



REFLECTIONS ON CHILDREN'S RACIAL LEARNING 2023

ESSAYS AND DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD



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INTRODUCTION

Gathering Momentum — Building a Field to Raise a Brave Generation

Race is deeply woven into the fabric of US life. Race shapes whether cars stop for pedestrians at crosswalks, the makeup of our social and professional networks, and our policy preferences in areas from education to health care and even climate change.¹ More than 150 years after the passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, race remains arguably the sharpest edge along which we divide ourselves in US life.

At EmbraceRace we believe that reversing racial divisions and inequities and creating a society marked by authentic multiracial belonging must begin in our homes, schools, and communities with our children's hearts and minds. As President Obama once observed, "every generation has the opportunity to remake the world."² The crucial question is: what skills, knowledge, and convictions about race will today's generation of children bring to their world-remaking work tomorrow? Since our founding in 2016, EmbraceRace has worked to organize and create the resources, programs and communities adults need to raise children who are thoughtful, informed and brave about race, children who will help mend our racial divides rather than perpetuate them. We've watched with excitement and gratitude as more and more people mobilize to do this vital work.

In this first-ever *Reflections on Children's Racial Learning*, we begin to chronicle the emergence of a field of learning and practice centered on *children's racial learning* — how and what children learn about race, including but not limited to the deliberate efforts of adults to teach children about race (i.e., racial socialization).³ To that end, we reached out to leaders in five key sectors in which the seeds of field-building have especially deep roots: Parenting Practice, PK-12 Education, the Health Professions, Children's Media, and Social Science Research. We asked these leaders, briefly, to:

- Provide one or more examples of work in your professional discipline or sector that supports healthy racial learning among children and suggests growing attention to the issue (asked of all contributors).
- Describe the kinds of efforts that would lead more people and resources to engage with children's racial learning and spur even bigger efforts from those already engaged (asked only of "essayists").

For more than two years, news stories on the heated national debate about whether and how schools should engage our children on issues of race, racial justice, and US history have been dominated by those insisting that we shouldn't engage kids at all, or should do so only tepidly. Our *Reflections* contributors insist with equal vigor that we must engage

"America, when we have a challenge, we take it head on, we don't shrink away from it. We take a stand. We show courage. So right now, what I'm asking you to do, I'm asking you to show courage. I'm asking you to be bold. ... I'm asking you not to be color blind, but to be color brave, so that every child knows that their future matters and their dreams are possible.."

— Mellody Hobson



children thoughtfully, bravely, and whole-heartedly on these topics, and they highlight some ways that work is being done by community leaders, pediatricians, social workers, researchers, children’s book authors, media professionals, and many others. The forces of racial regression may capture the headlines, dear Reader, but beneath the waterline a powerful, color-brave countercurrent is gathering momentum!

This set of *Reflections* is only the first in a series. Over time, we hope the *Reflections* will provide a forum in which we lift up key challenges, progress, and opportunities in the space of children’s racial learning and help develop a promising agenda for the field. It is within our collective power to spark much bigger investments in racial learning as an integral part of child development. That means convenings and network building, technical support, research, and more to connect key stakeholders, including caregivers, educators, researchers, funders, and media makers. It entails establishing a common vocabulary and base of knowledge and practice on which to scaffold new work. It requires forging within- and cross-sector collaborations that will be crucial vehicles for that work.

We can do this and we must. As educator Louise Derman-Sparks and her colleagues noted, “Children will ‘naturally’ grow up to be non-racist adults only when they live in a non-racist society. Until then, adults must guide children’s anti-racist development...”⁴ We have far to go before the US can be considered a “non-racist society.” Centuries after our founding, US family, community, and institutional life remain awash with racial biases, anxieties, and resentments. At EmbraceRace, our goal is to raise a “brave generation” of young people who can nurture healing relationships across racial difference and who have developed the deep critical thinking skills needed to build a more just society. With some 75 million children now living in the US, including 50 million under the age of 12, meeting that goal is well beyond the reach of any one organization, sector, or community. We have already begun the work. And a lot of work lies ahead of us.

The road to the development of the field of children’s racial learning will be paved by thoughtful questions, creative ideas, and webs of connection among us. **With that in mind, please [complete this feedback form](#) to let us know what you think of this inaugural Reflections on Children’s Racial Learning and tell us what would make the next one in the series more helpful.**

Looking forward!



Melissa Giraud & Andrew Grant-Thomas, Founders



The crucial question is: what skills, knowledge, and convictions about race will today’s generation of children bring to their world-remaking work tomorrow?”

Melissa Giraud and **Andrew Grant-Thomas** are the co-founders and co-directors of EmbraceRace. You can read Melissa’s full biographical statement [here](#) and Andrew’s [here](#). Contact them at hugs@embracerace.org.

“They’re Not Too Young to Talk About Race”: The Science of Early Racial Learning



The budding field of children’s racial learning is deeply rooted in the science of child development. Mounting evidence demonstrates that children are noticing, processing, and making meaning of race early and often, beginning in infancy — long before they are walking and talking.

Many parents, educators, and other caregivers have a very different understanding. They believe that young children are “innocent” about race: that they do not notice racial differences like skin color; that they are totally unbiased; that they do not perceive the meanings, values, and stereotypes attached to racial identity in the world; that teaching and learning about these difficult topics are best deferred until children are older. By delaying conversations about race and racism, caregivers believe they are helping preserve children’s innocence.

Yet a 2020 research study showed that adults generally **underestimate** how early children start to notice and process race.⁵ On average, their estimates are off by about 4.5 years. The research literature shows us that children begin to distinguish faces by race early in infancy⁶ and that racial biases are often formed by the preschool and kindergarten years.⁷ Plus, the age at which adults think children are capable of processing race influences when they are willing to engage children in conversations about race. Recent studies suggest that the average adult believes that a first conversation about race should occur around the time children turn 5 years old.⁸

The reality is that young children are learning about race whether or not their caregivers talk about it or believe the learning is happening. The extraordinary popularity of a graphic shared by the Children’s Community School of Philadelphia in 2018 suggests growing awareness that children begin to notice skin color and develop racial preferences and biases early in life.

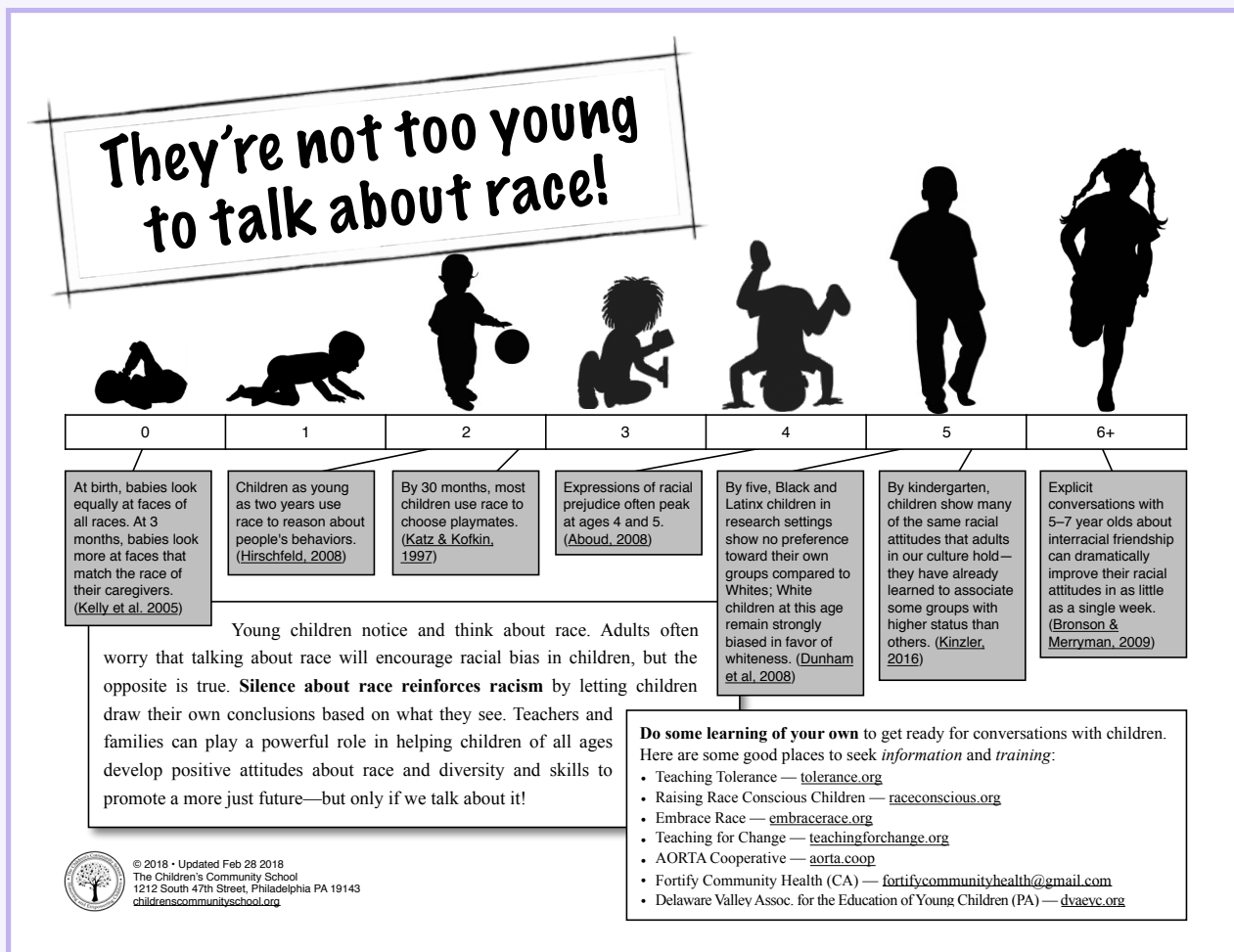
The early development of racial ideas and attitudes, including racial biases, does not mean that biases are innate and unavoidable. Instead, it shows how children come to interpret race as a meaningful social category based on many inputs from their environments. For example, in racially homogeneous environments, infants generally prefer looking at and are better able to recognize faces that match the race of their caregivers. Babies regularly exposed to racially diverse faces show no racial preference.⁹ Unfortunately, most children in the U.S. experience caregiving environments that are racially homogenous.

Children are keen observers, paying attention to patterns they notice in the world around them, and forming implicit theories about why those patterns exist. This helps explain why children’s racial preferences come to reflect status differences in society

Kids are
processing race

4.5
years

earlier than adults
think they are.



This graphic blew up on EmbraceRace’s social media. Twice.

The widely-shared timeline is reprinted here with permission from the Children’s Community School of Philadelphia.

by about 3-4 years old. By this age, White children generally show clear pro-White biases, while children of color do not show similar preferences for their own racial groups, and often show preferences for higher-status groups over lower-status groups.¹⁰ During these early years, children pick up both explicit and subtle messages about which groups of people are most and least valued and privileged in their society, and quickly internalize those ideas.¹¹ From who is portrayed as a hero on TV and whose story matters, to which neighborhoods people live in and what jobs they have, to who gets “in trouble” most often in school and who takes which classes – messages about race are coming at children from all angles.

Thus, from very young ages, children are learning about race whether or not we are intentionally talking to them about it. When we don’t actively guide children in making sense of these patterns — specifically, anti-Blackness, the devaluing and dehumanization of people of color, and the high value ascribed to whiteness in U.S. society — we leave them to draw their own conclusions. In this case, they are more likely to internalize messages from other sources that suggest these inequities are deserved.

But if we take the opportunity to engage children in conversation over these many incoming messages, as well as providing counter-messages and counter-examples,

When we don't actively guide children in making sense of these [racial] patterns — specifically, anti-Blackness, the devaluing and dehumanization of people of color, and the high value ascribed to whiteness in U.S. society — we leave them to draw their own conclusions

caregivers and communities can help children understand the patterns they observe as products of racism, unfairness, and structural barriers, and *not* deserved, justified, or unchangeable.¹² We can pair messages about the world we would like to see — in which all are treated equally and fairly regardless of race and where we celebrate our common humanity — with honest recognition that in the world we live in right now, people *are* treated unfairly based on the color of their skin. It is okay for both adults and kids to have strong, negative emotions about that. It is also important to talk together about what we can do to change it.

It makes sense that many adults, especially but not exclusively White caregivers of White children, feel uncomfortable or anxious talking about race with children. We are often unpracticed ourselves at having race-based conversations. We might worry about causing unnecessary stress or ruining our children's innocence.¹³ The emerging field of children's racial learning is grounded in the reality that even young children are already noticing and making sense of race; in the belief that teaching and learning about race can be entirely — as in, 100% — developmentally appropriate at any age; and in the conviction that our own behaviors and the choices we make for our children's environments matter as much as the words we use.

Children are capable of understanding complicated topics if we break them down into simpler terms, like differences in skin color and how people look; fairness and unfairness; true and untrue stories people tell; and how people are treated. Kids are capable of handling big emotions if we give them space, strategies, and support to process those feelings. Children don't need us to be perfect and tell them all the answers; what they really need is for us to ask *them* questions and listen to *their* answers, and to model the ability to say "I don't know" and admit when we have more to learn.

Our children are ready to learn about race. And the earlier we start talking about it, the more opportunities we have to practice and learn along with them.

Christina Rucinski is the Research-to-Practice Program Manager at EmbraceRace. You can read Christina's full biographical statement [here](#).

PARENTING PRACTICE

Parents are often referred to as children’s first teachers, and for good reason. From birth, children are learning through everyday interactions with their primary caregivers. As children grow, their parents and guardians typically remain trusted sources of information about the social world. Parents have a powerful role to play in shaping children’s racial sensibilities, both through the conversations they have and the choices they make that shape children’s lives. At EmbraceRace, we conceptualize caregivers as playing a dual role in children’s racial learning: first, as a key source of information that shapes children’s attitudes, values, and beliefs about race; and second, as an active guide in processing information from other sources.

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84%

of parents are very open to helping kids learn about race

61%

of parents feel a sense of urgency to teach kids about race

2022 EmbraceRace Parent Survey

Children's Racial Learning: A Growing Parenting Priority

Maryam Abdullah



Healthy racial learning gives children the opportunity to develop a positive self-image, cultural pride, and resilience when facing racial stress. It also helps children develop positive ways to recognize and celebrate racial differences, and connect over shared strengths, values, and experiences with people across races. Parents can support their children's healthy racial learning by providing a responsive space for curiosity and conversations. By addressing parents' needs for credible and practical resources for racial learning, we can help them nurture in children the civil courage needed to promote opportunities for all people to flourish.

In the wake of recent racialized tragedies, many parents have been looking for help with their children's racial learning — and the active demand for such help has grown substantially even in the past few years. A Google News search for “How to Talk with Kids about Race” revealed over three million results between 2020 and 2022 compared to over two thousand results between 2017 and 2019. The science of children's racial learning has also continued to grow. In 2022, there was an explosion of racial learning research on White families in response to an urgent call to understand how White children learn about race and how that learning contributes to societal systems that perpetuate destructive racial ideology.¹⁴ Research points to insights that could help White children learn to embrace race and disrupt systems to dismantle racism.

As the racial learning science field expands, so has its coverage in *Greater Good*, the Greater Good Science Center's free, online magazine. Since the Center's founding over 20 years ago, *Greater Good* articles and videos have reported on a range of racial learning research, articles and videos that have been read and watched thousands of times. Our reader engagement provides compelling evidence that parents increasingly want science-based, practical ways to help their children learn about race.

“ I think that [race] is very prevalent in both the news and pop culture. It is important for those conversations to happen at home, and for them to happen early.”

2022 EmbraceRace Parent Survey

That is why I am excited about the emergence of EmbraceRace, a thought leader and *the* go-to resource in the field of children's racial learning for parents and professionals. Families and organizations rely on EmbraceRace not only for its easily accessible knowledge base, such as exceptional webinars and action guides, but also to be a part of

a broader community energized to engage complex racial learning questions and devise solutions that need a systems-level approach. A systems view takes a broad and long-term perspective such that children's racial learning within families is understood to be influenced by dynamic factors beyond the family like neighborhoods, laws, institutions, policies, and history.

What kinds of efforts could help increase momentum among existing and potential partners to engage and contribute to the children's racial learning field? First, recent research insights make up the building blocks of science-based parenting strategies, but the field needs more guidance in developing research-backed parenting interventions to support children's racial learning within diverse racial and social identities and across ages. Second, more communities of learning and practice around parenting and children's racial learning would provide opportunities to engage deeply with resources, share insights and best practices, and build a field that can take collective action to foster systems-level change.

Third, fostering partnerships among groups working on children's racial learning would leverage the strengths and perspectives of each individual organization to advance solutions with the potential for greater reach and scale than any one organization could achieve working separately. Finally, while there already exists an abundance of children's racial learning resources, we need better means for getting them to the communities that need them. In all, these efforts would spark even greater hope that together we can foster children's racial learning to cultivate a race-brave, just, and compassionate society.

“ Race and racism education is vital to make sure we don't repeat the past. If we don't educate on these subjects, how do we try to do better than our ancestors?”

2022 EmbraceRace Parent Survey

Dr. Maryam Abdullah, is the parenting program director of the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at the University of California, Berkeley. She is a developmental psychologist who writes articles for [Greater Good](#) and develops practical research-based activities for [Greater Good in Action](#) to support the social and emotional well-being of children, parents, and families. Maryam also supports organizations providing parenting education to help raise caring, courageous children and foster a compassionate society. Her research has explored parent-child relationships, the early development of children with autism spectrum disorder, and traditional psychosocial and canine-assisted interventions for children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

Making Space for Little Uprisings

Tanya Nixon-Silberg



I have made it my mission to spark and witness “little uprisings” everyday. Over years of practice with kids, I have noticed increased self-confidence among the youth I interact with. They are (and really always have been) about challenging the status quo we adults put into place. They are proud of who they are, and they light up when they are presented with cultural manifestations and presentations that align with their own sense of self. At times, they have even taken to questioning why I am at the center and convening our gatherings.

This pushback is significant for our Black and brown youth, who are often told to be quiet and to accept passively whatever someone in a position of authority dictates to them. Folks, let’s be real: progressive, egalitarian spaces of pedagogy are usually reserved for my community’s wealthier, whiter peers. As a parent and educator, I have to check my childism often and vociferously. I constantly ask myself: if I am all about kids questioning authority, do I make room for my own child to question mine? I have been buoyed by witnessing more children questioning the structures and norms put in place by adults and exercising their own agency, and look forward to all of us involved in similar work sitting with these developments, divesting ourselves of reactionary impulses to nip them in the bud, and incorporating their import into our work moving forward.

I am one of more and more Black and brown parents looking at our legacy of parenting practices and decolonizing the way we make room for our children. Obedience and compliance have been tactics used by BIPOC folk to keep our kids safe from white folks. Shifting takes time and commitment and an eye on the goal. We were never meant to parent in isolation, and so I look to the community for help. Workshops, prompts and social media posts from intentional parenting communities like Parenting Decolonized, Latinx Parenting and Untigering have helped tremendously. What does it look like for kids to spark little uprisings everyday? To some, it might feel like chaos. To the folks truly with our eyes, hearts and minds on freedom? Little uprisings everyday looks like liberation in real time.



Image by Tess Scheffan

Tanya Nixon-Silberg holding a megaphone to her child M.E. at a protest.

Tanya Nixon-Silberg (she/her) is a Black mother, artist, educator and facilitator and founder of Little Uprisings. Little Uprisings (LU) is a collaborative and liberative racial justice project for kids and their caregivers. LU endeavors to: **Build** long lasting, sustainable, and deep relationships with schools and educators. **Create** programming that centers itself in joy and play that inspires, educates, and revolutionizes our youth. You’ll mostly find Tanya playing, radicalizing and learning from her 10-year-old daughter, creating puppet shows and dreaming up fun ways to engage children in racial justice. She can be reached at littleuprisings.org.

Finding Hope through Anti-Racism Summer Camps

Ronda Taylor Bullock, Brittany del Rosario, & Sierra Gibbs



At **we are**, which stands for **working to extend anti-racist education**, our work centers around providing anti-racism training for children, families, and educators. One of our approaches to dismantling systemic racism in education is offering summer camps for children in rising 1st-5th grade. In these camps we have trained anti-racist educators helping children build healthy racial identities by teaching them about race, racism, its impact on communities, and how to actively resist racism in our communities. When the camp was first being piloted in Durham, NC in the summer of 2016, **we are** started with just 15 campers. By 2019 that number grew to nearly 130 campers including participants at a satellite camp in Greensboro. Since 2019 the camps continue to sell out within weeks of registration opening. Where it was once unknown it grew in popularity quickly and, through word of mouth, more and more families continue to show up in larger numbers to register for camp. It is here where we've seen hope come alive. It is clear that families want this type of education for their children.

we are 1ST-2ND GRADE SUMMER CAMP 2022



we are Summer Camp

This work is heavy and layered and yet we watch every year as the children in our community tackle the complexities of race and racism and understand that they can use their voices to stand up for themselves and others in the face of injustice. They are not too young! At **we are**, we believe that Race-based Conversations with Kids Matter! We believe it, we live it out and we see it come to fruition at our camps. The conversations can be messy and they aren't always perfect. But in the end, **we are** is not striving for perfection but rather the healthy development of racial identities for all children.

we are is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that provides anti-racism training for children, families, and educators. We use a three-pronged approach to dismantle systemic racism in education by offering summer camps for children in rising 1st-5th grade, professional development for educators, and workshops for parents & families.

Parents Pushing for True School Integration

Integrated Schools

Just as public education is the foundation of democracy, at Integrated Schools we believe that multiracial public education is the foundation of multiracial democracy. Proximity isn't enough. Desegregation isn't enough. We are families choosing integration so that we might play our part in creating a true multiracial democracy in the future. And something exciting is happening. In the past four years we have opened 30 chapters in cities across the country — from Boston to Pasadena, Cincinnati to Minneapolis. In all of these places groups of parents, mostly White and/or privileged, are hosting monthly meetings, book clubs, or podcast discussion groups. Some are organizing city-wide forums and advocating for change, in partnership with local BIPOC led organizations. Listeners have downloaded the Integrated Schools podcast nearly 500,000 times, with 5,000+ people tuning in every month. These numbers represent the start of something beautiful — a movement of parents committed to antiracist school integration, and a pathway towards a true multiracial democracy.



Integrated Schools

Integrated Schools supports meaningfully integrated schools and classrooms that reflect the diversity of our districts. We champion school communities that respect ALL families and are galvanized around supporting ALL children. Through national organizing to promote local action, we support, educate, develop and mobilize families to “live our values,” disrupt segregation, and leverage our choices for the well-being and futures of our own children, of all children, and of our democracy. Learn more about our work at [Integrated Schools](#).

EDUCATION

The headlines tell us that in recent years our schools have become a battleground over whether and how to teach our children about race and racism. The truth is that PK-12 schools have always been at the forefront of the struggle to define who we are and whether and how we are to live, and be, together. Committed educators have developed engaging and developmentally appropriate lessons to deepen children’s appreciation for human differences and enhance their abilities to think critically about racial inequities both past and present. Recent eruptions about “critical race theory” make clear that the work of educators to engage children in honest, constructive learning about race and racism is far from over — and as vital as ever.

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“I think they learn from their teachers as much as from their caregivers. I also think they learn from watching how others interact. I think books and educational videos are amazing resources, but if they are not combined with teachers/caregivers modeling the same behavior as in the material, the material is less effective.”

2022 EmbraceRace Parent Survey

Finding Hope in Anti-bias Education

Debbie LeeKeenan



Converging pandemics, shifts in social views, and polarizing political issues have presented challenges to us as professionals interested in social justice education. At the same time, we have experienced a resurgence of protest and anti-bias and anti-racist education due to the watershed moment of George Floyd's murder. People locked down at home, glued to the television and social media, were forced to acknowledge the racial injustice that has been occurring for decades and moved to reaction and action. Children were also trying to make sense of what was happening around them. They have their own curiosity about differences and bring those ideas into the classroom.¹⁶

- Why is my skin this color? Can I change it?
- Malika has two mommies; does she have a daddy?
- My dad said those people will take our jobs.
- Is Devlin a boy or a girl?
- Are Indians still alive today?
- My grandpa said the police officers are not our friends. Another child says, My mom says they are.

As early educators, we know children are capable of developing racial literacy and as early as 6 months of age prefer same-skin-color faces. We need to affirm and respond to children's questions about differences and counteract their pre-prejudicial ideas. The four anti-bias goals¹⁷ of identity, diversity, justice and action provide a framework for children to develop positive social identities; have empathic, caring interactions with people who are different from them; and notice and stand up against unfairness they see in their community.

There are many significant recent developments that support anti-bias education. We have more accessible professional development resources, children's books, videos, webinars and podcasts authored and developed by BIPOC. More educators are meeting in communities of practice to discuss anti-bias/anti-racist issues and share practices, such as looking at classroom documentation of an anti-bias activity or reading an article together about children's racial identity development. Affinity groups have gained ground where people with a common social identity gather for connection, support and action. We are finding allies and community.

My co-produced 2021 film with John Nimmo, *Reflecting on Anti-bias in Action: The Early Years*,¹⁸ has been seen all over the world. The film has been a powerful provocation for making anti-bias education an integral part of schools and organizations, and not just in the friendly blue states. The film has been welcomed as a tool for those invested in social justice work in places like Florida, Texas, Arizona, Wyoming, and



Reflecting on Anti-bias Education has been well-received all over the US and the world.

Oklahoma. People are asking for more specific tools and strategies to further equity work. Last November 2022 at the National Association of Education for Young Children's (NAEYC) annual conference in Washington DC, over 6,000 early childhood educators convened for the first time in person since 2019 to learn and share possibilities of how to bring equity into our educational settings. It was a joyous moment to be in person, hugging, high-fiving...we survived, are still standing, and are marching forward.

We can break down the barriers of this divisive nation by holding community conversations with people who have diverse perspectives and identities. What if every school, church, temple, mosque, youth and senior center held a community supper once a month, where people come together to share their stories and memories of encountering diversity and experiencing community with people who are the same and different from them? What would we learn? There are many people and organizations doing social justice work. But we are often siloed. What if we created a national database that included updated information on all the organizations working for social justice in the different sectors?

What if every school, church, temple, mosque, youth and senior center held a community supper once a month, where people come together to share their stories and memories of encountering diversity and experiencing community with people who are the same and different from them? What would we learn?

We can also lean into disequilibrium and conflict as a part of doing anti-bias work. Inevitably there is disagreement and pushback when doing this work, because our different values and beliefs are based on our positionality. The intersectionality of our social identities and lived experiences impact how much we can manage discomfort and risk-taking, balanced with the need for safety. However if we show up authentically, listen deeply and compassionately, and embrace complexity, we can always learn something even if we don't always agree. Conflict and disequilibrium can provide opportunity for growth. We can move beyond either/or binary thinking. There is never one way forward. Be strategic, and find the spaces where there is common ground to reimagine and create a more fair and just world.

Debbie LeeKeenan is a long time social justice educator, lecturer, consultant and author. She has been in the field of early education for over 50 years. She is a former preschool, special education, and elementary school teacher. Debbie is a producer of the award winning film, [Reflecting on Anti-bias Education in Action: The Early Years](#), released in April 2021. Debbie was awarded the 2022 National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Asian Interest Forum Leadership Award for demonstrating professional excellence, integrity and social responsibility to better the lives of many children, families, the ECE workforce of Asian descent and the ECE field as a whole. Debbie is a member of a multi-racial family and an active grandmother.

We Must Build It. They Will Come!

Nicol Russell



I recently attended the annual conference for the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The conference offered more than 65 sessions on diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, race, racism, and critical race theory. Here was the scene when I walked into the President’s Seminar, entitled *Charting the Future for the Early Childhood Profession: BIPOC Leaders Reflect on the State of the Field and What Lies Ahead for the Early Learning Sector*.

On the stage is NAEYC’s new CEO, Michelle Kang—the first Asian American CEO of the organization. Next to Michelle is Erica Phillips, the African American President and Chief Impact Officer of the early childhood organization *All Our Kin*. At center-stage is Dr. Calvin Moore, the African American CEO of the Council for Professional Recognition, the leading credentialing agency for early childhood educators. Next to him is Dr. Leah Austin, the African American President and CEO of the National Black Child Development Institute. The last person on the stage is Natalie Vega O’Neil, the first Latinx President of NAEYC.

In the audience are hundreds of NAEYC members of all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds—all present to witness this incredible panel of early childhood leaders of color. The panel talks about the pressing needs of young children, especially children of color. Every leader lifted the need to acknowledge and support these children’s families and educators of color to serve them well.

As I looked around the room, I couldn’t help but think that we are coming to a tipping point in which a critical mass of folks in early childhood recognize that we need more racial learning — in fact, that we need a field of racial learning. The President’s Seminar left me feeling like we must build it; they will come!

Dr. Nicol Russell is the Vice President of Implementation Research at Teaching Strategies, was formerly a teacher in early childhood and in early childhood special education, state director of special education, state deputy superintendent of early childhood education, and an educational researcher. Nicol brings a wealth of experience in early childhood education. In all her work, Nicol tries her best to “choose the margins” — a phrase learned from Linda Tuhiwai Smith — and be a voice for Indigenous, Black, and other children of color who are often excluded, neglected, or otherwise overlooked. Nicol also serves as a facilitator for EmbraceRace’s Color-Brave Community.

Students and Educators Pushing Back, Leading the Way

Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn



A few years ago, when my stepdaughter was still in elementary school, she asked me: “Why do we only learn about Indigenous Americans in the past tense at school?” She went on to describe what she *had* been taught about history. Unsurprisingly, it was the same white-centered, male-dominated narrative that I had learned in elementary school, that my American father had learned, and that his parents had learned before him. The difference was that she had the awareness to realize that what she was learning was simply that — one narrative — and she had the critical consciousness to question it.

There are many children with this critical consciousness, asking questions and advocating for access to diverse histories and complex narratives.

Lately, the news has been dominated by stories of (all too real, all too troubling) book bans and curricular erasures. At the same time, many young people are aware that this is happening and are pushing back. Across the country, students are organizing, protesting, walking out, and speaking out. They’re reading and distributing banned books. They’re even filing lawsuits in response to district policies.

When children are the ones advocating for their own access to honest, anti-racist education, the adults around them are more likely to rise to the occasion. Every day I work with educators who are actively diversifying and deepening their students’ access to racially honest history. Teachers are centering more texts by Black, Indigenous, and Latine authors. Schools are providing ethnic studies programs at younger ages. States are passing the first-ever mandates around Asian American studies. This work is happening at every level, and as long as young people continue to lead the way in advocating for this kind of learning, I retain my optimism for the future.

Huge majorities of Americans believe that lessons about the history of racism, rather than being harmful to children, prepare children to build a better future for everyone.

86% of Independents agree

95% of Democrats agree

76% of Republicans agree

[ippos Poll for Parents Together Among American Adults](#)

Dr. Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn is an educator, speaker and professional learning facilitator. Sarah has experience teaching at both the secondary and elementary levels and in 2011 was named Teacher of the Year at Lakeside Upper Elementary School in Lake Village, Arkansas. As a professional trainer, Sarah’s areas of focus have included workplace cultures, leadership skills, and diversity, equity and inclusion, working with organizations across the country such as Learning for Justice, Microsoft and LinkedIn. Sarah has an M.A. in Social Justice and Education from University College London’s Institute of Education and an Ed.D. from Johns Hopkins University.

The Power of True Stories and Honest History



Michael Lawrence-Riddell

Stories have power. Better, more inclusive stories have the power to change the world. This belief in the power of well-told stories is at the core of the work that **Self-Evident Education** is doing. Through the power of multimedia storytelling to interrogate the histories and legacies of systemic racism in the United States, we are building partnerships with educators and leaders in Georgia, Virginia, and Texas, states where there is organized and well-funded pushback on the teaching of accurate history about race and racism. In each we have found passionate educators committed to critical thinking and honest history.

One [8th-grade social studies] student said, “If we don’t understand our history, we can never make things better.”

There’s the 8th-grade social studies teacher in Georgia who uses our resources as a model to have his students tell their own stories about “difficult history.” One of his students said, “If we don’t understand our history, we can **never** make things better.” In Virginia, teachers and students in the REAL Richmond course are investigating the “hard” history of their city, looking for the stories that have been marginalized or left out altogether, and using them to better understand present-day Richmond. And in Texas, at a gathering of social studies educators from across the state, I saw sessions on “Having Critical Conversations,” “Why ‘Hard’ Topics Are Essential in the Social Studies Classroom,” “Teaching Social Studies in an Age of Division,” and more. I presented two of our films that examine historical moments that shine a light on the creation and weaponization of race. Educator after educator thanked us for doing that work. I have been invited back to present to the Social Studies Directors for all twenty regions in the state of Texas.

We are inspired by this and will continue to be a resource for people ready to use the power of history and more inclusive stories to change the world.

Michael Lawrence-Riddell is an award winning public school educator with twenty years of classroom experience. He founded Self-Evident Education in September of 2019 because he wasn’t finding teaching materials that addressed the urgent need for our society to honestly and rigorously engage in work to understand the histories and legacies of race and institutional racism. Michael’s foundation as an African-American Studies major at Wesleyan University and as a teacher of American History also shapes his work.

CHILDREN'S MEDIA

Children spend more time engaged with media than ever before. Their imaginations are captivated by media, and they actively learn from the books they read, the television shows and movies they watch, and the video platforms and digital games they play. When crafted intentionally to authentically represent the diversity of children and families today, and when used as jumping off points for critical conversations between adults and children, these media can be powerful tools to support healthy racial learning.

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AMONG 0 TO 8-YEAR-OLDS, AVERAGE DAILY AMOUNT OF SCREEN MEDIA USED (HOURS:MINUTES)



Representation of Race in Children's Media

Mariana Díaz-Wionczek



In the last couple of years, particularly since Black Lives Matter, the urgency of calls for increased diversity, representation and inclusion in kids' media has become undeniable. That in itself is a promising sign. We know that all children can benefit from seeing diverse and inclusive content, whether they are from an under-represented group or not. Seeing realistic, layered portrayals of kids and families can aid in identity development and help kids uncover who they are and who they want to be. Diverse examples also enrich life, exposing kids to things they may not see in their everyday worlds — places to travel, songs to sing, foods to enjoy. And of course, seeing similarities and differences promotes understanding among people.

We would like to think that parents and teachers are teaching kids about diversity, but they often are not.¹⁹ Media can and should fill the knowledge gaps left by parents and teachers. This is a huge opportunity, and even a responsibility, given how much time kids spend in front of screens. Despite what some might say, kids are not “color-blind.” They learn visually, first and foremost, so seeing a character that looks, sounds, and acts like them will have a great impact on their sense of self-worth. For representation purposes, that means that they need to see human characters, not animals, monsters, or robots. That said, a recent study²⁰ shows only 42% of preschool TV characters are human, so less than half even have a chance at showing diversity. Of those human characters, only 1/3 are characters of color.

Still, we have seen movement in the media space in recent years. Examples of high-quality representation in the preschool animation space include *Rosie's Rules*, centering a blended Mexican American family living in suburban Texas; *Molly of Denali*, centering an Alaska Native child; and *Alma's Way*, centering a Puerto Rican child living in the Bronx. These shows intentionally and effectively embed specific and authentic cultural representation in their storytelling and design choices and, importantly, include members of the portrayed communities among their production teams. There are also examples of established, successful series that have increasingly created space to explore cultural themes. Shows like *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* and *Blue's Clues* have introduced new characters and have dedicated episodes to visiting different communities and portraying different traditions, music, architecture, and more. Going beyond empty gestures at inclusivity, these “deep dive” episodes afford the opportunity to integrate more cultural specificity into popular shows.

Despite the progress we have made, there is still a long way to go. Children's media can be a powerful springboard to further



***Rosie's Rules* on PBSKids is a great example of authentic cultural representation in preschool animation.**

healthy racial learning if we embrace the opportunities it presents us.

Visually represent diversity. Based on what we know about child development, children need to see themselves very directly. Kids, especially the little ones, are not known for picking up on subtle cues. When it comes to their learning, simple and direct statements and stories work best. And when it comes to diversity, kids need to see people who look like them on-screen. The most explicit way to show diversity is via physical attributes including skin tone, eye shape, and hair. Besides these physical features, there is also the opportunity to include character names that indicate diverse cultures; linguistic competency, where characters consistently speak a language other than English; and cultural competencies which include themes, music, settings, and props.

Include fully developed and culturally authentic stories. Featuring multiple characters of color is only the first step towards true diverse representation in media for kids. Equally as important is representing character perspectives that are layered and specific enough to portray authenticity in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, language, personality, etc., which is achieved by including the details to bring the culture to life like music, clothing, food, and celebrations. Shows ought to check enough boxes in terms of visual diversity and story elements to count as diverse, representative, and inclusive, particularly when it comes to looks, character names, and language and cultural competencies. Diverse portrayals must be direct via human characters, stories, and dialog about racial, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Diversify behind the scenes. Diversity, representation, and inclusion on screen begins with teams that reflect the diversity of the U.S. population. This means that 50% of any creative team should be people of color. More diverse teams, where people's background matches that of the characters, will naturally lead to the most authentic content. In turn, authentic content will

Asian, Black, and Hispanic/Latino parents are much more likely to feel that the representation of their own ethnic-racial group in media is stereotypical.

64%

Black

54%

Hispanic/Latino

52%

Asian

31%

White

[Common Sense Media](#)

resonate with more diverse audiences. As far as supporting those who are already engaged in this work, it is important to uplift these voices. Discrimination, microaggression and inherent bias are always prevalent in any space, and it is a slow and steady curve towards equity. Supporting each other in navigating this is at times challenging, but important work.

Intentionally promote children's racial learning through media. When it comes to race and ethnicity, decisions need to be deliberate and thoughtful and put the perspectives of diverse human characters front and center as main characters that kids can connect with emotionally, learn from, and be inspired by. In tandem with on-screen and behind-the-scenes representation, when it comes to educational media content there is an opportunity to build robust race education frameworks and curricula. The same way we have series that teach us the ABCs like *Sesame Street* and social-emotional learning like *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* or *Alma's Way*, it is important to create content and shows that teach and promote healthy racial learning and discourse. This can mean curricula supported both in shows and in long form, short form, and digital content supplementing them. This can include games, supporting materials and printables to be used in the classroom or at home, books and more.

The work we do in Children's Media doesn't stop when the TV shuts off or the episode ends, and the full package of the media experience is key to holistic education about race and inclusion. Raising children who are thoughtful and informed about race requires intention from parents, caregivers, and educators. As a community, we are responsible for promoting healthy racial learning across the different spheres of kids' lives spanning from the home to school, their communities, and the media content they consume. For media creators, it begins with the authentic and direct representation in the shows we create, ensuring this representation is reflected behind the screen, and is completed with follow-up from the families and educators at home and in our communities. Together, we can help affirm children in their experiences and identities, teach children about those they have yet to be exposed to, and raise generations of young ones more comfortable and equipped in navigating race.

Dr. Díaz-Wionczek is a Co-Executive Producer on Nickelodeon's *iDora!* and Executive Producer on 9 Story's *Rosie's Rules* for PBSKids. She is a DEI advisor for Google, PBSKids, Sesame Workshop, Higher Ground, Nickelodeon, Noggin, Joan Ganz Cooney Center, Pinna, and Bridge Multimedia, among others. She teaches a graduate class at NYU, gave a TEDx talk on ethnic identity, is a reviewer for the *Journal of Children and the Media*, and is a contributor to The Future of Children report and KidScreen. Dr. Díaz-Wionczek obtained a Ph.D in Psychology from CUNY's Graduate Center and a B.A. from the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Reflecting Our Children in Their Full Humanity

Traci Sorell & Megan Dowd Lambert

In 2021, Native artist Michaela Goade (Tlingit) won the Randolph Caldecott Medal for her illustration of the picture book *We Are Water Protectors*, written by Carole Lindstrom (Anishinabe/Métis). She was the first-ever woman of color to win this prestigious award in its 80+ year history.

We have been waiting and hoping for a BIPOC woman to win the Caldecott. From a marketing standpoint, books that win medals stay in print and reach more readers. This win was a particular joy because *We Are Water Protectors*, written and illustrated by Indigenous women, tells a story of contemporary Indigenous people. It's clear Goade is grounded in connection to community and in being culturally accurate and authentic. She does the research, and she understands how important it is to show every character in their full humanity.

Goade's Caldecott win also signaled support for how mainstream publishing is finally starting to listen to and hold space for accurate and authentic representations of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people in children's literature. Our hope is that such openness and inclusivity will become an integral part of how the industry operates moving forward because this is about true representation of our child population. The majority of people in the U.S. under age 30 are non-White—even more so under age 18. This is the world our children are growing up in, and we need to reflect their reality by giving children true reflections of themselves and their peers. That's what they deserve. We all deserved that as children. And there are so many stories to tell! There are 574 Native Nations federally recognized in the U.S.—that's not counting groups still seeking recognition. We need stories from all of those!

This need is also about more than representation. It's about honesty, humility, curiosity, and openness to learning more. Diverse books offer opportunities to practice humility, to learn things society teaches us to look away from. This isn't a sacrifice, but an invitation. Aren't we lucky to have an invitation to learn more and to grow beyond where we are?

Of course, we've still got work to do in terms of inclusivity in American children's book publishing.²¹ For those outside the industry, make it known that this is the content you want. Buy books from smaller, tribally owned presses and BIPOC-owned presses,²² which highlight voices who are really connected to their communities. Follow Native creators on social media, because they will lead you to titles you



A member of the Tlingit tribe, Michaela Goade won the Caldecott Medal for her work in *We Are Water Protectors*.

might not otherwise see. Follow independent Native- or Black-owned bookstores²³ and see what they're putting on their shelves. Pre-order these books for your school, your library, your home. To the extent you can, put your money where your values are. Go to your library and request them so that everyone has access. Wear your library out with requests!

Finally, remember that as adults, we can be informed, we can be healed, and we can learn from these books just as much as our young people. Learning, growing, and evolving is part of the human experience. Another part is to be in relationship with each other—which is impossible to do if we do not recognize each other's full humanity. Literature and the arts give us ways of fostering that connectivity and reciprocity.



PERCENT OF PARENTS WHO SAY IT IS IMPORTANT FOR MEDIA TO:

Expose children to other cultures, religions, and their lifestyles

74%

Have characters of a different ethnicity-race than their children

68%

[Common Sense Media](#)

Megan Dowd Lambert created the Whole Book Approach storytime model in association with The Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art and is a former lecturer in children's literature at Simmons University. The winner of a 2016 Ezra Jack Keats New Writer Honor, Megan's experiences as a White mother of seven children in a blended, multiracial, queer, adoptive family inform her work as an author, reviewer, and consultant. She currently serves as co-owner and president of Modern Memoirs, Inc., a private publishing company specializing in personal and family histories. Megan brings to her work the conviction that everyone's story is worth telling, and a belief in the transformative power of radical listening.

Traci Sorell is a Cherokee Nation citizen and an author of fiction and nonfiction for young people. Her first five books all received awards from the American Indian Library Association. Those titles include *We Are Still Here! Native American Truths Everyone Should Know*; *Classified: The Secret Career of Mary Golda Ross, Cherokee Aerospace Engineer*; and *At the Mountain's Base*. Her nonfiction titles have also received two Sibert Honors, two Orbis Pictus Honors, and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor. A former federal Indigenous law attorney and advocate, Traci lives with her family on her tribe's reservation in northeastern Oklahoma. You can learn more about Traci and her work at www.tracisorell.com.

Building Characters, Blending Cultures

Courtney Wong Chin



When I was a kid, I saw my cultural identity represented in media on opposite ends of the spectrum: completely Americanized or completely Chinese. Today, kids have an incredibly rich media window into the lived experiences of others—a window that has widened to cover the vast range of possibilities between completely Americanized and completely any-other-culture. Code-switching into a non-English language for a single word or entire conversation. Sitting around a dinner table with only American food or a mix including non-American dishes. Eating with chopsticks or forks, or both.

Blending and growing cultures can be beautiful. There is no perfect balance of American and non-American elements within an individual kids' show or within an individual kid or family. At Noggin, Nickelodeon's interactive learning platform, we consider these questions quite deliberately as we develop our original kid characters. Beyond building characters to be representative of various racial/ethnic cultures, we architect full profiles including parent and grandparent backstories to understand how their families' journey to the U.S. drives the blending of cultures that make up a child's world.

I would love to continue seeing more examples of blending cultures beyond language and food, especially in evolving family relationships. There is more work to be done; at the same time we have made tremendous progress. Representing the diversity between cultures, within cultures, and within the blending of cultures gives me hope for growing our awareness and appreciation for every child's lived experience.

Beyond building characters to be representative of various racial/ethnic cultures, we architect full profiles including parent and grandparent backstories to understand how their families' journey to the U.S. drives the blending of cultures that make up a child's world.

Courtney Wong Chin is Director of Learning Insights & Design at Noggin, leading research across Noggin interactive and video content to ensure that materials are created with the highest potential for measurable learning. She has spent over 10 years conducting educational media and technology user-experience research with children, parents and educators. Previously, she served as director of content research and evaluation at Sesame Workshop. In her current role, Courtney has also contributed to the "Discussing Race with Young Children" guide from Sparkler Learning, OK Play, and Noggin: www.bigheartworld.org/discussingrace.

Hot Off the Press: Striding Toward Diversity in Children's Book Publishing



Marti Dumas

To say that decisions about which children's books get published is an art and not a science is an understatement. Children's book publishers work based on gut feelings. Who can blame them? The world is filled with good writers, and it takes more than good writing for a book to earn back the money it takes to publish it, let alone end up in the black. So, to make a profit, children's book editors are forced to rely on their spidey senses, literally trying to pinpoint the undefinable *je ne sais quoi* that will make a book a success.

The catch is that since publishers have to rely on their personal senses of connection to decide what to publish, the books they choose will mostly reflect the race and experiences of the people acquiring them. However unintentionally, this dynamic reinforces the idea that to be important enough to be the main character, you will also probably have to be white. In our increasingly connected, highly diverse world, this isn't good for children of any race or ethnicity, including those who identify as white. That's why it's so encouraging to see more of our world's diversity reflected in the people of publishing, not just in the characters in books published. It's early days yet, but imprints like Kokila, headed by Namrata Tripathi; the recent announcement that Kwame Mbalia will head Freedom Fire, a new division of Disney Publishing; and packagers like Dhonielle Clayton's Cake Creative give me hope. More diversity in the publishing industry, and more organizations like these that are dedicated to lifting up BIPOC voices and stories, won't just mean more great children's books. It means that great children's books will reflect an even fuller range of the people in the world. And we all need that.

“ In my class — in all fifth-grade classes — we were required to read ‘classics,’ books like ‘Shiloh,’ which is about a white boy and the dog he rescues. And ‘Old Yeller,’ which is about a white boy and the dog that rescues him. And ‘Where the Red Fern Grows,’ which is about a white boy and the two dogs he trains.”

— Marley Dias

Marti Dumas is a mom, teacher and writer from New Orleans. She is best known for her *Jaden Toussaint, the Greatest*, series. Her latest books, *Jupiter Storm* and *The Little Human*, are middle-grade fantasies being heralded for their skillful combination of science, family, and magic.

HEALTH PROFESSIONS

Practitioners in the health professions — pediatricians, pediatric psychologists, social workers, and others — have developed keen insights into how growing up in a racist society impacts children’s health and well-being. More of these practitioners are now routinely integrating what they know about the practices that mitigate the harms of racism into their work with children and families. Increasingly, this includes providing guidance and resources for families to help them raise children who are thoughtful, informed, and brave about race.

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Many Black and Hispanic parents identify racism as one of their top child health concerns.

82%

Black parents identify racism as one of their top child health concerns

66%

Hispanic parents identify racism as one of their top child health concerns

[C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital’s 2020 National Poll on Children’s Health](#)

Preparing Health Professionals and Families to Partner for Children’s Racial Learning



Jacqueline Douge

As the mom of two Black sons, I wish I could have talked with my children’s pediatrician about the stress that my kids experienced in school due to racial bullying or media reports of another Black person being shot by the police. I wish they could have provided recommendations on how to talk to my children about race and the importance of racial identity. My pediatrician wasn’t trained to have such conversations. Nor did I receive that training in medical school or pediatric residency. My family and I had to have these conversations without the support or resources of our pediatrician.

My children’s experiences influenced my work to help other parents and my colleagues learn about the importance of helping children develop positive racial and ethnic identities.²⁴ I developed a podcast, *What is Black?*, to help parents instill racial pride in Black children through conversations with health experts, book recommendations and other resources. I’ve helped train parents on how to talk to children about race and racism and written articles on the topic. I co-authored the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) policy statement, [The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health](#), to provide recommendations for pediatricians, which include talking to parents about race.

I wish they could have provided recommendations on how to talk to my children about race and the importance of racial identity. My pediatrician wasn’t trained to have such conversations. Nor did I receive that training in medical school or pediatric residency.

I’m excited that I’ve been able to contribute to a fast-growing body of work aimed at preparing child health professionals and parents for these conversations. The American Psychological Association’s [RESilience](#) website²⁵ provides resources for caregivers on talking to children about race and promoting strength, health and well-being among youth of color. The AAP website offers a [Bright Futures](#) resource that provides pediatricians with tips and recommendations on how to engage with children and families in discussion on racism, discrimination and racial bias. This resource was developed based on research and advocacy by pediatricians.

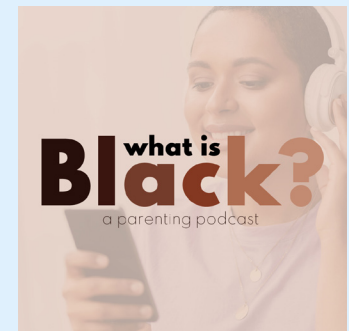
Developmental psychologists helped produce the 2021 research report from Common Sense Media, [The Inclusion Imperative](#), which explores the impact of diverse media representation on what children learn about race and ethnicity. The report helped fuel

Common Sense Media's creation of a diverse representation rating for children's media such as books, movies, podcasts and video games. Psychologists also played a lead role in developing the University of Pittsburgh's [Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education Program](#) (P.R.I.D.E.). P.R.I.D.E. helps 3-8-year-old Black children learn about race and develop a positive view of their racial identity.

Behind the scenes, health professional organizations are also working to create resources such as simulation trainings, where child health professionals can practice talking with families about race and receive feedback to improve their communication skills. They are writing textbooks to train their colleagues on how to help parents talk with children about race, creating caregiver resources and tools, normalizing race conversations in office visits, educating parents on racial developmental milestones, and partnering across professional and multidisciplinary settings — like the one between the [AAP and Reach Out and Read](#)²⁶ — to build bridges for better collaboration, education and improved care for families.

Of course, there is much more that we can do to improve our contributions to healthy racial learning among children. Above all, going forward it will be important that health professionals work much more closely with parents and caregivers to learn from and with each other about what works, what doesn't, and about the challenges, opportunities and innovations in the field. Moreover, we can never forget that people are defined not only by racial or ethnic identity, but also by language, gender, sexual orientation, culture and so much more. As we continue to expand our knowledge and understanding of the field of racial learning, health professionals must ensure that we consider the whole child by bringing an intersectional lens to our work.

I'm excited about the progress being made. We've come a long way from my experiences as a parent and a pediatrician-in-training. Through expanded training of health professionals; more research in the field of racial learning; and cross-sector partnerships, including robust collaborations between the professionals and caregivers, we can make major strides toward improving the racial literacy, health and wellbeing of US children.



Jacqueline Douge hosts the [“What is Black?”](#) podcast.

Dr. Jacqueline Douge is a pediatrician, writer and speaker. She's a child health expert on the issues of the impact of racism on children's health and helping parents talk to children about race and racism. She's been featured on Today, CNN, NY Times and NPR. She's a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI). In addition, she's the co-author of the American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement, *The Impact of Racism on Child and Adolescent Health*. When she's not writing, she hosts *What is Black?* a parenting podcast that addresses issues important to raising healthy and thriving Black children and teens. *Learning To Love All of Me* is her first middle grade novel.

Catalyzing Youth Racial Learning through Social Work Practice

James P. Huguley & Cecily D. Davis



Social Work as a field has a fundamental ethical mandate to advance social justice and to promote the dignity of every human. These essential priorities coalesce with Social Work's bedrock youth development professions in areas like counseling, child welfare, and school social work to make it a natural fit for efforts to promote healthy racial learning among children.

Among current initiatives is the Parenting While Black program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, which leverages the racial socialization literature, community partnerships, and social work training to provide best practice strategies and group-level supports to Black parents in their efforts to promote their children's thriving in a racialized society. Parenting While Black is led by a team of facilitators who are Black parents themselves. Community co-leads are also a feature of the program, whereby parents from partner organizations co-facilitate groups, in the process tailoring experience to their constituents' localized needs. The organizing team for Parenting While Black has recently won multiple Social Work research awards for their racial socialization work, indicating a growing, broader recognition in the field of the importance of racial learning to the promotion of justice and thriving for all youth.

Dr. James Huguley is an Associate Professor and the Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work. He is also the chair of the Race and Youth Development Research Group at the Center on Race and Social Problems. Dr. Huguley's research focuses on school- and family-based interventions that promote positive developmental outcomes for African American youth in adverse and oppressive contexts. He is the Principal Investigator for Parenting While Black, a program that provides Black primary caregivers with supports around utilizing best practices in racial socialization, educational involvement, and promoting positive mental health. Prior to his academic career Dr. Huguley was a youth program director and middle school teacher. He received his bachelors in Secondary Education from Providence College, and both his master's in Risk and Prevention and doctorate in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard University.

Cecily D. Davis, MSW, is a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, where she is Co-PI and lead facilitator for the Parenting While Black program. With over ten years of practice experience, Cecily's expertise has focused on collaborative partnerships across sectors, and she specializes in connecting research to on-the-ground practice for agencies such as Trying Together, Pittsburgh Public Schools, and the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. Ms. Davis's current practice emphasizes the needs of children, youth, and families, and her primary research interests focus on disproportionality within early childhood settings, racial socialization, mixed methods designs, and implementation/dissemination research. Cecily received her Master's in Social Work from the University of Pittsburgh, focusing on Community Organizing and Social Administration. She holds a Bachelor's in Social Work from Carlow University.

Transforming Mental Health Practice with Children and Families



Katie Lingras

The field of child psychology and its mental health peers (e.g. social work, psychiatry, counseling, and more) have long recognized the importance of identity development and, more specifically, racial identity development. The events of 2020 — the racial inequities of the COVID-19 pandemic followed by the murder of George Floyd and subsequent racial injustice uprisings — reminded us all of the importance of attending to such topics in our work.

As a result, more and more mental health providers are working to transform their practice with children and families. Practitioners are understanding that complex topics can be explained in simple language for children of all ages. Subsequently, children are asking more questions and being given language that they can understand. Gone (waning) are the days when children are “too young to understand” — particularly when the challenging events are occurring at their doorstep and in their daily lives.

Caregivers whose awareness has been raised are bringing hard questions to practitioners about how to talk with their children about difficult topics. Mental health practitioners are also discussing race with parents of BIPOC and mixed race children (particularly White parents who may not share this identity with their children), supporting caregivers in discussing experiences related to racism, racial trauma, and other types of discrimination, and working to increase the representativeness of toys, books, and other materials used in clinical practice.

These are only beginning steps, and as we move forward in this work, it will be important to continue collaborating across disciplines and between academic and community partners to best serve children and families!



The author as auntie.

Dr. Katherine (Katie) Lingras is an Associate Professor and Child Psychologist at the University of Minnesota in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. Dr. Lingras specializes in early childhood mental health, with an emphasis on behavioral concerns and trauma. In addition to direct clinical care and supervision of trainees, Dr. Lingras works in community-based settings like preschools and primary care clinics to train multi-disciplinary providers to understand and identify children’s mental health concerns. Dr. Lingras also serves in various Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion leadership roles in her department, at the Medical School, and in the community. She regularly conducts trainings that integrate her passion for EDI work with her children’s mental health expertise.

Talking Race to Address Racism in Pediatric Healthcare

Adiaha Spinks-Franklin



The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 was a major catalyst for big changes in pediatric training and care delivery. In the intervening time, several national pediatric organizations have engaged in activities to improve pediatricians' racial literacy and ability to provide equitable care to patients of color and their families. These include conference presentations, research articles, textbook chapters, and standing-room-only anti-racism workshops that train pediatricians to engage in delivery of anti-racist healthcare and research. Pediatricians have a key role to play in reducing the significant health disparities we see between children of color and immigrant children, on one hand, and US-born White children, on the other. It will take a while for these changes to become a widespread part of routine pediatric care, but once they do they are also likely to shape what children learn and think about race.

Over time, more children will hear their doctors explicitly and routinely lifting up race, thereby sending a strong signal about the importance of talking about race while doing so in healthy and informed ways.

In time, more and more pediatricians will ask parents about the role race and racism play in their family's life; about whether the children or caregivers have experienced racial or other forms of discrimination; and about whether and how parents talk to their children about race and racism, including issues of racism and discrimination shown in the media. I have these conversations in my own practice and more of my colleagues have begun to follow suit. Over time, more children will hear their doctors explicitly and routinely lifting up race, thereby sending a strong signal about the importance of talking about race while doing so in healthy and informed ways.

Dr. Adiaha Spinks-Franklin is a developmental behavioral pediatrician in the Meyer Center for Developmental Pediatrics at Texas Children's Hospital and an Associate Professor of Pediatrics for Baylor College of Medicine. Since 2018, she has led a team of multi-disciplinary, multi-ethnic pediatric professionals to conduct anti-racism workshops across the country. The workshops focus on racism as an Adverse Childhood Experience, training healthcare professionals to become "anti-racists," and addressing the effects of racism during clinical encounters with patients.

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Social scientists have contributed a great deal to what we know about children's racial identity development and racial learning. Scholars in developmental science, social psychology, sociology, education, and related disciplines use innovative methods to investigate how children understand and experience race and racism from the first year of life through adolescence and emerging adulthood. Now more than ever before, many social scientists are working to apply the insights from their research to matters of policy and practice in ways that ultimately improve the lives of children and families.

REFLECTIONS

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86%

of teens say they are “proud that people are taking a stand protecting against racism”

[National 4H Council Survey](#)

2/3

say they “need people to hear their voice about racism”

Creating a Bold Antiracist Research Agenda for Racial Learning: Protecting, Promoting, and Preserving Human Dignity



Iheoma Iruka

White supremacy ideology permeates our culture, laws, policies, and interactions, generating pernicious racial disparities in health, wealth, social, psychological and educational outcomes. This ideology imprints early in children's minds, making it harder to change later in life. Promoting children's positive racial-ethnic identity increasingly is seen as one way to blunt the effects of bias and discrimination often experienced by Black and Brown children while helping White children see their privilege.

Attention to positive racial-ethnic identity is gaining momentum through schools' increased engagement with social-emotional learning (SEL), and with transformative SEL specifically²⁷. "Transformative SEL is grounded in the idea that students learn to build strong, respectful relationships that appreciate people's differences and similarities and learn to critically examine issues and seek collaborative solutions to social problems"²⁸. Insofar as effective collaborative problem-solving requires self-awareness (understanding one's personality, behavior, internal states, and role in social networks) and social awareness (engaging in empathy and perspective-taking and their ability to respect diversity), the adoption of transformative SEL practices will provide more opportunities to study and strengthen children's racial learning.

Meanwhile, emerging research examines how children learn about race. For example, my colleagues and I are conducting a developmental, mixed-methods home visiting evaluation to understand *when* parents believe children should know and talk about race and from *whom* children learn about race (e.g., parents/family, child care, school, TV/media, friends/peers, materials/objects, family friends, neighborhood/community). There is a need for more studies on *what* and *how* children learn about race and *how* best to support high-quality racial learning in the early years.

And still more is needed. We need a public-private, multiracial, multi-sectoral approach to spur more robust and sustainable research on children's racial learning. Accelerating research and practice in children's racial learning will require research-to-practice-to-policy funding from public and private funders. Early childhood funders, including state and local governments, recognize the early years as a sensitive period of development and are beginning to understand that supporting the healthy development of children, especially young Black children and other children of color,



***Don't Look Away*, co-authored by Iheoma Iruka, supports early care professionals to examine their own biases.**

requires attending to positive racial-ethnic identity development and to children's racial learning.

For example, in late 2020, a group of funders (Bezos Family Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Foundation for Child Development), heeding calls from parents, professionals, and policymakers about the need for guidance on how to mitigate the harms of racism on young children, convened parents, early childhood leaders, and researchers to examine how to support positive racial-ethnic identity development through family-school partnerships and early childhood systems. While the next step of this work remains uncertain, it gives a blueprint of how a **research-to-practice-to-policy agenda** might be developed if we sought to understand fully how to foster children's racial learning in multiple early childhood settings through existing systems (e.g., home visiting, quality rating improvement system, family engagement).

If we are to fully uncover what racial learning is, understand the factors that shape it across settings, and make it part of the educational and accountability landscape, we need a network that aligns relevant research to practice and policy. (Educare Learning Network and the Bridging the Word Gap Network might be good models of effective research networks.) Ensuring the effectiveness of this new network would require extensive and flexible funding and people who synthesize current evidence, review current child racial literacy programs, and more, while engaging diverse groups of parents, educators, home visitors and parent educators, policymakers, and other constituents. To ensure that this work is comprehensive and actionable, it will be crucial from the launch of the network onward to invite groups with diverse perspectives to reflect on the resulting research and its implications for practice and policy and to communicate with policymakers and the general public.

There is a great deal we can do to promote children's positive racial-ethnic identity and thereby advance racial equity. However, we need a bold research-to-practice-to-policy agenda that moves us to and beyond racial literacy to racial healing, joy, and liberation.

Dr. Iheoma U. Iruka, is a Research Professor in the Department of Public Policy, a Fellow at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and the Founding Director of the Equity Research Action Coalition at FPG. She leads projects and initiatives focused on ensuring that minoritized children and children from low-income households, especially Black children, thrive. Some areas of focus include family engagement and support, quality rating and improvement systems, and early care and education systems and programs. She has served, and serves, on numerous national and local boards and committees, including the National Advisory Committee for the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. She is the recipient of the 2022 American Psychological Association Mid-Career Award for Outstanding Contributions to Benefit Children, Youth, and Families.

Embrace “The Talk” Across ALL Races

Riana Elyse Anderson & Shawn C. T. Jones



In the fifth decade of research on “The Talk,” we’re stirring up the pot, y’all. For almost half a century, studies have focused on simple measures of the frequency and content of parent-child conversations about race. Enter our research team. Along with Dr. Howard Stevenson from the University of Pennsylvania, we have tackled new questions: how *well* are these families engaging in the talk with each other? And, perhaps more importantly, what does this phenomenon look like *across* race?

An interdisciplinary team of researchers and a multiracial sample showed that, indeed, we can expand our understanding of *racial socialization* with a focus on families’ experiences and competency — their skills, confidence, and stress. Whether parents are talking to Black, Latina, Asian, or White children, they demonstrate similar patterns of competence. This means that **every** parent can benefit from reducing their stress (breathing), improving their skills (utilizing resources), and enhancing their confidence (practice) when talking to their children, regardless of racial identity. This also means that there are more opportunities for organizations like EmbraceRace to help parents become more competent in caring for their children’s emotional wellness at a time of heightened sensitivity and stress with respect to race.

65%

of parents polled say they are very interested in resources to support educating children about race

2022 EmbraceRace Parent Survey

Dr. Riana Elyse Anderson is a clinical and community psychologist and a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. Riana was born in, raised for, and returned to Detroit. She has been trained in Clinical and Community Psychology at the University of Virginia, Yale University’s School of Medicine, and the University of Pennsylvania. Riana studies how racial discrimination impacts the mental health of Black adolescents and their families. She works with therapeutic programs and community partners and shares knowledge through media, writing, and talks.

Dr. Shawn C.T. Jones is an Assistant Professor in the Counseling Program in the Psychology Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dr. Jones seeks to improve the psychosocial wellbeing of Black youth and their families by exploring mechanisms undergirding culturally-relevant protective and promotive factors. He is particularly interested in the interplay between racism-related stress and racial socialization processes. He is a co-creator of the video series and podcast, “Our Mental Health Minute.”

New Directions for Anti-Racism Research: White Children’s Understanding of Structural Racism



Michael T. Rizzo

Over many years, research has shown us that racial biases emerge early in development. For example, by 3- to 4-years-old, White children in the United States begin to consider their peers’ race when deciding whom to play with, oftentimes choosing White peers and excluding peers of color. More recently, new, promising avenues of research have begun to examine the roots of these biases and how we might prevent or mitigate them.

For example, in one study²⁹, we found that children who believed that racial inequalities were caused by internal differences between people (“who people are on the inside”) developed more racial biases over time, whereas children who recognized the societal factors underlying racial inequalities (“things that happen in the world that make it harder for some people and easier for others”) developed more inclusive, egalitarian attitudes.

In related work, we’ve found that children’s understanding of these societal factors become especially important for promoting inclusive, anti-racist worldviews as children are exposed to more racial inequalities in their neighborhoods³⁰ and in the media³¹. This research points toward teaching about structural racism as a way to promote more antiracist worldviews in early childhood³², and reflects the growing contributions and increasingly promising role of social science researchers in helping us navigate the practical challenge of raising anti-racist children.

Dr. Michael T. Rizzo is an Assistant Professor and director of the Developing Equitable Minds Lab at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Michael’s research aims to promote social equity in childhood by revealing the psychological processes and developmental mechanisms that underlie children’s developing conceptions of fairness and emerging social biases. Specifically, Michael’s research examines three interrelated questions: How do conceptions of equity develop? How do social biases develop? And how can we promote the concern for equity and disrupt the formation and expression of social biases?

Nurturing Children's Racial Learning One Talk at a Time

Stephanie Irby Coard, Lisa Kiang, & Gabriela Livas Stein

Recent years have seen more and more researchers hard at work trying to figure out how we can best support communities in having courageous conversations about race.³³ The research is clear that parents provide youth with intentional and unintentional messages about race that influence youth's racial understanding of themselves and others around them. What we know is that *intentionality* is necessary to ensure these conversations are productive, useful for youth, and lead to youth having a stronger sense of themselves – ready to handle racialized moments and be change agents in their environments.³⁴

But *how* we have these conversations is as important as having them in the first place. Observational studies with parents and youth shed light on the benefit of scaffolding to youth's developmental stage, to being alert to youth's emotional well-being in the conversations, to following the child's lead by asking open-ended questions to understand youth perspectives, and to helping youth anticipate how they can manage these moments in the future.³⁵ The tone parents take in these conversations is also important: warmth and support are the backbone of any effective conversation about race.



One Talk at a Time is an online parent program developed by researchers at UNC Greensboro and Wake Forest University that provides support for Black, Asian, and Latinx middle school youth and their families to have valuable conversations about race, ethnicity, and culture. We are inviting families in North Carolina to participate in our online parent program and provide feedback! Contact us at [One Talk at a Time](#).

How We Talk About Prejudice Matters

Kristin Pauker



How do we get children to engage with race-related topics rather than avoid them? How do we lay the foundation for positive, meaningful cross-race interactions? Typically, researchers, educators, and parents alike focus on identifying prejudice in children. Increasingly, more attention is being paid to the nuances of the ideas we communicate to children about racism and prejudice, and our recent research highlights the promise in believing that prejudice can change³⁶.

Specifically, we can shift the view of prejudice as fixed (“once a racist, always a racist”) to a view that it is malleable (“that seems prejudiced, but that can be changed”). In our research with 8-13-year-olds, we found that the more children believed prejudice is fixed, the less friendly they behaved toward a cross-race peer and the less they wanted to interact with that cross-race peer in the future. Children who believed that prejudice is an attribute that can change behaved quite differently: they were more friendly and they reported an increased desire to interact with their cross-race peers. We also measured children’s prejudice and what mattered was not how prejudiced children were, but whether they believed prejudice could change.

Our research suggests that the goal of creating a greater willingness to talk about race and more positive interracial interactions could be achieved through shifting the focus of our conversations with children away from identifying prejudiced people and toward emphasizing how prejudice itself can be changed. The research world is increasingly identifying opportunities to be more intentional in our caregiving practices and the messages we communicate to our children.

Children who believed that prejudice is an attribute that can change behaved quite differently: they were more friendly and they reported an increased desire to interact with their cross-race peers.

Dr. Kristin Pauker is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Hawai‘i and director of the [ISP lab](#). She received her A.B. from Dartmouth College (2002), Ph.D. from Tufts University (2009), and completed postdoctoral study at Stanford University. Originally born and raised in Hawai‘i, she became fascinated with exploring how a person’s immediate environment and culturally-shaped theories about race impact basic social perception, social interactions, and stereotyping in childhood and throughout development. Dr. Pauker prioritizes research that can inform change and mitigate bias. Her work has been supported with over \$1 million in combined support from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation.

Another world is not only possible,
she is on her way. On a quiet day,
I can hear her breathing.”

— Arundhati Roy



CONCLUSION

The Path Forward

My goodness.

Given limited space and time, contributors to these *Reflections on Children's Racial Learning* could lift up only some of the relevant efforts within the sectors we asked them to consider — Parenting Practice, PK-12 Education, Children's Media, the Health Professions, and Social Science Research. And yet this brief survey-of-sorts makes clear that a lot of good work is happening, that the pace of that work has quickened, and that much more work is needed. The eagerness to do that work is evident.

Across the essays and dispatches we hear a few resonant themes. *For one*, those of us concerned to raise kids who are thoughtful, informed, and brave about race encompass a wide range of identities. We are teachers, administrators, pediatricians, therapists, social workers, television producers, researchers, and community organizers, parents, grandparents, and children. We live in “red” states as well as “blue” and “purple” ones in all regions of the country; in urban, suburban, and rural areas and small towns. We describe ourselves as conservatives and progressives, as Republicans, Democrats, Independents, and otherwise — though not in equal parts. We occupy the full spectrum of racial identities, as do the children we love.

Second, the mobilization around children's racial learning is happening at the institutional as well as individual levels. Even as legislatures and school boards across the country clamp down on schools' ability to create honest spaces to teach and learn about race and racial justice, a multisectoral set of nonprofit organizations and initiatives like **we are**, Self-Evident Education, Little Uprisings, One Talk at a Time, and What Is Black? serve growing audiences even in places often thought hostile to such offerings. Some smaller and larger professional associations — the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the American Psychological Association, the Society for Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, and the Society for Research in Child Development, for example — follow suit. The increased leadership of people of color in some such organizations surely helps fuel this progress.

Third, these *Reflections* make hearteningly clear that our children aren't simply waiting to be saved from the racial ignorance, fatigue, fears and anxieties that unsettle so many of

If we are to transform the landscape of how and what children in the United States learn about race, we must organize ourselves with purpose and vigor, at much greater scale, within and across sectors.

their elders. Children are speaking up. Speaking up for books, television shows, and movies whose characters and storylines reflect the fact that fully half of US children are children of color. Speaking up against book bans and in favor of forthright conversations about the play of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality and immigration in US history — and for honest exploration of how historical dynamics shape the realities and trajectories of communities today. As Tanya Nixon-Silberg reminds us, many kids, not least our kids of color, are speaking up for their right to speak up!

Finally, our contributors make plain that if we are to transform the landscape of how and what children in the United States learn about race, we must organize ourselves with purpose and vigor, at much greater scale, within and across sectors. Done well, such organizing — among researchers, parents, and educators, for example — would generate more evidence-based racial learning tools that better account for the cultural contexts and settings in which they will be used. It would help identify more effective ways of getting those tools into the hands of the growing number of community organizations working directly with parents and educators. And, generally, it would seed more communities and networks of stakeholders committed to the vital work of deepening and extending our color-brave learning, advocacy, and caregiving practice.

Above all, throughout these *Reflections* we hear a call for diligent field-building that improves and complements the work being done. We want to hear your thoughts about what field-building might entail.

For example:

What if, together, we created some bits of infrastructure to help us identify, organize and connect practitioners and researchers, individuals and organizations in the emerging field of children’s racial learning? Those tools could include a digital Map that locates groups doing relevant work in the United States, a Calendar of online and in-person events open to the public, a Directory that allows us to identify ourselves and our work to each other, and a Listserv that allows us to connect with one another. The steps involved might include planning, fact-finding, and developing technical solutions and hosting.

What if we established a research-practice network to develop and encourage the widespread use of promising, practical interventions caregivers could use to nurture healthy racial attitudes and behaviors in children? We could support researchers and practitioners to partner meaningfully throughout the research process, from identifying key questions to analyzing and disseminating findings. We could make the most promising interventions more widely known, understood and available to practitioners and help further mobilize a diverse field of researchers and practitioners working together.

What if we organized a recurring national conference on children's racial learning? Conferences can be powerful vehicles for field-building. Imagine parents, educators, researchers, media folks, young people, funders, and other key stakeholders gathered together to identify scalable evidence-based practices; build capacity to foster resilience in children, families, and communities; and develop networks to support work that promotes healthy racial identity development. What if this conference became a signature event in the emergence of the field?

WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

[Complete this feedback form](#) to let us know what you think of these ideas, contribute your own, and/or offer feedback on these *Reflections on Children's Racial Learning*.

At EmbraceRace we are committed to the power of the possible. We believe it is possible to nurture multiracial generations of children with the skills, sensibilities and will to bend the arc of possible US futures toward those in which children and adults of color, and all of us, thrive rather than merely survive. Let's make it happen.

Yours in possibility.



Melissa Giraud & Andrew Grant-Thomas, Founders

Melissa Giraud and **Andrew Grant-Thomas** are the co-founders and co-directors of EmbraceRace. You can read Melissa's full biographical statement [here](#) and Andrew's [here](#). Contact them at hugs@embracerace.org.

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EmbraceRace is a national nonprofit that supports parents, guardians, educators, and other caregivers working to raise children who are thoughtful, informed and brave about race so that multiracial democracy in the United States can thrive. We identify, organize, and create the tools, resources, discussion spaces, and networks needed to nurture resilience in children of color, nurture inclusive, empathetic children of all stripes, raise kids who think critically about race, and support a movement of kid and adult racial justice advocates for all children. Founded in 2016, *EmbraceRace* is now well-established as a national leader in the space of children's racial learning and socialization.

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