

Children learn about race from MANY sources!

Children’s learning about race comes from many sources – not just their families. They are growing up in a world that provides a lot of information, misinformation, and messages about race. If we don’t teach children about race honestly and thoughtfully – what it is, and what it isn’t – messages from these sources are likely to play a powerful role in shaping children’s ideas, attitudes, and feelings about race.

Let’s take a quick look at some of those sources (there are more sources than listed here!) and the kinds of messages they send.



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Family & friends

Family caregivers – parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and close family friends – have many opportunities to help children learn about themselves and others. Whether they realize it or not, through direct conversations, offhand comments, and modeling behavior, family and friends are directly communicating values, beliefs, and attitudes that will shape children’s understanding of race and racism. Family members also play an important role in creating the home and community environment that children grow up in. This environment includes the books, toys, and people in children’s lives that help shape their views of themselves and others.

Family members also have a unique opportunity to help children process, interpret, and think critically about the racial messages that come from other sources. By intentionally and thoughtfully “narrating over” these other sources of input, family and friends can provide helpful context for the messages children are receiving and support children to navigate their environment in healthy and constructive ways.

Peers

Children are highly influenced by their peers. What peers say and how they treat each other can impact children’s self-esteem and their racial attitudes. By playing and forming relationships across racial lines, children can learn to value others who are different from them. At the same time, connecting with same-race peers can be affirming and protective for children of color.

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School

Many aspects of the school environment send messages about race, explicitly or implicitly. The curriculum and materials used in the classroom can celebrate, ignore, or water down the histories, contributions, and perspectives of different racial groups. Posters on the walls and names in test questions can signal who belongs. The racial composition of students, teachers, and staff can send messages about the statuses of different groups. Well-documented racial biases in the way children are disciplined – with Black and brown children treated more harshly, starting as young as preschool – can influence children’s beliefs about who the ‘troublemakers’ are. Teachers’ openness to or avoidance of conversations about race and racism can communicate what is important or safe to talk about.

Social inequality

Because of our legacy of racial inequality, plus ongoing racial biases, many of our social institutions and processes have racial bias baked in. The result is that White people are more likely than people of color to hold powerful positions, to have higher education, and to have more financial success (both income and family wealth). These patterns can impact children’s perceptions of worth and career aspirations. The “myth of meritocracy” in the U.S. tells us that people who work hard get the success they deserve – but that can be confusing when paired with obvious inequalities between racial groups, and can send the wrong message to kids about the capabilities and deservingness of people from different racial backgrounds.

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Neighborhood & community

As children spend time in their neighborhoods and communities, they notice patterns of inequality and separation by race. They might notice differences between their local playground or school and the ones in the next neighborhood over. They might notice who has which jobs and who makes decisions for the community. They might notice non-residents who nevertheless spend time in the neighborhood, whether they be police, laborers or community groups. By kindergarten, most children notice racial patterns -- like who lives in wealthy neighborhoods and less wealthy neighborhoods.

Media

Children learn a lot from how people are represented in books, TV, movies, and other media. They benefit from seeing their own racial identities represented on the page or screen, as well as seeing others who are racially or culturally different from them. Unfortunately, media portrayals are often full of stereotypes: White people more often have leading roles, and people of color are represented in smaller roles with limited power. Black people are more likely to be portrayed as criminals or villains, Asians as foreigners, and Muslims as terrorists. And often, stories centering characters of color are missing altogether. At the same time, progress is being made toward making children's media more diverse and sharing the stories of characters of color more authentically and positively.

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Racial Segregation

Neighborhoods, schools, and places of worship are often segregated by race (and wealth). And when asked about their core networks (people you confide in), three-quarters of White adults in the U.S. surveyed said their social circles are entirely White and over half of Black adults said their core networks were entirely Black.

This limits the degree to which children can see and interact with people different from themselves. It can send the message that these sorts of separations are natural and inevitable, that this group is our people and that group is not – when in reality, they are typically the result of longstanding inequalities and unfair policies.

Social movements

Children are also observing the social movements happening in our current cultural moment. They see and hear bits of the news that adults pay attention to. They may see protests in their community or in images. They have likely heard the words “Black Lives Matter,” “Stop Asian Hate,” “Make America Great Again” or talk of immigration. They tend to notice more than we realize, and often have questions about what is going on. When beginning conversations about race-related events or issues, many caregivers find it helpful to start by asking children what they’ve heard.

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Children naturally look for explanations about how the world works and why things happen the way they do. If we as adults don't give kids good information and help them make sense of the messages and patterns they observe, we leave them to draw their own conclusions about the meaning of race. Research shows us that without input from adults, kids are more likely to conclude that inherent differences between people justify how people are treated and what they deserve. For example, they might conclude that White people deserve to live in nicer houses and better neighborhoods, or that Black kids aren't important enough to be the main characters in TV shows.

Instead, we can actively engage with children to help them understand why things are unfair for people of color. It's about racism. It's about stories people believe that are not true about how people with lighter skin are better than people with darker skin. It's about how, in the past, White people wanted to make rules to keep all the best things for themselves. It's about how the rules that help determine who gets what in our society still favor White people over people of color. There are many ways we can start to break down these ideas for children, so they understand that unfairness based on race still exists, and they have a part to play in making things fair for everyone. Both children of color and White children can be empowered by these conversations.

As children get older, they tend to conform to our adult norms around race talk: they stop mentioning it. Our silence around race communicates that it is a taboo topic that is too scary or shameful to talk about. Meanwhile, children are left to make sense of it on their own. By talking openly and honestly about race and racism – even if it's hard, or uncomfortable, or uncertain – we can help normalize the conversation. We can counteract harmful and stereotypical messages and communicate to kids that all our similarities and our differences as human beings are worth celebrating. We can raise children who will make our society more fair for everyone.