

Getting Started: Kids Are Ready to Talk About Race



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In the founding of the Family Learning Program, Laura Horwitz and Adelaide Lancaster developed the basis of the content for this document. Rhema Anazonwu, the first program manager of We Stories, also played a large role in the initial content development. Due to those founding roles, Laura, Adelaide, and Rhema have contributed to the content in this document. Having evolved over time, the latest iteration is what you see here.

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THE BEAUTY OF THE HUMAN FORM ABOUNDS.
HELP YOUR CHILDREN SEE, APPRECIATE, AND
CELEBRATE OUR NATURAL DIVERSITY!





INTRODUCTION

ABOUT US

Research on child development, racial identity, and family socialization demonstrates that bias formation begins at a young age and that white families tend to discuss race much less frequently than families of color. Based on these findings, Laura Horwitz and Adelaide Lancaster founded We Stories in 2016. We Stories sought to build a more equitable and inclusive future through the creation and implementation of its core offering, the Family Learning Program (FLP). Its grounding framework is in this document.

The program was designed for white caregivers with young children (ages 8 and under) in the St. Louis region who wanted to start and strengthen conversations about race and racism with their families. In each cohort, or group of participating families, caregivers were provided with diverse children's books as well as strategies for minimizing and deconstructing bias formation. The program endeavored to foster mindsets and build skills toward lifelong learning and advocating for change in spaces where these families lived, worked, and played. This program is now captured in our self-guided **Family Learning Program** document.

At the end of the facilitated 12-week program, the families in the cohort joined an ongoing learning community of a growing group of fellow FLP families. Together they received continued support in extending, processing, and implementing their learnings. Rich collaborations with schools, libraries, community organizations, parent groups, and a robust social media presence quickly followed. We engaged in teacher training opportunities, research partnerships, and curriculum design and development. The **DEI Themed Lessons** document represents many of the resources developed to support these partnerships, as well as our FLP families.

Clear that meaningful change required intentional actions to address root causes of disparities, we developed the Advocacy Builders Project for FLP caregivers to move beyond family conversations to deeper discussions of systemic racism. To support learning, this program focused on four social determinants of health and challenged participants to see how systems are designed to help some groups of people, while simultaneously designed to hurt other groups of people. We Stories piloted this project with FLP families in 2021. This content has been consolidated and now exists as our **Advocacy Builders Project** document.

To increase the accessibility and impact of our programs and resources, our board and staff made the decision to culminate and refine these assets into resources that could be utilized and shared broadly. We hope to bolster changemakers as they lead our collective effort for a more equitable and inclusive future.



WHAT'S INSIDE

This packet is an easily accessible primer that provides a framework for caregivers and educators to engage in important conversations with kids about race. We suggest beginning with Getting Started before delving into our other offerings: the Family Learning Program, DEI Themed Lessons, and the Advocacy Builders Project.

In the following pages, you will find resources, research, and reflection to help you get comfortable talking about race first before talking to your kids about it. Once you are ready, you will find three concrete strategies to help you start and continue conversations with your young kids.

Deconstructing biases and reflecting upon our personal and families' histories, choices, habits, and traditions is hard work. Our curriculum provides individual families, groups of families, and educators with structure and support as they embark or continue on their anti-racist learning journeys. Because through this work, not only do our efforts impact our present, but our efforts impact generations to come as well. The stories we make, seek, and tell about ourselves, our families, and our communities are far more nuanced, rich, and full.



GET COMFORTABLE TALKING ABOUT RACE

WHAT IS RACE?

Race is a concept used to categorize people based on the color of their skin and other physical characteristics. Race has no biological basis but is instead socially constructed. What this means is the definition of race has changed and continues to change over time depending on a variety of social and political factors. In other words, race carries a lot of historical context and social meaning.

Race profoundly shapes how we see ourselves and others, how others see us, and how we fare in life. We all receive messages, both subtle and explicit, about what is normal, desirable, and American and about who should be included and excluded when we seek out friends, neighbors, and employees. Very often, these are messages about race.

But race doesn't just affect each of us on a personal level, it is also baked into the history of our country and its policies such that entire groups of people are advantaged or disadvantaged based on how they have been racially categorized.

On average, people of color make less money, have less access to wealth, live in less safe neighborhoods, attend poorer schools, and fare worse across many health indicators than their white counterparts. Part of coming to terms with the legacy of race in America is understanding that while race is an arbitrary creation, its consequences are far-reaching. This is the reality with which each of us must reckon.

So where to start? How does one begin to address a problem as big as racism?

The answer will be different for everyone, but the most important thing is to START. Seeking out information that delves into the history

and ramifications of race in America; the policies and legislation that create segregated neighborhoods and cause wealth, health or educational disparities; or any specific area that interests you. Once you start paying attention to race, you'll see its impact many places.

In addition to prioritizing learning more, try to be patient with both yourself and the learning process! Learning about race in a society that has purposefully kept race out of the historical narrative will be uncomfortable, angering, and disheartening at times. As you go about your learning, know that you can't do anything about your race and the unearned advantages that may accompany it, but you can choose how to leverage it. Embracing discomfort and developing a practice of ongoing learning about race will allow you to become a more effective teacher for your child. As your child's model, you can't be expected to impart the racial awareness that you want them to have, without building a conceptual framework for yourself to draw from.

Finally, everyone comes to this work with different life experiences and differing amounts of formal or informal education about race. No two journeys will look the same. Just like with any other element of parenting, there will be missteps along the way. Know that nothing is irreversible, and you can always choose to revisit conversations when you have new information. The more you integrate race into your family's discussions and activities, the more dimension and importance it will assume.

SHIFTING MINDSETS AND BEHAVIORS FOR ANTI-RACIST CAREGIVING AND PRACTICE

Becoming a (more) anti-racist caregiver requires us to unlearn many performance-oriented mindsets that we have internalized as part of our own upbringing and education as well as broader societal expectations of and pressures on caregivers today. Many of these sticking places are inextricably linked with whiteness norms that leave caregivers feeling caught between a slew of high-stakes expectations (What if my kid does something racist?) and consequences (If I rock the boat I will ruin relationships I care about). We have found that by collectively striving for the practices in the right hand column, families are able to loose themselves from the “high-stakeness” that can accompany work around race and overcome the hesitations and fears that might have us stop before we start. The more we practice individually and together, the more comfortable we become with our own life-long journey of learning and development and the better able we are to invite our children to join us.

While these are visually presented as a binary we encourage you to imagine a continuum and invite you to consider that no matter how long we’ve been traveling, we are not immune from the sticking points, although we may be more adept at recognizing when they emerge for us.

Sticking Points

Being racist is a binary—I am or am not: As a caregiver, it is my job to curate information and experiences so that my kids won’t end up racist.

Fear to start or to try (again): Talking about racism is big, overwhelming, and heavy. I don’t know where to begin. I don’t know if I can make a difference. I doubt that I can offer enough. What’s really possible, and are we up for it?

(White) shame and blame: I don’t know how effective I can be as a white person. I worry about the bounds of my own abilities and my propensity to cause harm. I don’t want my children to be ashamed of who they are. I don’t want to feel bad about being white.



Striving Places

Anti-racism is a practice: It takes ongoing work, and I can get better at it. As a caregiver, it is my job to journey together with my children to give them the tools they will need for their own anti-racism practice.

Courage to continue: Racism is a part of life and family life. Even though it’s big, I must do my part to stand for justice. Without shying away from the realities of racism, I can imbue my children with a sense of agency, endurance, and resilience to choose to stand up for justice. In order to contribute to the long-term, we must develop sustainable practices.

(White) acceptance and responsibility: All of us are products of the larger society in which we live whether we like it or not, AND I can influence my story moving forward. White people have and will continue to cause harm. I can become less harmful and more helpful with practice and commitment. It’s everyone’s job to stand for justice, including mine.

It's my job to protect my kids: Talking about racism exposes my kids to a messy, painful topic that they aren't ready for, and it's my job to protect them from the world.



It's my job to prepare my kids: Kids experience the world with intensity and notice much more than we realize. Pain and joy are part of life and also parts of our past and present collective realities. Part of my job as a caregiver is to prepare them to live responsibly in this world. Kids can handle hard things, and I don't want them to feel exempt or excuse them from this conversation and work.

I am the teacher: I should have the answers and need to understand the history fully before sharing with my children.



We are learning together: The truth is I have a lot of gaps in my own learning and knowledge. I want to invest in my own education and can bring my kids into that learning journey.

I'm looking for the right way/perfectionism: I'm not ready to talk to my kids about racism.



(I will find) many ways: Anti-racism work requires us to build and strengthen many habits. It is okay to start small and build. It's never too early or too late. Once I start this conversation, I can revisit, revise, and enhance it at any time. I am learning, they are learning, we are learning. I can improve. We will do this again and again. There is always something to learn.

Isolation and disconnection: I feel alone. I don't agree with everything my (white) neighbors say—where do I fit in? I worry I'm the only one who feels this way. (exceptionalism) I worry about breaching this white code of silence. If I rock the boat, will my family relationships and my social networks crumble?



Community and belonging: I can be part of a broader community and movement (that is multiracial and/or anti-racist) no matter where I live—"even here-ism." Working to overcome segregated and disparate structures to build this kind of community is worth the investment. It is possible to sustain relationships where there isn't perfect alignment of visions and values.

"You get the idea": If I focus on colorblindness, being a good person, and/or exposure to diversity, it will foster anti-racism practices or behaviors.



Do what I say and do: I need to have explicit conversations about race and racism, using direct, simple, clear, and age-appropriate language. I can narrate my circumstances, choices, learning, and actions to my family. Sharing what I'm doing and why.

(White) Saviorism/heroism: The fear that my kid won't care/be the kind of person I want them to be.



Every kid-ism: My child needs tools to navigate their own life and journey in a world where they might have racial privilege and may inflict harm on friends and colleagues of color. I can't stop all the white supremacy that they will encounter.

REDUCING BIAS IN MYSELF ACTIVITY

Research is really informative about how bias forms. It is also really instructive about how to best counteract bias. Our model is built upon the following three research findings about deconstructing bias.

1. Having Explicit Conversation

We need to be able to comfortably name and talk about race and human difference in a direct manner without euphemisms.

2. Learning About the History of Discrimination and Bias

We also need to equip children with context, including the history of discrimination and bias. When we don't, they fill in the blanks on their own in ways that often reinforce bias. Children notice the very real patterns of disparity that surround us, and if we can't help them understand the role of policies, prejudice, and structural discrimination in those disparities, they are more likely to attribute differences in outcomes to individual deficits.

3. Increase Exposure and Cross-Group Contact (Even Through Books!)

We need to provide all children with the opportunity to form empathetic and emotional bonds across difference. Unfortunately many of our children live in towns and attend schools that are highly segregated. While nothing can replace real relationships, it is heartening to know that children can achieve a cross-group contact effect by connecting with characters in books and media. Books are great tools to help prepare our children (and ourselves) to live in a more integrated world that we desire and strive for.

In our work, we often give caregivers and educators the opportunity to take stock of what is true for them today and where there are opportunities to grow and strengthen these strategies. We've included a sample worksheet for your use on the next page as well!

REDUCING BIAS IN MYSELF REFLECTION

SELF

WORK

How Explicit

What language do I use to talk about race? How often do I use it? Do I feel comfortable? Confident? Competent?

How Much History

How full is my knowledge of American history? How well represented are the contributions of people of color? How much do I know and share about the history of discrimination and racism?

How Much Exposure

How many opportunities do I (and my family/patron) have to hear the stories, voices, experiences, and expertise of people of color? How often are they presented as mainstream and central to the topic?

TALK TO KIDS ABOUT RACE

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Some people are raised not to talk about skin color and instead adopt a philosophy of "colorblindness." While often rooted in good intentions, the muting of a conversation about difference has profoundly negative effects for both marginalized and privileged groups.

Skin color diversity is something to be celebrated! By talking about visible and meaningful differences, you are giving your children the language they need to be competent and fluid in the multiracial and multicultural world in which they live. We believe that all children (and adults) benefit from having competency and consciousness when it comes to race. Communities that truly seek to be inclusive and vibrant encourage these skills as well.

Research consistently shows that:

- Children clearly notice skin color, whether or not they say so and whether or not adults draw attention to it.
- The less we know and talk about observable differences, the more likely we are to have negative perceptions of other groups.
- The best way to decrease bias in children (and adults) is with:
 1. Regular conversation about skin color difference using concrete, descriptive language
 2. Intentional education on the history of racial discrimination and bias
 3. Increased cross-group exposure and contact (even through books!)

The good news is that children, like all people, are hard wired for categorization, matching, and sorting. They also naturally have curiosity about what is alike and what is different. Use this curiosity to talk about the phenotypic characteristics that make each person different and beautiful. These small conversations will help you build your confidence and comfort, too. Compare your and your family members' skin tones to each other and, using books and media, explore shades that don't exist within your family. It's okay to use words like "brown-ish," "tan-ish," and "peachy." It's ok to point out that lots of people get grouped into racial categories with names that don't actually reflect their skin tone. For example, "People often call this kind of peachy skin white, even though it's not white." Or, "People often call this kind of caramel skin black, even though it's not black." Also consider discussing the different hair types, eye colors and shapes, nose shapes, or other individual differences that might exist within your family and our larger community.



SUMMARY OF RESEARCH ABOUT KIDS AND BIAS

Early childhood is a critical window for racial identity and racial bias formation.

- Babies as young as 6 months stare longer at a face from a racial group different than their own. *(Phyllis Katz, 2000–2010)*
- Children as young as 3 make distinctions based on race, even when race is not discussed *(Phyllis Katz, 2000–2010)* and start to prefer and more often ascribe positive attributes to their own racial group. *(Rebecca Bigler, 1993)*
- By age 5, children see race as a major point of difference or distinction, even when it is not discussed. *(Phyllis Katz, 2000–2010)*
- By age 7, children can accurately reflect social status bias and will make choices or judgments based on who they perceive as having more power or privilege. *(Bigler, Averhart, & Liben, 2003)*
- White children as young as 7 demonstrate that they believe Black individuals experience less pain than white individuals. *(Rebecca Dore, 2014)*

YET...

- Research on family habits indicates that parents of color are three times more likely to discuss race with their children than white parents. The majority of white families never or almost never talk about race at home. *(Brown, Tony N., Emily E. Tanner–Smith, Chase L. Lesane–Brown, and Michael E. Ezell, 2007)*
- When we don't talk about race with our kids, they fill in the blanks, extrapolating from an often inequitable and segregated existence filled with racial messages. *(Phyllis Katz, 2000–2010) (Brigitte Vittrup, 2006)*
- One study showed that when white children of white parents (who intentionally enrolled in a study about children's racial attitudes) were asked, "Do your parents like Black

people?", 14 percent said, "No, they don't," and 38 percent said, "I don't know." Almost 90 percent of the enrolled parents were very reluctant or refused to talk directly about race with their children. *(Brigitte Vittrup, 2006)*

AND...

- Even when kids are told that people are all the same, white kids continue to demonstrate stronger racial biases than children of other groups. *(Schutts & Olsen, 2011)*
- Contrary to popular belief, Millennials only have minimally less stated racial bias than the generations ahead of them. *(Sean McElwee, 2012)*
- Despite good intentions, white individuals that avoid talking about race in mixed racial company often appear more suspicious to people of color. *(Michael Norton, 2006)*

We also know how to decrease prejudice.

Studies also show that:

- Explicit conversation about race improves racial attitudes across groups. *(Rebecca Bigler, 1995–2010)*
- Teaching about the country's history of bias and discrimination is the most effective technique for decreasing bias. *(Hughes, Bigler & Levy, 2007)*
- Conversations with less-prejudiced individuals is likely to lower one's own bias. *(Aboud & Doyle, 1996)*
- Even slightly more exposure to other racial groups, even through children's books, helps to counteract bias and discrimination. *(Crisp & Turner, 2009) (Krista Aronson, 2014)*



So, what do we know about how to develop healthy habits and positive frameworks for discussing difference?

Socialization is the process through which members of a family, group, or community learn from each other. The things we learn include everything from how we think, talk, and act to the ways we process new information, handle (or avoid) conflict, express love, and find meaning in traditions. Socialization is a crucial piece of the puzzle that makes up our racial identities, our levels of tolerance, and our prejudices.

First, we need to know that tolerance is not merely the absence of prejudice.

Tolerance is an abstract ideological belief based on our understanding of equalitarian principles—what we believe is right and wrong, and how much that distinction matters to us.

Prejudice is a preconceived stereotype characterized by negative emotional evaluation of an outgroup and does not necessarily reflect abstract reasoning ability; we are often aware that our prejudices are not consistent with our values, but we are not always able to reconcile that inconsistency within our ethical frameworks.

Prejudice looks like collusion, like status-quo habits we've been taught not to question. Tolerance looks like deliberate, collaborative action.

Research consistently shows that family socialization has bi-directional influence.

Caregivers model **behaviors** that reflect prejudice to their young children...

which primes children to grow into adolescents and adults who model **value systems** that model tolerance for their caregivers...

which in turn often pushes caregivers to elevate their **behaviors and value systems** to reflect tolerance levels more aligned with those of their children's.

Here's what this relationship most often looks like:

If caregivers did NOT model prejudiced behavior and their children had a strong, supportive family relationship in early and middle childhood, tolerance in adulthood tends to be high.

If caregivers DID model prejudiced behavior and their children had a strong, supportive family relationship in early and middle childhood, tolerance in adulthood tends to be low.

Regardless of what caregivers modeled, if their children did NOT have a strong, supportive family relationship in early and middle childhood, tolerance in adulthood tends to be inconsistent with that of their caregivers.

In all three scenarios, adolescents' value systems around tolerance played a powerful role in influencing their caregivers to align with their behaviors around prejudice.

This teaches us two things:

1. Our kids do see the implications of our actions, and the example we set goes on to impact their social justice compasses for the rest of their lives.
2. However, family socialization alone is not enough to create tolerance. As children grow into adolescence, the other social stimuli they interact with (education, friend groups, peer and social networks, popular media, world affairs, etc.) all shape their perceptions of tolerance.

So, what can parents do to develop healthy habits and positive frameworks for discussing difference?

We can start by seeking to overcome our insecurities regarding race and demonstrate to our children and the families around us that discussing difference is something we can do together.





STRATEGIES

ENCOURAGE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT OBSERVATIONS

MYTH: Children don't notice difference, especially racial difference.

TRUTH: Humans are built to be discerning. We are built to notice difference and make sense of the patterns we see.

STRATEGY: Leverage children's natural curiosity and honor their witness by proactively encouraging conversations about their observations. Help them see the layers of complexity so they don't attribute large societal patterns to individual desires or deficiencies.

1. Comment to your children on the sameness or diversity you see around you.

"Did you notice that when we are at this playground, we see lots of people who look different from each other and from you?" or "It looks like most of the books that we read all have characters that look like you. I want to make sure you learn about everyone who lives in our world."

2. Honor their observations and questions.

Our country's racial history is evident in the patterns of everyday life all around us. Children notice these patterns and comment on them. Even if their observations catch you by surprise, don't shut down their observations. You may not know how to respond in the moment, and that's okay. "That's a good observation. Let's talk about it later," is a perfectly fine response. As is "I'll have to think about that." What is important is that you're actively cultivating an environment where it is okay to notice and ask.

3. Encourage them to ask "Who is present?" and "Who is missing?"

Developing a practice of noticing who is present and who is missing will not only help children recognize inclusivity, but will also highlight the monolithic representations around them. This is particularly powerful when used with media. Make an activity of looking at your family's bookshelves and media. Whose voices and images are plentiful? Whose are scant?

4. Seek countervailing stories, histories, and characters.

How can you diversify what you see, read, and hear in order to develop a fuller picture of the world? Based on the media your child sees and hears, what does a leader look like? Princess? Superhero? President? Teacher? Student? Citizen? Use the library and online media to fill in the gaps in the stories, characters, and histories that you see most often.

5. Venture to some new places.

Try some different experiences. What places can you go that you often don't? How can you establish some different paths and routes? The goal of changing things up is not to promote racial or diversity tourism but to expand your routine and sense of connection to a larger and more diverse community.

PROVIDE WINDOWS AND MIRRORS

MYTH: Segregation, lack of diverse representation, and incomplete history is only a detriment to children of color.

TRUTH: The healthy ego development of children relies on both “windows” and “mirrors.” Kids who see themselves reflected in the world they inhabit receive affirmation. Kids who see and learn about others are better able to appreciate the diversity of the world they live in, be better peers to those who are different from them, and recognize themselves as a part of a larger tapestry of humanity rather than an example of what’s “normal.”

STRATEGY: Use books and other media to provide children with ample windows and mirrors. Encourage them to see both sameness and difference in the same story and character. Leave space for explicit noticing, appreciation, and meaning making.

By seeking out books featuring diverse characters, you are creating the opportunity for kids to connect to stories that expand and reflect their own experiences and identities, or books that are “windows” and “mirrors.”

A book serves as a window when it allows for a vicarious experience, superseding the limits of the readers’ own lives and identities and provides the opportunity to spend time observing those of others.

A book serves as a mirror when it reflects back to readers’ portions of their identities, cultures, or experiences.

Some titles we recommend offer a glimpse into settings and life circumstances that may differ from your own or history and role models that are new to you. Reading experiences like these engender empathy that children can take with them out into the world. The books also provide many mirrors. Whether through relatable personalities, interests and feelings, family routines, activities, or settings, children will be able to draw many connections between their life and those of the characters.

Asking questions can deepen the meaning of a particular book, character, or story! Noticing mirrors and windows is a great launching pad for discussion.

What are the windows? What differences do you notice?

It is also important to point out what is different for children and their experiences and those in the stories. For example, when they go to the playground do they see the kind of diversity reflected in these stories? “In this story, these children all live in the city just like our friends X, Y, and Z. We don’t live in the city, but something called a suburb where the houses aren’t connected and there isn’t as much public transportation.” (Book Connection: *Bein’ With You This Way* by W. Nikola-Lisa) OR “Hector lived with his grandma. In lots of families, grandparents live with their grandchildren, but we don’t live with your grandparents. Your grandparents live in Florida and Pennsylvania.” (Book Connection: *Juna’s Jar* by Jane Bahk).

What are the mirrors? What connections can you make?

Using these stories to reinforce the similarities between your children’s interests and experiences and those of the characters is very important. “Momo loves playing with her umbrella just like you! Remember when you got to play in the rain and how much fun that was?” (Book Connection: *Umbrella* by Taro Yashima). We want children to see themselves and their daily interactions in these characters and stories, so take the opportunity to find them!

The definitions for windows and mirrors are paraphrased from a 2014 article, “Building on Windows and Mirrors” by Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor in the *Journal of Children’s Literature*. The windows and mirrors analogy was developed originally by Emily Styles.



ASK CRITICAL QUESTIONS

STRATEGY: Ask these five critical questions to open up deeper race-conscious conversations with children. A variety of scenarios in which the question is useful for expanding conversations follows.

1. WHO IS PRESENT? WHO IS MISSING?

Think about difference and sameness as it relates to your own experiences and environments.

Talk about who we see in your daily lives and who you don't.

Notice what has become automatic and how that shapes what may seem "normal."

Analyze your own "normal" as it relates to space, place, media, entertainment, and news.

2. WHAT DO I KNOW? HOW DO I KNOW IT?

(Re)claim lost, unrealized, unrecognized history.

Integrate missing histories and realities into you/your family's common awareness.

Connect themes from the past to patterns and policies you see today.

Explore where particular misconceptions or stereotypes originate from.

Interrogate what personal, social and educational factors keep some history hidden.

3. CAN I ALLOW MULTIPLE TRUTHS TO BE PRESENT?

Embrace both the promise and the pain of America and American history.

Honor the complexity of American identity and its multiple permutations.

Reflect on whose stories you commonly hear and whose stories you often miss.

Consider how a story changes based on who is telling it, who is at the center, and who is the intended audience.

Allow space for the both/and—when two seemingly contradictory truths are simultaneously true.

4. DO THE STORIES I KNOW TELL A FULL PICTURE?

Think about how "thin" stories, shallow relationships and limited examples lead to stereotypes.

Explore instances in which you have many examples and others in which you have few.

Consider how some stereotypes are intentionally propelled and why they endure.

Begin to consider the power of "counter narratives," and how you can play a role in strengthening them as a caregiver or educator.

5. HOW DO I FIT INTO THE STORY? WHAT'S MY ROLE?

Place your own story in the context of our nation's history.

Consider how your family is reflected in present day patterns, and what family stories and traditions have persisted.

Practice talking about what is similar and different across group identity and how your American identity has become what it is.

Recognize the tendency to ignore the role of dominant groups when learning about non-dominant groups, rather than look for the interactions.

DEVELOPMENTAL GOALS

Each of the three strategies can be used with children at different ages. However, consider these developmental goals and adjust your approach based on the following age-appropriate aims:

Ages 2 and under

Develop comfort with language to describes difference and sameness.

Establish the practice of noticing and appreciating difference in your family, communities, and world.

Themes: Connection, Daily Routine, Awareness of Body, Ownership

Age 2

Notice and celebrate differences in skin color and hair texture and style.

Continue the practice of noticing and appreciating difference in your family, communities, and world.

Themes: Independence, Autonomy, Self vs. Other, Imitation

Ages 3–5

Introduce the concept of race—categorizing people into groups based on some shared physical characteristics—and acknowledge the confusion and complexities of group categories.

Discuss the existence of unfair treatment based on race and skin color, both historically and in the present day.

Emphasize that the existence of unfair treatment reflects the shortcomings of our society and those who hold biased beliefs, not the person being treated unfairly. This is especially important for children of color.

Celebrate stories that show the importance of standing up for yourself and others.

Themes: Sharing, Cooperation, Friendship, Feelings, Fairness, Right vs. Wrong

Ages 5–8

Establish an early understanding of the historical components of racism, such as slavery and segregation.

Celebrate appreciation of diversity, fair treatment, and anti-racism as core family and/or community values.

Introduce important historical events and characters that have helped shape the America we know today, emphasizing leadership from people of color.

Bring attention to opportunities of past and present activists and heroes who help advance the rights of all, emphasizing leadership from people of color.

Increase awareness of school and neighborhood dynamics, considering in particular the experience of children of color in those spaces and how white children's behavior can positively or negatively impact peers, particularly as it relates to school discipline, safety concerns, and stereotypes.

Themes: Rules, Individuality vs. Conformity, Novelty, Imagination, Negotiation

Ages 9+

Deepen appreciation of difference with deeper cultural profiles and stories.

Cultivate a stronger connection to local history.

Themes: Complex Friendships, Independence, Right vs. Wrong, Fairness





EXPLORE MORE

Read these research-based articles and videos for non-academics to explore more about:

- Race explicitly, with history of bias
 - “Even Babies Discriminate, Nurture Shock Excerpt” by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman
- How most white families handle conversations about race and what kids learn as a result
 - “What White Children Need to Know About Race” by Ali Michael and Elenora Bartoli
- How white people avoid talking about race, especially in mixed racial company
 - “The Case Against Racial Colorblindness” by Carmen Nobel
- Who can be friends and the perception of positive and negative intent
 - “Kids on Race: The Hidden Picture” on Anderson Cooper 360°
- How there is not as huge of a generation gap in racial bias as many think
 - “The Hidden Racism of Young White Americans” by Sean McElwee
 - “We Treat Racism Like It’s Going Extinct. It’s Not.” by Brittney Cooper
- How adults delay conversations about race due to underestimating children’s ability to process
 - “If Babies and Toddlers Can Detect Race, Why Do So Many Parents Avoid Talking About It?” by Jessica Colarossi
- Liberals and racism; segregation of social networks
 - “Race Ya” by Katherine Fritz
- How talking about race with a less-prejudiced person tends to lower one’s own prejudice
 - “Does Talk of Race Foster Prejudice or Tolerance in Children?” by Frances E. Aboud and Anna Beth Doyle
- Recent research that summarizes the formation of bias and socialization practices
 - “Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race” by Erin N. Winkler, Ph.D

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