



"The most revealing and important treatment of  
human prejudice to appear in years."

—CLAUDE M. STEELE

# ARE WE BORN RACIST?

New Insights from Neuroscience  
and Positive Psychology



Edited by **JASON MARSH, RODOLFO MENDOZA-DENTON,**  
and **JEREMY ADAM SMITH**



# How to Talk with Kids about Race

Allison Briscoe-Smith

Years before I became a child psychologist, I was a swim instructor and taught kindergarten. I remember working in the water one day with a four-year-old white girl when she started to rub my arm.

“Does it come off?” she asked.

“Does what come off?” I asked back.

“The black.” She was rubbing her arm on mine to see if she could get some of my skin color on her.

Her mother, who had been sitting near us, gasped out loud. She turned to me, pale and embarrassed. “I don’t know where she’d come up with such a thing,” she said. “We never talk about . . . things like that.” She pulled her daughter out of the water and ended the lesson, shushing the girl as they left.

As a teacher, I had heard these kinds of comments from children before—directed not just at me but at other kids or adults—then witnessed the crestfallen looks on their parents’ faces. The parents would ask, “Where do kids get this stuff from—they can’t even notice race yet, right?” or, “Does this mean my child will be a racist?” Or they would get defensive: “We don’t teach them that stuff at home”; “We have plenty of friends of different races”; “We don’t even talk about race, so how can they know what it is?”

In my work with children as a teacher and as a psychologist, I’ve found that scientific research can assuage many parents’ fears. While there’s no easy answer to the question, How do I raise a tolerant child? research does offer some constructive suggestions for how kids learn about race—and when and how to discuss it with them.

Let's start from the beginning: do kids even see or notice race? The answer is yes, they see and notice racial differences from a very young age, even in infancy. In fact, several studies by psychologists Phyllis Katz and Jennifer Kofkin have found that infants and very young children (from six to eighteen months) will look at the faces of people of a different race longer than they look at faces from their own racial group. This is how infants and toddlers commonly react to new information, and it suggests racial difference is visually salient to them. This means that kids are able to notice and pay attention to racial differences even before they can speak about them. Katz and Kofkin also found that, by the age of three, children will start choosing to play with people of their own race more than people of a different race.

While they may notice racial differences and even prefer playing with members of their own race, this doesn't mean that kids this young understand race in the same ways that adults do, nor does it mean they're burgeoning racists. For children under around the age of seven, race—or, rather, traits like skin color, language, and hair texture—are just signs that someone is in some way different from themselves, similar to gender, hair length, or weight. It's not unusual or unhealthy for kids to gravitate toward the familiar so early in life. Kids' views only become prejudiced when they start linking these traits to flaws in character or behavior. We adults are the ones who ascribe malice to simply noticing racial differences.

So in and of itself, recognizing racial difference is not a cause for alarm—quite the opposite, in fact. For years, studies have found that children who recognize these kinds of differences from an early age show a stronger general ability to identify subtle differences between categories like color, shape, and size—which, in turn, has been linked to higher performance on intelligence tests. Researcher Francis Aboud has found that children between the ages of four and seven who show this advanced ability to identify and categorize differences are actually less prejudiced. So parents, rest assured: when children notice and ask about racial differences, that is a normal and healthy stage of development.

Still, this can create a lot of work for parents as children ask

questions and struggle to understand the racial world around them. On his blog *Daddy Dialectic*, Jeremy Adam Smith (one of the editors of this anthology) describes watching a basketball game with his four-year-old son. “Daddy,” his son asked, “why do only black kids play basketball?” In that one question—which Smith says made him anxious—we can see a child noticing racial differences and trying to make sense of them. Smith’s son may have also been implicitly asking, Since I’m not black, does that mean I shouldn’t play? or, Does this mean that black kids are better at basketball than other children?

Now comes the tricky part: how do you answer those questions?

In fact, many parents have opted not to answer them. When psychologist Diane Hughes and colleagues reviewed research on how parents talk about race, they found that as many as half claim they don’t talk about race at all with their children. These parents have, often with good intentions, embraced the ideal of color blindness. They assume that if they raise their children not to recognize racial differences, they’ll prevent them from becoming racist.

The problem with this approach, however, is that we all do notice difference. When we abstain from discussing race with our kids, we may confuse them and implicitly send the message that it is bad or wrong to talk about racial differences. This may affect children of color as well as white children. For example, researchers Phillip Bowman and Cleopatra Howard found that when African American parents did not teach their children anything about race, those kids felt less prepared to handle racial discrimination, and in general they felt like they had less control over their lives or environments.

In addition, the “remain silent” strategy ignores the fact that we communicate how we feel and think about race in all kinds of ways to our children. Who we choose to befriend—and avoid—communicates volumes to our children. Do our children see us interacting across race lines? And if so, how do we act—anxious, friendly, concerned? Our children are watching us, making sense of the racial world throughout their development. We as parents have a great opportunity to begin shaping how our children think about race, to help create tolerant children early on.

Instead of trying to ignore race, research suggests that parents should be more proactive. They can tell their kids it's okay to recognize and talk about racial differences while still communicating that it's wrong to hold racial prejudices. When his son asked him why only black kids were playing basketball, Smith could have frozen in fear with concerns about "making his child racist" and simply ignored the question, shushed his son, or changed the subject, like many parents do. Instead, he gave his son a developmentally appropriate answer. "Well, I guess a lot of black kids like playing basketball," he said, and then posed a question of his own: "Do you want to play with them one day?" To which his son replied, "Yes!"

My own research with sixty-seven racially and ethnically diverse families with children under the age of seven indicates that talking and answering kids' questions about race may help them understand racial issues and become more tolerant. I found that parents who talked more about race had children who were better able to identify racism when they saw it and were also more likely to have positive views about ethnic minorities. This was true for both the white families and the families of color in my study.

Other researchers have made similar findings. A study done by Frances Aboud and Anna Beth Doyle took nine- to eleven-year-old children who held prejudiced attitudes toward ethnic minorities and placed them with other nine- to eleven-year-olds who held less biased beliefs. They asked the kids to talk for two minutes about some of the race-based beliefs they had endorsed earlier in the study. The results were remarkable: after these conversations, the high-prejudice kids demonstrated lower prejudice and more tolerant attitudes. Given this impact of a two-minute conversation with a peer, imagine what a childhood of conversations with parents could achieve.

While there is strong evidence suggesting parents should talk about race, researchers are still studying the best way to talk about it. For both white families and families of color, there is some evidence suggesting parents should avoid language that induces fear in their kids, because these kids won't know how to respond. For example, explaining to a child, "You know, people are going to be mean to you

and treat you unfairly because you are X race,” without providing coping skills, empathy for the child, or support, may actually cause more fear and bias toward others. However, following this kind of statement with, “But that doesn’t mean we should be mean to others,” and, “But those people don’t really know how great you are and how special it is to be X,” or, “And if that happens, you can come to me and I’ll help you out,” may actually provide the support and coping skills children need to handle such discrimination.

Other research by Bowman and Howard suggests that helping kids feel pride in their racial or ethnic identity helps boost their self-esteem—with the caveat that lessons of pride shouldn’t undercut other groups. In other words, the message shouldn’t be, “We’re so much better and smarter than Ys,” but rather it should support other groups, too: “You know, some Ys do things that way and that’s great. We do things differently, and that’s really nice, too.” Teaching children about pride, and how to make sense of the differences around them, can actually be an act of teaching and supporting tolerance.

First and foremost, though, it seems that the simple act of just having these conversations about race can help. Given that research shows kids notice and are trying to make sense of race as early as six to eighteen months, these conversations can begin very early. To that end, it’s important to make kids feel comfortable broaching the subject. That means parents should try to avoid making race seem like such a big or intimidating topic that kids believe it’s off limits, and they should try not to make kids feel awkward or inappropriate for asking questions. One of the best ways for parents to do this is to practice talking about race—with friends, with each other, with colleagues—so they can reduce their own anxiety before discussing these issues with their kids. There are Web sites, chat rooms, and organizations out there to help parents get this kind of practice. For example, one place to start is the blog *Anti-Racist Parent*, where parents discuss their efforts to raise racially conscious kids.

So parents, next time you’re on a playground and you hear your child say something that seems racially confused or even offensive,

don't be embarrassed. Don't scold or shush. And don't end the conversation with, "We don't say things like that." Instead, you might want to try, "Hmm, why don't we talk about that some more?"

### *Further Reading*

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