

A Vroom Guide

Talking About Race with Young Children

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Introduction

by Dan Torres, Senior Program Manager at Bezos Family Foundation

Vroom is frequently asked for research-based guidance to help children 0-5 grow up with positive ethnic-racial identities. Caregivers, professionals, and policy makers want to know how to help young children deal effectively with racism, stereotyping and discrimination. To respond to these important questions, we spoke with trusted scholars and researchers, most of whom are people of color, and consolidated current thinking in the field relating to ethnic-racial identity development in the early years.

After scanning the field, we convened a specific group of science advisors to explore and address these issues further. Together we engaged in an open dialogue that focused on providing a foundational overview of the research on ethnic-racial identity formation in young children. The following material is a synthesis of that work. We hope this brief provides practical guidance and is a starting place for us as we work to develop additional resources to support caregivers.



Talking About Race with Young Children

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A Balanced Approach

Brain building is all about small conversations, during everyday moments, over time. Talking with young children about race is no different. A balance of two types of conversations is most effective, research shows: instilling a positive racial identity and “preparation for bias.” Pride is the more important of the two for children through age 5.

Positive racial identity: For Black and Brown children, this means intentionally creating a positive sense of belonging to their racial groups. White children already receive so many positive messages about their race. This means intentionally helping them form positive perceptions of people of color.

All children need to hear a more nuanced telling of our country’s past and present. This includes the struggles and the achievements, including stories of White abolitionists and Black and Brown people resisting discrimination.

Preparation for bias: Preparing Black and Brown children for bias involves sharing that they will face racism and discrimination because of their race. This is known as “The Talk” — while also modeling healthy strategies for coping and resisting. Preparing White children

for bias means pointing out the privilege White people have in society, because of unjust structures still in place, and modeling acts of anti-racism.

Researchers don’t yet fully understand how racial identity develops from birth to age 5. We do know that children as young as 3 months old notice race. By age 2, children can use race to reason about others.

Young children aren’t too young to hear their parents and caregivers help them interpret issues and observations around race.

How? And why?

Working in fields related to how racial identity forms, Vroom Science Advisors share approaches for talking with young children about race in a way that furthers equity.



Racism Hurts Young Children, Too

by Stephanie M. Curenton, PhD

Associate professor of applied human development, Boston University



"I couldn't sleep last night because I dreamed a police officer put a taser on me. I was telling him that I didn't do anything wrong, but he still pointed it at me anyway. I got scared, and I couldn't sleep. So I just read some books to make me feel better."

—Stephen Isaac, 8-year-old African American boy

These were the words spoken by my second-grade son when he woke up one Friday morning, groggy and tired. I was taken aback by the clarity of his explanation. I worried that my attempts to shield him from the police violence against unarmed, often innocent, African Americans had been thwarted because the narratives of the murders, along with graphic details of the killings, had been displayed so prevalently in the media. Every time we turned on the television, horrific stories were on the news, talk shows, and radio broadcasts. Despite my attempts to limit his exposure, the racial violence had crept into his subconscious mind and was causing nightmares.

What are parents supposed to do in such moments? More directly, what was I supposed to do in that moment to comfort Stephen Isaac? He was too young to carry that burden of unpredictable and uncontrollable racial violence by the police. I could not bear to crush his soul or his innocence.

Indirect Violence Matters

Yet as a researcher, I know that the psychological effects of indirect police violence are all too real. Racial or ethnic violence, whether in person, on television or online, causes a specific form of psychological trauma called racial stress and trauma (RST).

RST can be triggered by one-time or repeated stressors. For example, experiencing or witnessing acts of discrimination or frightening race-based events. The effects are worse if the stress occurs over an extended period of time.

How could witnessing discrimination or violence toward your racial-ethnic group be just as traumatic as experiencing it yourself? Because it activates the 'like me' reflex that all humans have from birth that causes us to identify with those who look like us. This is why just overhearing that a 'Black man was murdered by police' aroused a subconscious sense of danger and fear that manifested in Stephen Isaac's dreams.



How Young Children May Respond

Most young children (from birth to age 8) are limited in their ability to verbalize complex issues related to trauma. Their psychological responses tend to happen at an unconscious level.

Young children's responses to trauma might include nightmares, bed-wetting, inconsolable fear, avoiding places and situations, or hypervigilance. Longer-term psychological concerns include phobias, anxiety disorders, depression or even symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

RST can give children of color a negative outlook about themselves and their future. When children view themselves or those in their racial-ethnic group as the target of discrimination, it can negatively affect many areas. Their identity, friendships, academics, career aspirations, and mental and physical well-being may be impacted.

What Providers and Families Can Do

Individual families should not have to carry this burden alone. Families of color should be supported and offered

resources, such as free access to mental health services, to help their children become resilient in the face of RST. More mental-health professionals and pediatricians need specific trauma-informed training.

One child should alone not bear the torment of this monster that America calls racism.

It is during those times when young children of color worry, feeling that the world is scary and unfair, that families need to draw their children closer to them and reiterate that they are loved and valued.

As Stephen Isaac yawned and slowly got out of bed to prepare for his day at school, I did what any loving mother would do.

I hugged him tightly and said, "I am so sorry you had that bad dream. I know it was really scary. But you don't have to be afraid of that happening to you. You are a wonderful person, filled with love and kindness. We are safe here at home, and mommy and daddy will do everything we can to protect you."



Empowering Ways to Talk with Kids About Race

by Diane Hughes, PhD

Professor of applied psychology, New York University

While we as a society work to dismantle structural racism, discrimination and negative messaging toward and about ethnic-racial minority groups, it is imperative that we strengthen all young people's capacity to manage these forces.

Exposures to stereotypes and discrimination are negative, stressful and toxic experiences for youth, research shows. Youth exposed more frequently suffer a host of adverse outcomes, including poorer psychological health and academic adjustment.

However, many adults struggle to talk with youth about racism. Adults too often communicate in ways that are threatening, disempowering, and hard for children to hear correctly. For

example, when adults discuss discrimination without including strategies for resisting, children may hear that they need to accept or adapt to the status quo.

To both arm youth with coping skills and empower them to disrupt harmful racial dynamics, adults must deliberately teach children that the dynamics of racism **exist**, that these views are **complex**, and that they are **unacceptable**.

Ways to be Thoughtful About How and What We Teach

- Teach youth how racism and oppression are so deeply entrenched in the fabric of American life, both historically and now. Offer and elicit ideas on what to do about it.
- Inspire active resistance, the mindset needed to "talk back to" racism.
- Be intentional, honest, and focused on equity and justice for all people.
- Protect children age 3 to 5, from negative current events as much as possible. If asked, give simple, concrete, and honest answers.
- Proactively expose children to diversity through friendship networks, artifacts in the home, and exposure to diverse settings and cultural activities.
- Proactively point out negative stereotypes and instances in which non-dominant groups are harmed by slurs, microaggressions and inequalities. Challenge them.
- More accurately teach the racial history of our country in ways that empower youth. Feature oppressed groups' resistance. Feature White groups' allyship with Black and Brown causes.



Q&A: How Can I Protect Black Children from the Harmful Effects of Racism?

by Enrique Neblett, PhD

Professor of health behavior and health education, University of Michigan

Children of color benefit from both a positive racial identity and preparation for bias (an awareness that racism and discrimination will happen, along with strategies to cope.) Adults can foster both through the messages sent to children.

Researchers once recommended that adults focus only on bolstering racial pride and belonging. But Black parents knew that wouldn't reflect reality: they needed to prepare their children to experience racism. Children who heard only "The Talk"—high doses of messages about how they would be targets of discrimination—ended up feeling helpless. Children whose parents said nothing about race also

experienced negative mental-health outcomes as adolescents.

We're seeing that the sweet spot is a combination of the two messages.

In one study, my research team found that adolescents reported the most positive mental health if their parents had emphasized a mix of these messages and activities:

Black unity, positive feelings toward Blacks.

- "You should be proud to be Black"
- "Never be ashamed" of your hair, skin color, lip shape, etc.

Awareness of racial inequities and coping strategies.

- "Some people try to keep Black people from being successful."
- "Blacks have to work twice as hard as Whites to get ahead."

Interracial equality and coexistence.

- "Blacks and Whites should try to understand each other so they can get along."

Positive self-messages.

- "You are somebody special, no matter what anyone says."

Teaching about Black heritage, engaging in various activities or behaviors related to Black culture.

- Talking about the significance and meaning of race.
- Purchasing Black dolls or action figures and games.
- Reading children's books that positively represent Black people and that center around Black identity or culture.
- Attending meetings, such as rallies, that pertain to Black issues.
- Going to cultural events (children's plays, movies, concerts, museum exhibits) involving Black people and other races and cultures.

These are not a shield protecting youth from harm. They are a source of resilience that allows youth to keep going despite experiencing the harm of racism. Children who feel good about being Black, and who have a realistic

expectation that racism and discrimination will occur, are more prepared to handle racism than children who feel ashamed of their race or who don't expect racism to occur.



Q&A: I Just Experienced Racism. How Do I Handle It?

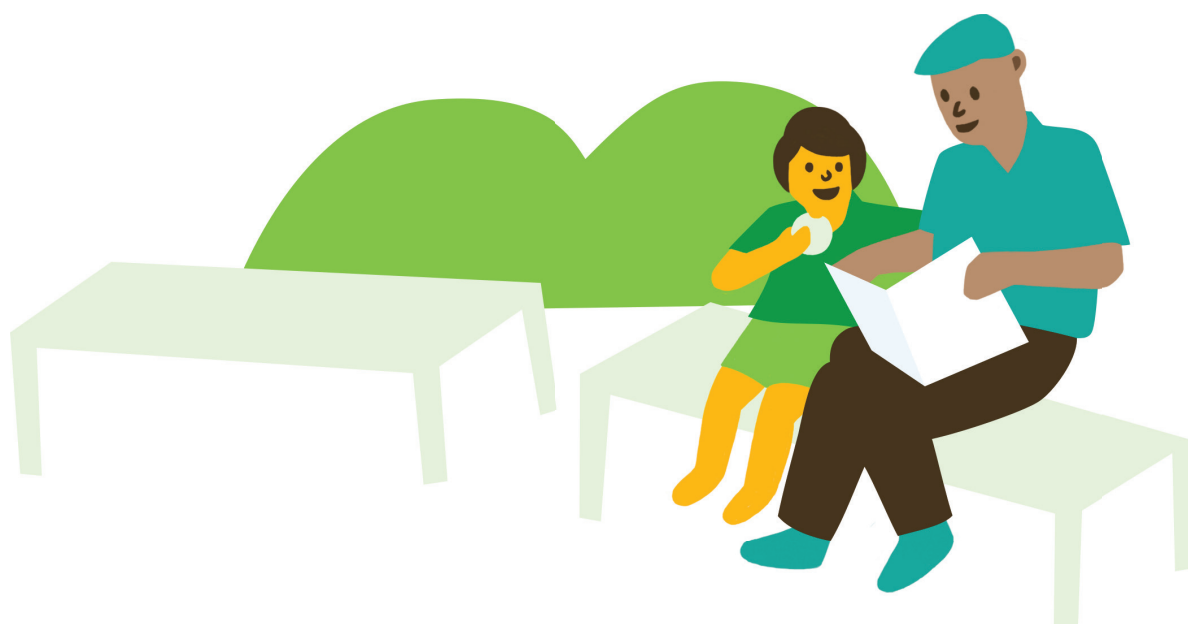
by Psychologist Howard Stevenson

Psychologist Howard Stevenson and his Racial Empowerment Collaborative teach mindfulness skills they call “CLCBE.” This is one strategy that adults can use and thus model for children:

- **Calculate** your stress level on a scale of 1 to 10.
- **Locate** where you feel the stress in your body.
- **Communicate** what you are saying to yourself—your self-talk—in the moment.
- **Breathe** in for four counts and
- **Exhale** for six counts
... before deciding how to respond.

Stevenson also encourages “healthy racial comeback lines,” such as saying, “Excuse me?” with attitude or “I reject your rejection of me”—whether said silently or out loud.

Learn more at recastingrace.com.



Normalize Talking about Mental Health

by Enrique Neblett, PhD

Professor of health behavior and health education, University of Michigan

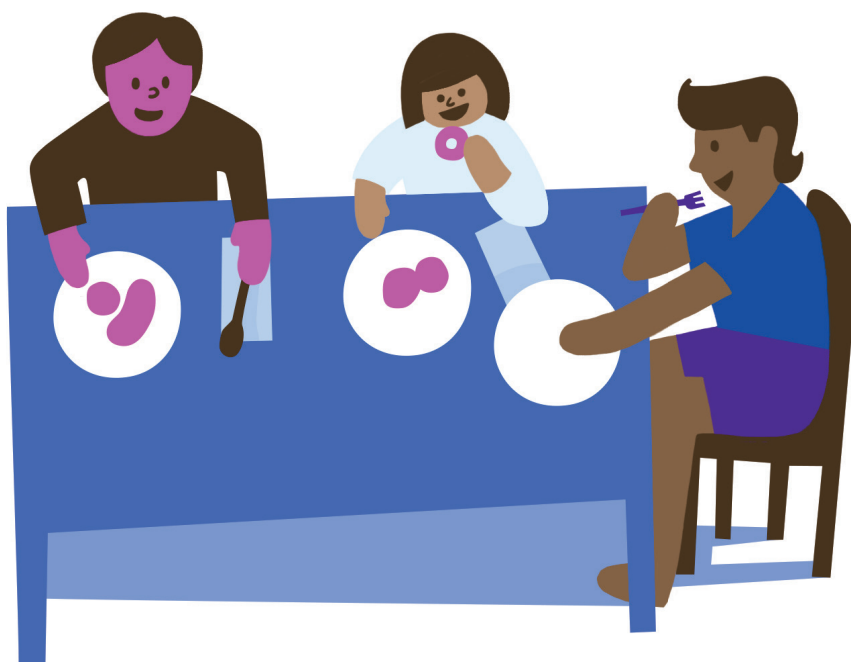
The number one strategy for destigmatizing mental health is to talk about mental health. Otherwise, we send the message that the topic is taboo and mental-health difficulties are something to be ashamed of.

Teachers, health providers and community organizations can offer programming, resources and education about mental health that:

- define mental health
- name reasons that mental health is important
- demonstrate the advantages of talking about mental health
- share examples of what different mental health challenges look like
- offer perspective regarding which mental-health experiences require medical attention and which ones don't
- help young children be aware of their feelings; provide them with the language to express positive and negative emotions, feelings, and thoughts

Clergy and religious leaders can take a both/and approach to prayer and seeking medical help when necessary. Both are important and can coexist.

The more we all talk about mental health, ask about it, and normalize it as an important part of self-care—in the same way that we attend to physical health—the more comfortable families may be with getting help when it's needed. Failing to act in a timely manner might allow mental-health problems to get worse before they get better.



Family Stories Weave a Child's Positive Ethnic and Racial Identity

by Robyn Fivush

Professor of psychology, Emory University

A child's positive racial identity is forged from a sense of belonging. And there's no richer path to belonging than family stories. Stories are what bond families together across time, creating a shared history and a sense of shared identity.

'Small' Stories are a Big Deal

Most of us think of family stories as the "big" stories: the stories of adventures and exploits, stories told over and over at family holiday dinners, the stories we love to tell and hear, laughing and crying together.

But family stories are also "small" stories. Stories that we refer to in passing as we go about our day, remembering the events of our shared lives together as we engage in ongoing activities ("Remember when we baked cookies with Grandma last Christmas?") and parents sharing stories from their own childhoods ("I remember having a doll just like this when I was a girl").

In stories big and small, children begin to understand who they are, anchoring their sense of self in a history of family.

Make Meaning of the Day's Events

When children are preschoolers, parents can help them shape more coherent accounts of what happened at school, at the supermarket, at Grandma's, that day at the park.

A coherent narrative is, simply, one that makes sense. It **introduces the**

characters ("Remember your friend Annie was at the park with you?"). It **creates a beginning** ("Were you excited to go to the park?"). **A middle** ("You had such fun on the swings!") with perhaps a bit of **emotional tension** ("You were a tiny bit scared of swinging so high"). And ultimately **resolves the story in a positive way** ("You and Annie laughed, and your beautiful curls flew, and you just wanted to swing and swing!")

Parents may have this full story in mind; still, **ask your child open-ended questions**. "Who was there?" "What did you do?" "How did you feel?" to elicit their version of the story.

These small, everyday, co-constructed stories of the child's own experiences give voice and meaning to the child's developing sense of self.

When the day's experience is a highly emotional one, helping children create a coherent narrative of what happened also enables them to understand and regulate their emotions.

In middle childhood, at about 9 or 10 years old, when children begin to understand and engage in the larger world.



They become interested in intergenerational stories. Stories about when their parents were little, stories of parent-grandparent disputes or discipline, stories of challenges and achievements.

Through all of these stories, heard and told, children begin to develop their own stories of who they are. Children learn where they came from and where they are going.

Positive Self-Esteem is Only One Benefit

Children whose families share more stories, especially stories that are detailed and coherent, develop higher self-esteem. They also have better emotion regulation and more positive relationships with others.

Stories are, simply put, the way we understand ourselves, others and the world.

How and When to Tell Stories

There is no need to carve out time to sit down and tell a fully formed story to an avid listener! Stories come up naturally and spontaneously in everyday conversations. Just be a bit more aware of these opportunities.

Most importantly, relax and have fun. Laugh at yourself! Don't worry if the entire story doesn't get told all at once. Value your children's stories as well as your own.



The Three Es: A Place for White Parents to Begin Talking about Ethnicity and Race

by Iheoma U. Iruka, PhD

Research professor in public policy, UNC-Chapel Hill

When White parents ask me how to talk about ethnicity and race with their children, they often understandably feel nervous and uncertain. “Isn’t my 4-year-old too young to talk about race?” “I don’t really see race. I want my child to know that people are just people.” “How do I talk about racism without making my kid feel bad about White people?”

I boil my advice down to three Es: **education, exploration**, and (begin) **early**.

Educate Yourself

As you begin talking with your children about racism and White privilege, seek out a deeper understanding of what these are and how they show up in children’s lives.

Racism is not just about avoiding the “N-word.” Racism isn’t something that Martin Luther King Jr. fixed. We must first understand that, since the founding of this country, the system has benefited White people. It has disadvantaged Black, Hispanic, Native American and other people of color. These systems are still largely in place today.

For example, Black and Brown people were more likely to get COVID-19 and they died from it at higher rates. So many are essential workers, required to go to work and not provided with gloves or face masks. Why do so many Black and Brown people work in such jobs—as security guards, at retail and grocery chains, in factories and on farms? These jobs are low wage. They don’t provide benefits. They can’t lift families from poverty. Families working in these jobs often find it very challenging to make the time and money to get more education and to move out of poverty that way.

Taken together, this almost guarantees that the families will continue to live in unsafe and low-resourced communities, experience food insecurity and be less likely to access high-quality early childhood education and schools.

Now add in racial stress and trauma (RST) from the everyday fear or visceral experience of being a target of discrimination or violence.

As you better understand the complete picture of systemic oppression and trauma, it changes the conversation you have with your children. When your child asks why Black people are poor, your answer—and your actions—can be better rooted in the context needed to combat racism.

So, educate yourself about this country’s history. Ask why things are the way they are today. Then begin the conversations.

Explore Your Environment

With a bit more education about racism, you may feel sad and guilty about what you did not know. Time to take action. Explore whether your environment matches your values around diversity and the messages you want to send to your child.



Books and Other Media

Do your books, TV shows, apps, games and movies mainly depict White children and families? Or do you have media by authors across the racial spectrum? Look for books about Black, Latine, Indigenous and other families of color doing everyday things. These not only help to shift your perception of people of color, they also provide openings for discussions with your children.

People in Your Community

Who do your children see as the business owners, the pediatrician, the dentist? How can you and your children be exposed to more people of color who are teachers, leaders, doctors, business owners, or politicians? Even if you live in an all-White community, you can seek out Black- and Brown-owned businesses and Black- and Brown-centered events.

People in Your Home

Who are your children's playmates? Who was the last person to come over for dinner, who is your closest friend, who is your favorite actor/actress and so on? Your responses tell you about your child's and your level of interaction with people of different races.

Increasing the diversity of your daily experiences requires commitment, intentionality, and authenticity—but it is a tangible step toward combating racism.

Begin Early

Many parents believe that children are too young or too innocent to think about race and skin color. In fact, a child's first five years are critical in brain development. These years lay the foundation for children's emotions, language, empathy and reasoning.

Children notice race whether we talk about it or not:

- By 9 months old, children begin to follow faces that resemble their primary caregiver.
- By age 3, research has shown, White youngsters prefer Whites over Blacks. They demonstrate prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behavior toward racial minorities, and see Blacks as less human than Whites.

Age 3 to 5 is a prime time to guide children's interpretation of race and skin color. This is called racial socialization.

White parents' anti-racism task is helping their children to understand their privilege and to see children of color as deserving of positive attention and experiences.

Talking about race, racism, bias and White privilege is not easy. There is no one perfect way to have this conversation. It takes a willingness to observe, listen, mess up and re-educate yourself. To explore who you are, who you want to be and who you want your child to be. And use the tools you already have as a parent to engage in age-appropriate discussions and authentic experiences.

Parents can commit to practicing anti-racism and raising children who are anti-racist—especially White parents from privileged backgrounds, who have the power to change the system. We don't have another option if we want a country that values everyone.

The best time to begin is now.



Definitions

Structural racism is evident when features of our social, economic, and political systems intentionally or inadvertently promote racial inequity, conferring privileges to whites and disadvantages to people of color.

Racial discrimination occurs when individuals are treated unfairly, unequally, and unjustly because of their membership in a racial or ethnic group.

Negative messaging includes both representation through negative stereotypes and lack of representation in media, the news, textbooks and other sources.

Racial socialization is the communication between parents and kids about race, which teaches kids how to interpret race around them. Some practices that families use to support children's positive identity about their race, ethnicity, or culture: teaching about history, engaging in traditions, and participating in cultural activities and events that bring joy to children. Also called racial-ethnic socialization or cultural socialization.

Science Advisors



Stephanie M. Curenton, PhD, is a tenured associate professor at Boston University's Wheelock College of Education & Human Development and the director of the [Center for the Ecology of Early Childhood Development](#) (CEED). She studies the social, cognitive, and language development of minority children and children living in low-income communities, looking within various ecological contexts such as parent-child interactions, early childhood education programs, and related state and federal policies.



Robyn Fivush, PhD, is the Samuel Candler Dobbs professor of psychology at Emory University and director of its Institute for the Liberal Arts. Her research focuses on early memory with an emphasis on the social construction of autobiographical memory and the relations among memory, narrative, identity, trauma, and coping. She has published more than 150 books, book chapters, and articles.



Diane Hughes, PhD, is professor of applied psychology in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Development and Education at New York University. Her research focuses on (a) understanding how racial/ethnic dynamics influence people's experiences at work, in classrooms, in neighborhoods, and in families, and (b) ethnic and cultural differences in parents' socialization goals, beliefs, and practices, especially as these influence children's learning.



Iheoma U. Iruka, PhD, is a research professor in public policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is founding director of the Equity Research Action at the university's [Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute](#). She conducts research on ways to support young children's healthy development. She is the mother of two young children and committed to raising racially conscious and community-engaged children.



Enrique W. Neblett Jr., PhD, is a professor of health behavior and health education at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. He is faculty co-lead for Diversity Equity, and Inclusion and associate director of the [Detroit Community-Academic Urban Research Center](#). Prior to that, he was a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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