique as a way to teach reading. Finger-pointing words has been shown to decrease reading fluency and reading comprehension. Here are some other things you can do to teach reading to three- and four-year olds.

- When reading rhyming books with a preschooler, stop before completing a rhyme and ask your children to complete the rhyme. Prompt them by giving them word clues if necessary. The clues may be in the form of pictures or questions. As a very simple example, *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great _____.* Show a picture of Humpty sitting on a wall and point to it. Provide the first letter sound if needed.
- Start to develop the notion of plot while developing critical reading skills by asking your children what will happen next in the story. If it's a new story, you may have to provide some hints. Describe some real situations that your children have been in and draw analogies. Then when your children guess correctly, praise their thinking abilities. If the answer is less than perfect, continue with more prompting until they get closer. Stop before the frustration level gets too high, of course. If you need to provide the answer, express hope that the next time they'll be right.

Encouraging Writing in Your Three- to Four-Year Old

Young children need to master the alphabet before anything else. We believe that the best way to learn about letters is by playing with them! You can also help your children master their cutting skills by using old magazines to cut out target letters and pictures. Then assemble the pages into a picture dictionary! Here are some other activities that you can do with your preschooler.

- The best letters to begin with are those found in your children's names! They will be enthralled to learn that some of the letters are in their very name, probably the first word they learned. Display the name prominently in a few places in your home. Practice saying and forming the letters until your children know them. It is recommended that children learn to *write* on blank sheets of paper, on sand or sidewalk, etc. These media encourage spontaneous letter formation that flows. Dotted letters to trace or lines to write on detract from the children's ability to write because it makes them concentrate on staying on the lines rather than on forming natural-looking letters.
- Use the environment around you to learn letters. Point out letters everywhere: on street signs, in stores, in magazines, in mail, etc. Encourage your children to do the same. Soon they will be doing it spontaneously. When they do, make comparisons with other words they know to point out how the same letters appear in different words. Develop mental word lists for each letter.
- Purchase some bright magnetic letters to place on your refrigerator. Your children will spend hours arranging them. Focus on one or two letters at a time.

- Foam letters used in painting or wooden letter puzzles are also good ideas. Ask your child to identify certain letters from a group of two or three letters. Some theorists have developed ordering schemes recommended for quick learning of the alphabet based on ease of letter-sound production (these usually begin with a, s, m, and d). There is no harm in doing it this way but it is not necessarily better. Nor is a sequential A to Z mandatory. We have found that using the children's interest or fascination with a certain letter at a given time works well. Likewise, we have found, contrary to some theorists, that teaching the upper- and lowercase letters together eases the transition to reading because children will already be familiar with the idea that each "sound" is written in two ways and the two ways occur together in books.

Conclusions

Putting your children on a fast-track to literacy can and should be fun! Start by using daily speaking and listening activities that develop critical thinking skills. Good thinkers make good readers and writers! In conjunction with these activities, introduce books, books, and more books, again and again! Make your environment print-rich and use it to teach the alphabet. Specifically, we addressed the following ideas in great detail in this article:

- Talk and listen to your children about everyday activities while engaged in those activities.
- Expose them to new people, places, and things, talking about them all the time.
- Teach them new words in context

even abstract words and process words.

- Play with language, such as with rhymes and tongue twisters.
- Develop analytical skills by asking your children "What will happen next?" in any book you're reading.
- Use magnetic, foam, or wooden letters while learning the alphabet. Let your children choose which letter they wish to learn. Develop a mental word list for each letter.
- Cut out letters and pictures in old magazines and put together a "dictionary."
- Identify letters in signs around town, in mail, etc.

Alaafia Kids Company has developed two **Reusable Alphabet Art Flip Charts, Uppercase and Lowercase Letters**, filled with letter art accompanied by imaginative, alliterative sentences. The letter is actually part of the art itself!

The **Flip Charts** are bound and laminated; just wipe off and reuse! Children can color in block letters, trace dotted letters, or fill letters in the art itself, completely in free form style. A graded activity sheet comes FREE with each purchase. Please see the [*Alaafia Kids' Reusable Alphabet Art Flip Chart Page*](#) for more information. Four pages of the **Reusable Alphabet Art Flip Charts** are available for downloading!

NOTE: *This article is part of a series of articles about literacy. Many of these techniques are appropriate for the homeschool or may be used to supplement traditional forms of education. The opinions expressed here are those of Jeanne Yacoubou, Alaafia Kids Company founder. Ms. Yacoubou holds three Master's degrees, one of which is in education. She also is a certified teacher with years of teaching experience. In the next issue of **Alaafia Kids Tidbits Newsletter**, we will focus on multicultural activities for young children.*

Surfing the MULTICULTURAL Web

One website that you're sure to find motivational in a multicultural sense just by looking at it is the website of *The Culture C.O.-O.P.*, www.CultureCo-Op.com. A non-profit organization founded by Sandy Lynne Holman, this organization embodies its name: **Caring, Optimistic, Open-minded People**. *The Culture Co-Op* strives to raise multicultural awareness through its services and products. The founder, Ms. Holman is a nationally acclaimed motivational speaker who educates businesses, schools, and community organizations about diversity issues. Ms. Holman has also written several highly celebrated books, some of which are available through *Alaafia Kids Company* on its **Multicultural Books Page**.

The Culture Co-Op's website is easy to navigate and loaded with information about its services and products. We found the FAQ Page especially informative about the meaning behind the organization's logo and background on its books. Also on the website, you can go through the books page by page to see just how wonderful they are! For anyone whose school, group, or community organization could benefit from a keynote speech at their next event or some diversity training among their staff, *Alaafia Kids Company* strongly recommends considering *The Culture Co-Op*.

Book Nook

The Colors of Us by Karen Katz © 1999

The Colors of Us is a book about friendship that spans self-love, love of peers, love for mom, and love for community members. What unites all of these people is different skin tone shades. This book simply exudes multicultural love on every page. Another great thing about it is that it is truly celebratory of all kinds of brown people no matter what their racial or ethnic identity. *The Colors of Us* portrays different skin color shades as normal, a message that I think we all want to send to our children.

Furthermore, this book makes the skin color differences so appealing because it calls each one by a provocatively interesting name such as honey, cinnamon, creamy peanut butter or French toast. When Lena, the seven-year-old protagonist, takes her observations to the next level by mixing paints to produce all the shades of brown that she sees in herself, her family, and her friends, she invites all of us to do the same. You can find this book on the *Alaafia Kids Company* **Multicultural Books Page** and the multicultural paints on our **Multicultural Arts and Crafts Page**.