

# Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race

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There is a myth in popular culture that young children are “colorblind” or don’t notice race. By this logic, children are “blank slates” who cannot develop racial prejudices until they are explicitly taught to do so. This leads many adults to argue that we should not discuss race with preschoolers because they are “too young,” and even mentioning race will “put ideas in their heads” or “poison their minds.” When young children talk about race or express any bias, it is often either dismissed (“She doesn’t know what she’s saying.”), blamed on parents or other adults (“Someone must have said that at home.”), or only indirectly addressed as general bad behavior (“We don’t say things like that because it hurts people’s feelings.”). However, current psychological research suggests this approach is all wrong. In fact, research clearly shows that children not only recognize race from a very young age, but also develop racial biases by ages three to five that do not necessarily resemble the racial attitudes of adults in their lives (Aboud, 2008;

Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Patterson & Bigler, 2006; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). This research suggests that we must rethink what we “know” about young children and race.

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## What do children learn, and when?

In a study that followed approximately 200 black and white children from the ages of six months to six years, Katz and Kofkin (1997) found that infants are able to nonverbally categorize people by race and gender at six months of age. The infants looked

significantly longer at an unfamiliar face of a different race than they did at an unfamiliar face of their same race. The researchers argue that, because this finding is very consistent in six-month-olds, “initial awareness [of race] probably begins even earlier” (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 55).

Toddlers as young as two years use racial categories to reason about people’s behaviors (Hirschfeld, 2008), and numerous studies show that three- to five-year-olds not only categorize people by race, but express

bias based on race (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). In a yearlong study, Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) found that three- to five-year-olds in a racially and ethnically diverse day care center used racial categories to identify themselves and others, to include or exclude children from activities, and to negotiate power in their own social/play networks.

## How and why does this happen?

Research has disproved the popular belief that children only have racial biases if they are directly taught to do so. Numerous studies have shown that children's racial beliefs

are *not* significantly or reliably related to those of their parents (Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006). While this may seem counterintuitive, Hirschfeld (2008) says it should not surprise us. Children, he argues, are motivated to learn and conform to the broader cultural and social norms that will help them function in society. In order to gauge these "community norms," children have to gather information from a broad range of sources – not

just their own families. He gives the example of accents as a way of illustrating his point. If children looked only or even mostly to their parents to learn behaviors and norms, then we would expect children of nonnative speakers to acquire their parents' accents. Instead, children acquire the normative accent of the region where they are growing up (Hirschfeld, 2008).

So, children collect information from the world around them in order to actively construct their own beliefs (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). But why do children form racial

biases so early in life, even if no one around them is teaching them to do so? And why is race a social category to which they attach meaning? Why not height or hairstyle or left-handedness? Scholars argue that there are both internal (biological and cognitive) and external (environmental and societal) factors at play.

First, the immature cognitive structures of preschoolers make them rife for stereotyping (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz & Kofkin, 1997). While young children are able to categorize people by race, they are often not able to categorize a person according to multiple dimensions at once (Aboud, 2008). Thus, they engage in "transductive reasoning" – when they see people who are

alike in one dimension (e.g., skin color), they presume they are alike in other dimensions as well (e.g., abilities or intelligence) (Katz & Kofkin, 1997; Patterson & Bigler, 2006).

Second, factors in children's environments, and in our society as a whole, teach children that race is a social category of significance. Bigler and her colleagues found that environments teach young children which categories seem to be most important (Bigler & Liben, 2007;

Patterson & Bigler, 2006). Children then attach meaning to those social categories on their own, without adult instruction. Patterson and Bigler (2006) argue that even a seemingly innocuous statement like, "Good morning, boys and girls," helps children infer that gender is an important social category, and children can then attach their own meanings to gender categories (e.g., "Girls are smarter."), or infer them from their environment (e.g., "Only men can be President of the United States."), even if adults do not mention or endorse those ideas.



Children also learn which social categories are important by observing their environments. They are likely to notice that the people in their families or neighborhoods are all different heights and have different hairstyles, but perhaps almost all have the same skin color. Therefore, children may assume that they should avoid or dislike people with different skin colors than their own, even if no adult ever says this to them (Aboud, 2005). Similarly, children may notice when going to the store or the doctor's office or riding the bus that height and hairstyle do not seem related to occupation or neighborhood, but skin color does. These patterns form what Bigler & Liben (2007) call a "cognitive puzzle for children to solve" (p. 164). When children notice these patterns, they often "infer that these are norms or rules" (Aboud, 2008, p. 58) and that the patterns "must have been caused by meaningful inherent differences between groups" (Bigler & Liben, 2007, p. 164).

Although children often attach meaning to race without adults directly telling them to do so, it is important to note that "the biases children exhibit are not random" (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 62). In fact, they often "reflect both subtle and not so subtle messages about the relative desirability of belonging to one social group as opposed to another" (Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 62). In other words, children pick up on the ways in which whiteness is normalized and privileged in U.S. society.

What does this mean? Consciously or unconsciously, middle-class white culture is presented as a norm or a standard in the United States in terms of appearance, beauty, language, cultural practices, food, and so on (Johnson, 2006; McIntosh, 1990;

Tatum, 1997). Tatum (1997) argues that this message is so prevalent in our society it is like "smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in" (p. 6). For very young children, this "smog" comes in the form of picture books, children's movies, television, and children's songs, which all include subtle messages that whiteness is preferable (Giroux, 2001; Graves, 1999; Katz, 2003; McIntosh, 1990; Murray & Mandara, 2002; Tatum, 1997). Even the language and symbolism we use daily tends to associate positive things with *white* (e.g., "purity," "clean," "Snow White," "the good witch") and negative things with *black* (e.g., "evil," "sin," "dirty," "the wicked witch"), and studies have shown that children do generalize these linguistic connotations to people (Katz, 2003; Tatum, 1997).

Researchers have found that even very young children develop what psychologists call "in-group bias," or favoritism towards the groups in which they are members (Patterson & Bigler, 2006). However, as children become more aware of societal norms that favor certain groups over

others, they will often show a bias toward the socially privileged group. In their study following a group of black and white children over time, Katz and Kofkin (1997) found that all of the children expressed an in-group bias at the age of 30 months. When asked to choose a potential playmate from among photos of unfamiliar white and black boys and girls, all of the children chose a same-race playmate. However, by 36 months, "the majority of both black and white children chose white playmates" (p. 59) and this pattern held at the 60-month mark, although it decreased slightly at that point.





The authors argue that this is a reflection of societal norms, noting that, in a variety of studies, “white children rarely exhibit anything other than a pro-white bias” (p. 62), while children of color as young as five years old show evidence of being aware of, and negatively impacted by, stereotypes about their racial group (Hirschfeld, 2008). Not surprisingly then, research shows that parents of children of color are much more likely to talk to their children about race and racism than white parents. These parents must teach their children how to function in a racially inequitable society, while still maintaining racial pride and a positive sense of self (Hale-Benson, 1990; Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). In this process, called *racial socialization*, parents of children of color help their children learn which societal messages “to filter out, [and which] to promote” (Boykin & Ellison, 1995, p. 124).

However, studies show that even parents of color often think that preschool-aged children are too young to have some of these discussions. Katz and Kofkin (1997) found that black parents were more likely to talk about racial identity with their preschoolers than were white parents (48% of black parents vs. 12% of white parents), but neither black nor white parents were likely to discuss the racial differences their children saw in media, on playgrounds, or in stores at this age. Hughes & Chen (1999) also found that African American parents were likely to talk

about culture and identity with their very young children, but talk about racial inequity and preparation for discrimination were more likely to occur as the children grew older. Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) argue that *all* children should be actively taught to recognize and reject the “smog” of white privilege, but that, if anti-bias education exists in school curricula at all, it tends to be too little, too late.

## What should caregivers do?

Sometimes adults are silent on the issue of race, prejudice, and racial inequity because we ourselves are not comfortable talking about them. Sometimes we give no information or inaccurate information because we ourselves do not fully understand how racism works, why racial inequity still exists in our society so many years after the Civil Rights Movement, or what we can do about it. Remember, adults have also been socialized into society and are also “breathing the smog” of cultural racism on a daily basis. Although race and racism are difficult topics, it is important to educate ourselves and discuss them with children in an age-appropriate way. So, what can caregivers of young children do?

### Talk about it!

When adults think that very young children do not notice or cannot understand race and racism, they avoid talking about it with children in a meaningful way. Katz and her colleagues found that parents of very young children talk freely about gender, but not about race (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). This silence about race does not keep children from noticing race and developing racial biases and prejudices, it just keeps them from talking about it (Aboud, 2005; Tatum, 1997). Consider the following example from psychologist Beverly Tatum (1997).

A White mother and preschool child are shopping at the grocery store. They pass a Black woman and child, and the White child says loudly,

“Mommy, look at that girl! Why is she so dirty?” (Confusing dark skin with dirt is a common misconception among White preschool children.) The White mother, embarrassed by her child’s comment, responds quickly with a “Ssh!”

An appropriate response might have been: “Honey, that little girl is not dirty. Her skin is as clean as yours. It’s just a different color. Just like we have different color hair, people have different skin colors.” If the child still seemed interested, the explanation of melanin could be added. Perhaps afraid of saying the wrong thing, however, many parents don’t offer an explanation. They stop at “Ssh,” silencing the child but not responding to the question or the reasoning underlying it. Children who have been silenced often enough learn not to talk about race publicly. Their questions don’t go away, they just go unasked. (p. 36)

The lesson for caregivers of young children is: Do not shush children or shut down the conversation. Instead, engage in open, honest, frequent, and age-appropriate conversation about race, racial differences, and even racial inequity and racism. Research has shown that such conversations are associated with lower levels of bias in young children (Katz, 2003). Let go of the notion that you are “putting ideas in their heads” by talking about race; as we have seen, research shows that young children notice race and draw conclusions about difference on their own. Scholars point out that avoiding conversation about race only encourages “prevalent stereotypes [to] remain unchanged” (as cited by Katz & Kofkin, 1997, p. 56).

### ***Be accurate and age-appropriate.***

Hirschfeld (2008) argues that when adults do discuss race with young children, they often dilute the discussion because they believe young children cannot understand

the complexities of this issue. This results in a kind of superficial multicultural education that focuses only on the celebration of culture and individual heroes, and leaves out any discussion of structural inequalities (Hirschfeld, 2008; Lewis, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Instead, children should be “presented with appropriate – not dumbed down – descriptions of the nature and scope of structural racial inequity,” so that they can “appreciate the group nature of racial prejudice” (Hirschfeld, 2008, p. 49). On this point, Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) offer the following advice to caregivers of preschool-age children.

[D]on’t encourage children to believe that negative racial talk or discriminatory action is the conduct of only “sick” individuals or that it indicates a peculiar character flaw or just “bad” behavior. Talk about the fact that the social world we live in is often unfair to people of color simply because they are people of color and that persisting racial-ethnic inequalities are unjust and morally wrong. Make it clear that racial-ethnic prejudice and discrimination are part of a larger society that needs reform and not just something that individuals do. (p. 208)

Educational resources for young children often present the issue of racial discrimination as something that happened in the past,



has been entirely overcome, and is today only perpetrated by a few bad individuals. Ironically, these resources can actually reinforce racial prejudice in children (Hirschfeld, 2008) because the take-away message can be that any remaining inequalities we see today are either natural or the fault of people who suffer from them, and that racial inequity is not the responsibility of “good, normal people.” As such, psychologists argue that it is important to present racism and other social inequities in a more accurate way, so children can understand how discrimination really works and recognize that it is a societal problem, not an individual problem.

### *Take it seriously.*

Because of the inaccurate but deep-seated folk belief that “children cannot be prejudiced,” many adults choose to ignore or brush off incidences in which young children express bias. Scholars warn against this, arguing that this only fuels the fire of developing prejudices (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Do not presume that children have to exhibit strong, hatefully racist attitudes in order to harbor racial prejudice (Aboud, 2008). Also be aware there is evidence preschoolers raise issues of race within their own peer groups more frequently than their adult caregivers know (Tatum, 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). If name-calling or other discrimination happens at school and then goes either unnoticed or is not discussed by adults, children infer that the behavior is widely accepted (Aboud, 2008). This means

that your role is critical! Be alert, and when incidents do arise, avoid using vague scolding about “hurting feelings” or “being mean,” but rather discuss the issue in a specific, head-on way.

Moreover, caregivers should know that this is an important issue in all classrooms, even (and perhaps especially) if there is no racial or ethnic diversity in that classroom or local area. Children pick up ideas about race from our broader popular culture – remember the “smog in the air,” and the less actual, meaningful contact they have with people from other racial groups besides their own, the more likely they are to retain higher levels of prejudice (Allport, 1954; Aboud, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

### *Encourage complex thinking.*

Aboud (2008) argues that anti-bias interventions with young children are too often based only “on the false premise that

prejudice is due to ignorance” (p. 68). In fact, she argues, just providing information is not enough because young children sometimes reject information that goes against their existing in-group biases. So what can be done? Studies have shown that teaching young children to think in a more complex way can be effective in reducing prejudice. When children are taught to pay attention to multiple attributes of a person at once (e.g., not just race), reduced levels of bias are shown (Aboud, 2008). So, in addition to

giving accurate information about race and racism, caregivers should focus on teaching children to think critically (Tatum, 1997).



## Empower!

Perhaps the most important thing caregivers can do is provide children with ideas about how to fight against the continuing racial inequity and discrimination in our society (Tatum, 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Empower the children! Actively seek out anti-racist role models in your community and in the broader society, and expose young children to these role models (Tatum, 1997; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Show children that, while we do face troubling problems as a society, there are people and organizations that are invested in making positive change. Show children they can help too! Involve them in projects that allow real participation in the process of change. For more ideas, see “Additional Resources for Educators” below.

## Conclusion

In order to address issues of racial bias and prejudice with children and help them understand race and inequity in our society, caregivers must first be comfortable addressing these issues themselves. After all, adults have also been socialized into a culture that silences conversations about race and a culture in which subtle racialized images are all around us. Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) remind us that educating children about these issues “requires that we rethink our ideas about several dimensions of everyday life, including the nature of racial and ethnic oppression, the intellectual capacity of children, our willingness to effect changes in oppressive social conditions, and the extent of children’s social skills” (p. 199). This is difficult but important work, and early childhood educators play a critical role.

## Additional resources for educators:

[www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)

[www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org)

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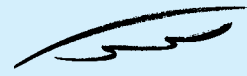
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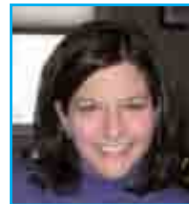
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