Development of Racial Awareness in Children

http://www.newsweek.com/id/214989/page/1

By Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman | NEWSWEEK

Published Sept. 5, 2009, From the magazine issue dated Sept 14, 2009

At the Children's Research Lab at the University of Texas, a database is kept on thousands of families in the Austin area who have volunteered to be available for scholarly research. In 2006 Birgitte Vittrup recruited from the database about a hundred families, all of whom were Caucasian with a child 5 to 7 years old.The goal of Vittrup's study was to learn if typical children's videos with multicultural storylines have any beneficial effect on children's racial attitudes. Her first step was to give the children a Racial Attitude Measure, which asked such questions as:

How many White people are nice?
(Almost all) (A lot) (Some) (Not many) (None)

How many Black people are nice?
(Almost all) (A lot) (Some) (Not many) (None)

During the test, the descriptive adjective "nice" was replaced with more than 20 other adjectives, like "dishonest," "pretty," "curious," and "snobby."

Vittrup sent a third of the families home with multiculturally themed videos for a week, such as an episode of *Sesame Street* in which characters visit an African-American family's home, and an episode of *Little Bill,* where the entire neighborhood comes together to clean the local park.

In truth, Vittrup didn't expect that children's racial attitudes would change very much just from watching these videos. Prior research had shown that multicultural curricula in schools have far less impact than we intend them to—largely because the implicit message "We're all friends" is too vague for young children to understand that it refers to skin color.

Yet Vittrup figured explicit conversations with parents could change that. So a second group of families got the videos, and Vittrup told these parents to use them as the jumping-off point for a discussion about interracial friendship. She provided a checklist of points to make, echoing the shows' themes. "I really believed it was going to work," Vittrup recalls.

The last third were also given the checklist of topics, but no videos. These parents were to discuss racial equality on their own, every night for five nights.

At this point, something interesting happened. Five families in the last group abruptly quit the study. Two directly told Vittrup, "We don't want to have these conversations with our child. We don't want to point out skin color."

Vittrup was taken aback—these families volunteered knowing full well it was a study of children's racial attitudes. Yet once they were aware that the study required talking openly about race, they started dropping out.

It was no surprise that in a liberal city like Austin, every parent was a welcoming multiculturalist, embracing diversity. But according to Vittrup's entry surveys, hardly any of these white parents had ever talked to their children directly about race. They might have asserted vague principles—like "Everybody's equal" or "God made all of us" or "Under the skin, we're all the same"—but they'd almost never called attention to racial differences.

They wanted their children to grow up colorblind. But Vittrup's first test of the kids revealed they weren't colorblind at all. Asked how many white people are mean, these children commonly answered, "Almost none." Asked how many blacks are mean, many answered, "Some," or "A lot." Even kids who attended diverse schools answered the questions this way.

More disturbing, Vittrup also asked all the kids a very blunt question: "Do your parents like black people?" Fourteen percent said outright, "No, my parents don't like black people"; 38 percent of the kids answered, "I don't know." In this supposed race-free vacuum being created by parents, kids were left to improvise their own conclusions—many of which would be abhorrent to their parents.

Vittrup hoped the families she'd instructed to talk about race would follow through. After watching the videos, the families returned to the Children's Research Lab for retesting. To Vittrup's complete surprise, the three groups of children were statistically the same—none, as a group, had budged very much in their racial attitudes. At first glance, the study was a failure.

Combing through the parents' study diaries, Vittrup realized why. Diary after diary revealed that the parents barely mentioned the checklist items. Many just couldn't talk about race, and they quickly reverted to the vague "Everybody's equal" phrasing.

Of all those Vittrup told to talk openly about interracial friendship, only six families managed to actually do so. And, for all six, their children dramatically improved their racial attitudes in a single week. Talking about race was clearly key. Reflecting later about the study, Vittrup said, "A lot of parents came to me afterwards and admitted they just didn't know what to say to their kids, and they didn't want the wrong thing coming out of the mouth of their kids."

We all want our children to be unintimidated by differences and have the social skills necessary for a diverse world. The question is, do we make it worse, or do we make it better, by calling attention to race?

The election of President Barack Obama marked the beginning of a new era in race relations in the United States—but it didn't resolve the question as to what we should tell children about race. Many parents have explicitly pointed out Obama's brown skin to their young children, to reinforce the message that anyone can rise to become a leader, and anyone—regardless of skin color—can be a friend, be loved, and be admired.

Others think it's better to say nothing at all about the president's race or ethnicity—because saying something about it unavoidably teaches a child a racial construct. They worry that even a positive statement ("It's wonderful that a black person can be president") still encourages a child to see divisions within society. For the early formative years, at least, they believe we should let children know a time when skin color does not matter.

What parents say depends heavily on their own race: a 2007 study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* found that out of 17,000 families with kindergartners, nonwhite parents are about three times more likely to discuss race than white parents; 75 percent of the latter never, or almost never, talk about race.

In our new book, *NurtureShock,* we argue that many modern strategies for nurturing children are backfiring—because key twists in the science have been overlooked. Small corrections in our thinking today could alter the character of society long term, one future citizen at a time. The way white families introduce the concept of race to their children is a prime example.

For decades, it was assumed that children see race only when society points it out to them. However, child-development researchers have increasingly begun to question that presumption. They argue that children see racial differences as much as they see the difference between pink and blue—but we tell kids that "pink" means for girls and "blue" is for boys. "White" and "black" are mysteries we leave them to figure out on their own.

It takes remarkably little for children to develop in-group preferences. Vittrup's mentor at the University of Texas, Rebecca Bigler, ran an experiment in three preschool classrooms, where 4- and 5-year-olds were lined up and given T shirts. Half the kids were randomly given blue T shirts, half red. The children wore the shirts for three weeks. During that time, the teachers never mentioned their colors and never grouped the kids by shirt color.

The kids didn't segregate in their behavior. They played with each other freely at recess. But when asked which color team was better to belong to, or which team might win a race, they chose their own color. They believed they were smarter than the other color. "The Reds never showed hatred for Blues," Bigler observed. "It was more like, 'Blues are fine, but not as good as us.' " When Reds were asked how many Reds were nice, they'd answer, "All of us." Asked how many Blues were nice, they'd answer, "Some." Some of the Blues were mean, and some were dumb—but not the Reds.

Bigler's experiment seems to show how children will use whatever you give them to create divisions—seeming to confirm that race becomes an issue only if we make it an issue. So why does Bigler think it's important to talk to children about race as early as the age of 3?

Her reasoning is that kids are developmentally prone to in-group favoritism; they're going to form these preferences on their own. Children naturally try to categorize everything, and the attribute they rely on is that which is the most clearly visible.

We might imagine we're creating color-blind environments for children, but differences in skin color or hair or weight are like differences in gender—they're plainly visible. Even if no teacher or parent mentions race, kids will use skin color on their own, the same way they use T-shirt colors. Bigler contends that children extend their shared appearances much further—believing that those who look similar to them enjoy the same things they do. Anything a child doesn't like thus belongs to those who look the least similar to him. The spontaneous tendency to assume your group shares characteristics—such as niceness, or smarts—is called essentialism.

Within the past decade or so, developmental psychologists have begun a handful of longitudinal studies to determine exactly when children develop bias. Phyllis Katz, then a professor at the University of Colorado, led one such study—following 100 black children and 100 white children for their first six years. She tested these children and their parents nine times during those six years, with the first test at 6 months old.

How do researchers test a 6-month-old? They show babies photographs of faces. Katz found that babies will stare significantly longer at photographs of faces that are a different race from their parents, indicating they find the face out of the ordinary. Race itself has no ethnic meaning per se—but children's brains are noticing skin-color differences and trying to understand their meaning.

When the kids turned 3, Katz showed them photographs of other children and asked them to choose whom they'd like to have as friends. Of the white children, 86 percent picked children of their own race. When the kids were 5 and 6, Katz gave these children a small deck of cards, with drawings of people on them. Katz told the children to sort the cards into two piles any way they wanted. Only 16 percent of the kids used gender to split the piles. But 68 percent of the kids used race to split the cards, without any prompting. In reporting her findings, Katz concluded: "I think it is fair to say that at no point in the study did the children exhibit the Rousseau type of color-blindness that many adults expect."

The point Katz emphasizes is that this period of our children's lives, when we imagine it's most important to not talk about race, is the very developmental period when children's minds are forming their first conclusions about race.

Several studies point to the possibility of developmental windows—stages when children's attitudes might be most amenable to change. In one experiment, children were put in cross-race study groups, and then were observed on the playground to see if the interracial classroom time led to interracial play at recess. The researchers found mixed study groups worked wonders with the first-grade children, but it made no difference with third graders. It's possible that by third grade, when parents usually recognize it's safe to start talking a little about race, the developmental window has already closed.

The other deeply held assumption modern parents have is what Ashley and I have come to call the Diverse Environment Theory. If you raise a child with a fair amount of exposure to people of other races and cultures, the environment becomes the message. Because both of us attended integrated schools in the 1970s—Ashley in San Diego and, in my case, Seattle—we had always accepted this theory's tenets: diversity breeds tolerance, and talking about race was, in and of itself, a diffuse kind of racism.

But my wife and I saw this differently in the years after our son, Luke, was born. When he was 4 months old, Luke began attending a preschool located in San Francisco's Fillmore/Western Addition neighborhood. One of the many benefits of the school was its great racial diversity. For years our son never once mentioned the color of anyone's skin. We never once mentioned skin color, either. We thought it was working perfectly.

Then came Martin Luther King Jr. Day at school, two months before his fifth birthday. Luke walked out of preschool that Friday before the weekend and started pointing at everyone, proudly announcing, "That guy comes from Africa. And she comes from Africa, too!" It was embarrassing how loudly he did this. "People with brown skin are from Africa," he'd repeat. He had not been taught the names for races—he had not heard the term "black" and he called us "people with pinkish-whitish skin." He named every kid in his schoolroom with brown skin, which was about half his class.

My son's eagerness was revealing. It was obvious this was something he'd been wondering about for a while. He was relieved to have been finally given the key. Skin color was a sign of ancestral roots.

Over the next year, we started to overhear one of his white friends talking about the color of their skin. They still didn't know what to call their skin, so they used the phrase "skin like ours." And this notion of ours versus theirs started to take on a meaning of its own. As these kids searched for their identities, skin color had become salient.

Soon, I overheard this particular white boy telling my son, "Parents don't like us to talk about our skin, so don't let them hear you."

As a parent, I dealt with these moments explicitly, telling my son it was wrong to choose anyone as his friend, or his "favorite," on the basis of skin color. We pointed out how certain friends wouldn't be in our lives if we picked friends for their color. Over time he not only accepted but embraced this lesson. Now he talks openly about equality and the wrongfulness of discrimination.

Not knowing then what I do now, I had a hard time understanding my son's initial impulses. Katz's work helped me to realize that Luke was never actually colorblind. He didn't talk about race in his first five years because our silence had unwittingly communicated that race was something he could not ask about.

The Diverse Environment Theory is the core principle behind school desegregation today. Like most people, I assumed that after 30 years of desegregation, it would have a long track record of scientific research proving that the Diverse Environment Theory works. Then Ashley and I began talking to the scholars who've compiled that very research.

In the summer of 2007, led by the Civil Rights Project, a dozen scholars wrote an amicus brief to the U.S. Supreme Court supporting school desegregation in Louisville, Ky., and Seattle. By the time the brief reached the court, 553 scientists had signed on in support. However, as much as the scientists all supported active desegregation, the brief is surprisingly circumspect in its advocacy: the benefits of desegregation are qualified with words like "may lead" and "can improve." "Mere school integration is not a panacea," the brief warns.

UT's Bigler was one of the scholars heavily involved in the process of its creation. Bigler is an adamant proponent of desegregation in schools on moral grounds. "It's an enormous step backward to increase social segregation," she says. However, she also admitted that "in the end, I was disappointed with the amount of evidence social psychology could muster [to support it]. Going to integrated schools gives you just as many chances to learn stereotypes as to unlearn them."

The unfortunate twist of diverse schools is that they don't necessarily lead to more cross-race relationships. Often it's the opposite. Duke University's James Moody—an expert on how adolescents form and maintain social networks—analyzed data on more than 90,000 teenagers at 112 different schools from every region of the country. The students had been asked to name their five best male friends and their five best female friends. Moody matched the ethnicity of the student with the race of each named friend, then compared the number of each student's cross-racial friendships with the school's overall diversity.

Moody found that the more diverse the school, the more the kids self-segregate by race and ethnicity within the school, and thus the likelihood that any two kids of different races have a friendship goes down.

Moody included statistical controls for activities, sports, academic tracking, and other school-structural conditions that tend to desegregate (or segregate) students within the school. The rule still holds true: more diversity translates into more division among students. Those increased opportunities to interact are also, effectively, increased opportunities to reject each other. And that is what's happening.

As a result, junior-high and high-school children in diverse schools experience two completely contrasting social cues on a daily basis. The first cue is inspiring—that many students have a friend of another race. The second cue is tragic—that far more kids just like to hang with their own. It's this second dynamic that becomes more and more visible as overall school diversity goes up. As a child circulates through school, she sees more groups that her race disqualifies her from, more lunchroom tables she can't sit at, and more implicit lines that are taboo to cross. This is unmissable even if she, personally, has friends of other races. "Even in multiracial schools, once young people leave the classroom, very little interracial discussion takes place because a desire to associate with one's own ethnic group often discourages interaction between groups," wrote Brendesha Tynes of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

All told, the odds of a white high-schooler in America having a best friend of another race is only 8 percent. Those odds barely improve for the second-best friend, or the third-best, or the fifth. For blacks, the odds aren't much better: 85 percent of black kids' best friends are also black. Cross-race friends also tend to share a single activity, rather than multiple activities; as a result, these friendships are more likely to be lost over time, as children transition from middle school to high school.

I can't help but wonder—would the track record of desegregation be so mixed if parents reinforced it, rather than remaining silent? It is tempting to believe that because their generation is so diverse, today's children grow up knowing how to get along with people of every race. But numerous studies suggest that this is more of a fantasy than a fact.

Is it really so difficult to talk with children about race when they're very young? What jumped out at Phyllis Katz, in her study of 200 black and white children, was that parents are very comfortable talking to their children about gender, and they work very hard to counterprogram against boy-girl stereotypes. That ought to be our model for talking about race. The same way we remind our daughters, "Mommies can be doctors just like daddies," we ought to be telling all children that doctors can be any skin color. It's not complicated what to say. It's only a matter of how often we reinforce it.

Shushing children when they make an improper remark is an instinctive reflex, but often the wrong move. Prone to categorization, children's brains can't help but attempt to generalize rules from the examples they see. It's embarrassing when a child blurts out, "Only brown people can have breakfast at school," or "You can't play basketball; you're white, so you have to play baseball." But shushing them only sends the message that this topic is unspeakable, which makes race more loaded, and more intimidating.

To be effective, researchers have found, conversations about race have to be explicit, in unmistakable terms that children understand. A friend of mine repeatedly told her 5-year-old son, "Remember, everybody's equal." She thought she was getting the message across. Finally, after seven months of this, her boy asked, "Mommy, what's 'equal' mean?"

Bigler ran a study in which children read brief biographies of famous African-Americans. For instance, in a biography of Jackie Robinson, they read that he was the first African-American in the major leagues. But only half read about how he'd previously been relegated to the Negro Leagues, and how he suffered taunts from white fans. Those facts—in five brief sentences were omitted in the version given to the other children.

After the two-week history class, the children were surveyed on their racial attitudes. White children who got the full story about historical discrimination had significantly better attitudes toward blacks than those who got the neutered version. Explicitness works. "It also made them feel some guilt," Bigler adds. "It knocked down their glorified view of white people." They couldn't justify in-group superiority.

Minority parents are more likely to help their children develop a racial identity from a young age. April Harris-Britt, a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found that all minority parents at some point tell their children that discrimination is out there, but they shouldn't let it stop them. Is this good for them? Harris-Britt found that some preparation for bias was beneficial, and it was necessary—94 percent of African-American eighth graders reported to Harris-Britt that they'd felt discriminated against in the prior three months.

But if children heard these preparation-for-bias warnings often (rather than just occasionally), they were significantly less likely to connect their successes to effort, and much more likely to blame their failures on their teachers—whom they saw as biased against them.

Harris-Britt warns that frequent predictions of future discrimination ironically become as destructive as experiences of actual discrimination: "If you overfocus on those types of events, you give the children the message that the world is going to be hostile—you're just not valued and that's just the way the world is."

Preparation for bias is not, however, the only way minorities talk to their children about race. The other broad category of conversation, in Harris-Britt's analysis, is ethnic pride. From a very young age, minority children are coached to be proud of their ethnic history. She found that this was exceedingly good for children's self-confidence; in one study, black children who'd heard messages of ethnic pride were more engaged in school and more likely to attribute their success to their effort and ability.

That leads to the question that everyone wonders but rarely dares to ask. If "black pride" is good for African-American children, where does that leave white children? It's horrifying to imagine kids being "proud to be white." Yet many scholars argue that's exactly what children's brains are already computing. Just as minority children are aware that they belong to an ethnic group with less status and wealth, most white children naturally decipher that they belong to the race that has more power, wealth, and control in society; this provides security, if not confidence. So a pride message would not just be abhorrent—it'd be redundant.

Over the course of our research, we heard many stories of how people—from parents to teachers—were struggling to talk about race with their children. For some, the conversations came up after a child had made an embarrassing comment in public. A number had the issue thrust on them, because of an interracial marriage or an international adoption. Still others were just introducing children into a diverse environment, wondering when and if the timing was right.

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Raising Social Justice Warriors.

Pt. 1: White parents, talk to your children about race

White parents, talk to your children about racism, and start talking to them now. And if you think you can get away with having this discussion with them one time, you're wrong. Make this an ongoing conversation with your kids throughout their childhood. If you really want them to be able to identify racism and understand its effect on marginalized people, you have to continuously engage them and expose them to different races and ethnicities. Give them the opportunity to have a diversity of experiences. That way, your children will see differences in skin color as normal and they won't judge people based on those differences.

Research shows that children as young as 3 years old can take on racist behaviors when they are exposed to them. So if you're focusing on how your children may be negatively affected when they start puberty, you are almost 10 years behind in teaching them how to spot racism and actively work to dismantle it. Think about what your baby or toddler may be hearing in day-care, from their babysitter or a relative who watches them while you're at work. How do you combat that? Talk to them about their day. Ask them what they learned. Children are happy to have your undivided attention, but it's up to you to listen closely and be able to interpret their words for hidden meaning, particularly when they're just starting to verbally communicate.

> You, the parent, have the power to raise a child who is empathetic, understanding, and accepting of all people no matter their skin color, ethnicity, or background. You also have the power to pass down judgement, prejudice, and bitterness. The truth is, kids aren't born racist. But over time, children often naturally adopt the characteristics and behavior they see portrayed as 'normal' in their environment. Racism and bigotry are products of nurture—not nature.
>
> ~ Meg Meeker, "Talking to Children about Racism"

Your children can start being influenced by racism around them as young as 6 months old. In her article "Talking about Race, Age by Age," Kara Corridan breaks down how and when children start thinking about race:

6 months to 1 year: Children see differences in skin color and hair texture. Start exposing them to a diversity of experiences to help them. Let them see you socializing with people of different colors.

Ages 2 to 3: Children start talking about skin color differences. When they comment about a person's different skin color, respond positively that you agree that person's skin is different. You can also discuss other physical attributes of that person so that skin color is just another part of who they are.

Ages 4 to 6: Children might see darker skin as dirty. Make sure you correct them, saying that darker skin color is simply a different color than theirs. Otherwise, it is just like their skin.

Ages 7 to 8: Children begin to see differences and similarities in people. If they mention that a classmate's skin is a different color or their hair is a different texture, agree with them. However, help them understand the similarities they also have with that child. Do they both like a certain subject? Do they both play the same sport? Are they both tall? Find the things they have in common to stress the idea that they are more alike than different.

Once you start having these talks with your kids, you will find out about your own racist tendencies. It will be an uncomfortable but necessary discovery. Don't think you're alone. There are plenty of other white people who possess those same undesirable traits. But this isn't about bashing you for being part of systemic racism or for having white privilege. This is about helping you understand how you can become a better person and raise your child to be aware and involved in the fight against racism. So before you start getting defensive and saying, "I'm not teaching my child to be racist …" STOP. Your kids will be exposed to racist behaviors from many other places other than you. And yes, you probably *are* teaching your children to be racists. The point is to stop the damage you've already done and reverse it.

> Many white Americans may have been raised to believe that not acknowledging race was a liberal, unprejudiced attitude and an aspirational way of being. 'I don't see skin color,' I'd sometimes hear my mom say when I was a child, 'People are people.' This creates an air of exceptionalism, as in 'sure, *the world* may be racist, but *I'm* not racist.'
>
> ~ Brian Gresko, "Race, Kids—and the Peril of Silence"

Children are like sponges. They soak up everything. Remember when you didn't think your child heard you when you dropped the f-bomb, but you got a call from their teacher because they repeated that word in class? Your children are watching. They are listening. So think about all the ways that you influence them when it comes to race.

Challenge yourself to consider these questions and answer them **honestly**:

- Do you only socialize with white people? If so, why?
- Do you only frequent places that are overwhelmingly white?
- Do you voice stereotypes about people of color (POC) in front of your children?
- Do you say racial slurs in front of your children?
- Do you encourage your children to have friendships with children of different races?
- Do you ignore racism when you see it or make excuses for racist behavior, including your own?
- Do you allow family members or friends to make racist comments in front of your children and say nothing?

Any one of these questions that you answer in a way that supports racism is damaging POC and negatively affecting your children. It's up to you to fix this. Teaching children not to be racists isn't just about sitting them down and telling them not to hate brown and black people. It also involves you modeling inclusive and accepting behavior that you, in turn, want to see in your children. What are you really telling them when, on the one hand, you say, "We don't see skin color" (which itself is problematic because we all see skin color), but you don't have any friends—real friends—that are people of color?

Does this sound like you? If so, you have a choice to either do nothing or get real with yourself about how you really feel about POC. Then *change it*. If you don't know how to have "the talk" with your children about race, then lead and educate them by example. Seek out relationships with POC. Take the time to learn about different races and ethnicities. Deepening your knowledge will make you a more understanding and empathetic person, and in turn you will be raising children who also possess these traits. So where do you start?

Learn about other races, cultures and ethnicities with your children. Teach them the real meaning behind Cinco de Mayo instead of letting them see the insulting, commercialized version that this country celebrates. Find a real celebration of this holiday and take your children so they can experience it. Visit a museum that showcases this country's rich, beautiful Hispanic history.

Read books together about Native American history. Go to your local library to get suggestions and reading lists such as this one from The Public Library and Cincinnati and Hamilton County or the San Francisco Public Library.

Pay attention to what your children are learning in school about black history. Instead of letting them simply learn about Crispus Attucks and Dr. Martin Luther King, take a trip to the city and visit statues, see a play or musical or contact a black historian to see if he or she will give your kids a history lesson.

Take note of what your children are seeing and hearing. Incorporate lessons anytime that you see representations of race that could be detrimental to your children. If you are watching television and notice that a character is being portrayed in a stereotypical and demeaning way (and let's be honest, this is rampant in children's cartoons), that's a great time to explain to your children why this is wrong. Let them know that POC are individuals.

If your relatives spew racial slurs about POC in front of your children, don't let it slide. Call them on it right there. Tell them that they're racists (yes TELL THEM). Let them know that you no longer want to be around such disgusting behavior. Yes, you may lose some people in your life that you love, but the well-being of your children must come first. It is your responsibility to raise them to accept POC completely, not simply tolerate their existence. Think about how many more diverse opportunities they will have as they open themselves up to learning about people who they think are so different from them but really aren’t.

> It’s a challenge on many levels for white Americans to figure out how to talk about racism to our kids, when our personal and cultural background has given us the privilege of ‘humor’ or silence. Yet, we must—because that silence equals complicity and that humor equals erasure.
>
> ~ Brian Gresko, “Race, Kids—and the Peril of Silence”

This was meant to give you some ideas on how to start talking to your children about race. The conversations are not going to be comfortable. You will probably come away understanding much more about yourself and what racist behaviors that you yourself possess that you need to work on. It is important that you address your own racism as well as working with your child. Remember, your child sees everything. Be the type of parent who is open and accepting of every race. Be the type of parent who doesn’t avoid discussing race with a child but does so with no hesitation.

**This article is the first in our series “Raising Social Justice Warriors.”*

This is the collective product of women of color and allies. This piece was written using the voices of both.

White parents, here’s how to start talking to your children about race

Pt. 2: Raising Social Justice Warriors

If you are a white parent, you may have read our previous article about the importance of talking about race with your children. If not, read these articles first, then come back to this article.

Maybe you don’t know where to start. Or you had a conversation or two, and it didn’t go well. Or you’re worried about messing up.

Up until my son was four, most of our conversations about race involved me reading the book “Shades of People” to him, word for word … which was a start. But then one day, he came home from preschool and started a new kind of conversation. He’d learned about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and about the recent history of discrimination against black people in the U.S., and he wanted to talk about it.

With no script to read off a page, I was on my own, using my own words. I squirmed and stumbled, feeling like there was a giant spotlight pointed at me. Afterwards, I questioned myself. Had I used the right words? Had I said enough? Had I said too much?

I felt awkward and embarrassed—as if, by even having the conversation, I had done something wrong.

I wanted to be better prepared the next time. I knew our conversations about race were critical, so I read articles about how to talk with children about race. I attended two workshops. And when opportunities arose, I practiced.

Now, several months later, I no longer fear those conversations about race. Not only that, I embrace and look forward to those talks.

And I want that for you, too.

There are plenty of reasons you might feel challenged by these talks. If you know you must discuss race with your child but have been dreading those conversations, it may be because:

(1) You aren't used to talking about race. Ever.
(2) You want to let your child arrive at their own moral values instead of lecturing or preaching.
(3) You fear burdening your child, putting them at risk, or at least adding complexity to their social lives.

Well, you can overcome all these hurdles. Let's discuss how.

Hurdle #1: You are used to avoiding any mention of race.

If you are a white liberal with young children in 2017, you probably were raised never to talk about race. You may even have learned that you're supposed to "not see race."

The problem, of course, is that you do see race. Everyone does. And people of color know everyone sees their race because they constantly get treated differently because of it. When we pretend we don't see race, we invalidate and erase those experiences of bias; we comfort only *ourselves*, not people of color. We deny our privilege and ignore our discomfort about that privilege. And we teach our children, in turn, that it's improper to talk about race, thus continuing the cycle. Far from benefiting people of color, our silence serves only ourselves.

Even if you intellectually understand the problem with never acknowledging race, you may still be in the habit of staying silent. Almost reflexively, you shut your jaw, avert your eyes, and suppress any comment on the subject. Whoever taught you all these habits did so with the best of intentions, but now they are setting you back: When you try talking about race with your child, your brain turns to mush. And after you get through the conversation, you fear it was wrong to even open your mouth. Just as I did, you feel embarrassed for even trying.

The way to overcome this hurdle is to *practice.* Take a deep breath and open your mouth. Remind yourself that your silence only protects your comfort and preserves your privilege. Start the conversation yourself! Bring up the topic as soon as you notice something about racial differences or inequality instead of waiting for MLK Day or Black History Month. It will be uncomfortable at first, but I promise you it will get easier.

And, by the way, if you still have a lot to learn about the history of racial inequality—that's fine. You don't need to have all the answers when you talk with your child. Learn together with them. Bonus for them: They get to see you evolving and growing as you strive to live your values. Bonus for you: Your child is the least judgmental learning companion you will ever have on your own anti-racism journey.

Hurdle #2: You don't want to be preachy.

If you are a white liberal parent, you may want to raise your child to be autonomous and free-thinking. You believe that, if you model your values, your child will organically internalize those values. You do not want them to accept or obey whatever adults tell them.

Talking about race may feel unnatural within this parenting style. Isn't it better to set a wordless example of anti-racism for your child to follow? If you talk to them about race, aren't you telling them what to think, and isn't that wrong—or, at best, ineffective for creating internal motivation?

But *talking*, not just *doing*, is crucial. It's not enough to set an example and expect your child to notice and follow. That's asking them to swim upstream. They are surrounded—bombarded—by messages reinforcing white superiority and dominance, messages you couldn't avoid if you tried. Your child is noticing things like the subtle looks of contempt passed from white to black characters on TV; a friend's innocent question about whether dark skin is dirty; the fact that their picture books overwhelmingly feature white protagonists; the geographic distribution of racial groups across your city.

You cannot even come close to addressing this barrage of biased messages, both loud and quiet, by merely setting a good example. **Your child is not going to hear you unless you speak up loud and clear.**

You can get your point across without lecturing. If you don't want to tell your child what to believe, you can still state clearly what YOU believe. Try these phrases:

> *"I think that's unfair. What do you think?"*
>
> *"Some people believe … But I don't believe that. Instead, I think … What do you think?"*
>
> *"Being kind is so important to me. And it seems to me that … is not kind at all. So I don't think it's right. What about you?"*

Those statements do not preach to your child. They lay out your interpretation and evaluation, and invite your child to discuss and ask questions. Chances are your child will agree with you, and if not, then you've started a rich discussion.

As much as we care about nurturing our children's autonomy, we cannot ignore the context in which they are developing. There are some answers that they can find on their own if we give them space and freedom to explore—like how to climb a ladder, or what interests they are passionate about. There are other areas where they need our guidance to overcome the effects of their context.

It's true, children are not born racist, but they learn racism very young. That gives us a prime opportunity—and an essential responsibility—to shape their views and values, in an area where they truly need our direction.

Hurdle #3: You don't want to burden your child or make them a target.

Does your child really need to know about this stuff? Isn't it too heavy for a young person? What if they feel guilty for dynamics that they personally had no hand in creating? Won't it be a burden if they witness racial micro (or macro) aggressions and feel obligated to put themselves in harm's way?

It's true, teaching your white children about racism will likely lead them to relinquish some privilege. Children of color are more likely to face harmful slurs and comments, physical violence, and harsh school discipline. If your white child intervenes to stick up for people of color, they could face all those risks, too. Knowing that the world is unjust might cause them stress. Are you ready for your child to experience that, when you want them to be safe, successful, and happy?

It is painful to give up privilege when you could hold on to it. It can feel easier to keep things the way they are. But is there really a good “neutral” option here?

Think about what happens to children raised with egalitarian ideals, but no anti-racism skills or practices. They grow up to be adults who cannot live in line with their ideals—like you, maybe, if you were raised to “not see race.” Have you noticed that you often seem to say the wrong thing despite your best intentions? If you’ve been called out for hurting people of color totally unintentionally, you know how uncomfortable it feels. And, if you avoid talking about race, you are virtually guaranteeing that your child will also have that experience over and over again.

Or, if you don’t talk about race and leave it to your child to figure out how to live out anti-racism, there’s another possibility… Maybe they’ll grow up to be one of the “allies” who do enough to pat themselves on the back, but not enough to actually help. Who tweet against Trump and the KKK, but who let down people of color when it matters most. I bet that’s not the kind of anti-racism you want to teach your child, either. You can help them do better.

Don’t just teach your child values. Teach them how to *live* those values.

Trust your child. Arm them with knowledge and intuition, and then let them use their judgment. Help them see what it will look like to put their privilege on the line. When it’s time, they will have to decide whether to do it or not. But if they are paralyzed because they don’t know what to do, or if they don’t see the problem in the first place, they won’t even have that choice.

I’m not saying these conversations are fun. But with practice and persistence, I bet you will find yourself seeking out opportunities to discuss race with your child, anytime you notice anything that anti-racist values would help your child understand. It will be hard and painful sometimes, because the reality of racism is hard and painful.

But even when they are painful, they are deeply meaningful. I am so grateful that my child pushed me out of my comfort zone and made these conversations inevitable. Because he is biracial, I felt I had no choice but to help him understand race and inequality. If he were white, I wouldn’t have been forced to shed my reservations and learn this lesson:

> that **conversations with my child about race are an immense opportunity to fulfill my most vital responsibilities as his parent.**

These conversations allow me to deepen my own learning and become a better activist and better parent. To connect with him over important, complex, and difficult topics, and to help give meaning to his world. To hear his perspective, and to have an open exchange. To illuminate his path toward making a difference. To raise him to become a person I can feel incredibly proud and confident sending out into the world.

So, seriously: Embrace those conversations. Welcome them. Start them yourself. Soon you won’t even remember what used to feel so scary.

**This is the collective product of women of color and allies. This piece specifically comes from the voice of an ally.*