

# Are Cherry LifeSavers Really the Best? Pausing to Reflect on Biases

BY PAULA STEFFEN

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? You will likely quickly notice some obvious features— the shape of your face, nose, and mouth, and the color of your skin, hair, and eyes. But what requires a deeper level of self-reflection is what’s inside – what we think and feel, our values and beliefs, and personal preferences, as well as our thoughts, likes, and dislikes.

If we look hard enough in the mirror, we will see that we are all biased. I am biased. You are biased. And these biases affect how we interact with others, form judgments, and develop societal attitudes.

According to Merriam-Webster, a [bias is a tendency](#), inclination, or prejudice toward or against something or someone. As a child, I loved cherry LifeSavers. In fact, I couldn’t figure out why the Mars candy company would even bother to put the pineapple LifeSavers in the packet. They were my least favorite - to the point that I threw them away. You can imagine my delight when they came out with a roll of ONLY the cherry flavor! Based on my taste preference, I was biased in favor of the cherry LifeSavers and against the pineapple. It wasn’t until I was older that I realized some people loved the pineapple LifeSavers as much as I loved the cherry.

My bias or preference for cherry LifeSavers was relatively harmless. However, when we exhibit favoritism or discrimination against certain groups, particularly based on their traits such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or abilities, it can have a detrimental impact.

Personal biases can be implicit (unconscious) or explicit (conscious), and at times, they are easily spotted, while other times, they show subtly in our decisions or interactions with others. Either way, as early childhood leaders, it is essential to pause and reflect on our own biases and help staff understand the importance of reflecting on their biases. As a center administrator, I practiced reflecting on my personal biases by journaling about times in the day that caused me to pause or the situations that “hit a nerve.” This allowed me to consider whether my assumptions were accurate, the other person’s perspective, and why I felt the way I did in the moment.

As you can imagine, failing to recognize and address our biases can have disastrous results, setting the stage for stereotyping, prejudice, and inequity. In their book, “Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People,” Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald suggest several proactive steps individuals can take to address their unconscious biases, starting with:

1. **Be self-aware:** Take time to observe your thoughts and reactions in various situations throughout the day. Are there any instances where you notice automatic judgments or assumptions about others? What might be underlying these biases? Below are two situations for you to reflect on to practice self-awareness.
  - Reflect on a recent interaction you had with someone from a different cultural background. Were there any moments where you noticed biases or assumptions influencing your thoughts or behaviors?
  - Think about a time when you made a snap judgment about someone. What factors do you think contributed to that judgment? How might those factors be influenced by bias?

Self-awareness is a critical part of working with young children because our biases influence how we care for children and how we lead program staff. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *Program Administration Scale (PAS-3)*, an assessment tool for measuring and improving Whole Leadership in early care and education programs, Drs Talan, Bella, and Bloom highlight the importance of administrators reflecting on personal bias as well as providing staff with opportunities to reflect on biases and their influence on behaviors.

2. **Education:** Raise your and your program’s awareness about bias through trainings and educational programs. This can include workshops, seminars, or online courses designed to help individuals understand the nature and impact of bias. Again, the PAS-3 recognizes the value of continuing education by emphasizing the importance of professional development opportunities exploring diversity, equity, and inclusion.
3. **Mindfulness:** Practicing mindfulness techniques can help us become more attuned to our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, enabling us to identify and counteract biases as they arise.
4. **Question Assumptions:** Banaji and Greenwald encourage us to question our assumptions and stereotypes about others. By challenging preconceived notions, we can avoid making snap judgments based on bias.
5. **Seek Diverse Perspectives:** Actively seeking out diverse perspectives and experiences can help counteract bias by broadening one’s understanding of different groups and cultures. Over the years, I have been exposed to so many wonderful treats, and while I still enjoy the occasional cherry LifeSaver, my life is much richer because I have had opportunities to explore other candies, including my now favorite – anything chocolate.
6. **Create Inclusive Environments:** In workplaces and other settings, fostering inclusivity and diversity can help mitigate the impact of bias. This can involve implementing policies and practices that promote fairness and equality for all individuals.
7. **Hold Yourself Accountable:** Finally, Banaji and Greenwald emphasize the importance of holding oneself accountable for addressing bias. This includes acknowledging mistakes, apologizing when necessary, and committing to ongoing efforts to challenge and overcome bias.

Below is a list of resources that might be helpful as you begin to look in the mirror and reflect on your own biases. As leaders in the early childhood care and education field, we must recognize and address our personal biases so we can create inclusive environments where children can thrive. Commit with me to challenging bias to build a brighter future for all children.

## BOOKS

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## ONLINE COURSES AND WORKSHOPS

- [Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#) - Developed by researchers at Harvard University, the IAT is a widely used tool for measuring implicit biases. You can take the test online to gain insights into your own biases.
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Training Programs - Many organizations offer DEI training programs that address personal biases and provide strategies for creating more inclusive environments.

## PODCASTS

- [Hidden Brain](#), hosted by Shankar Vedantam - This podcast explores the unconscious patterns that drive human behavior, including biases, and offers insights into how to navigate them effectively.
- [HBR IdeaCast](#) – This weekly podcast features leading thinkers in business and management. [Episode 78: A New Way to Combat Bias at Work](#).

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