

HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP RACIAL IDENTITY

Let's first define racial identity, by recognizing that race is a social construct that we know has no basis in science. In fact, recent research of the genome confirms that "race" has no basis in biology and genetic differences between races (as they are defined by society) do not exist (Angier, 2000). Still, most of us still develop some form of racial identity for ourselves. In addition, we may be racially identified by others, for good or ill. In part, we may define ourselves or be defined by others by skin color, ethnicity, culture, or by a mix of these. Our racial identity may change over time as we mature and experience life, consider our heritage more deeply, and in cases where individuals are of mixed heritage, possibly choosing one identity over another. For children in foster care and adoption, the issue of racial and cultural identity may be simple or complex. In racially and culturally diverse families, the issue of racial identity may be particularly confusing for both parents and the child.

Despite the confusion and discomfort that parents may experience when they realize they don't know what they don't know about raising a child whose race is different than their own, parents must value and commit to the importance of racial socialization and seek ways to ensure that the child they are parenting is accessing it. Now let's look at what we mean by racial socialization. Parents of black children in the United States, like all parents, are faced with the privilege and responsibility of raising their children with culturally-appropriate values and principles that prepare them to one day take on adult roles in society. However, parents of black children, along with parents of other ethnically underrepresented youth, are also tasked with teaching their children how to navigate, and sometimes even survive, a society that may give messages that undermine parents' efforts. Parents often must counteract messages their youth receive from broader society including the media, and the judicial, educational and health systems, to name a few. The way in which parents teach their youth how to navigate the often contradictory messages or teach them what it means to be black is called racial socialization.



Though there are many types of messages that parents can communicate about race, research on racial socialization has primarily focused on the following types of messages:

- Messages emphasizing pride in being black.
- Warnings about racial inequalities.
- Messages that de-emphasize the importance of race (sometimes called a “color-blind” approach) and instead may emphasize that hard work will ensure someone can overcome racism.
- Mistrust of other ethnic groups.
- Silence about race and racial issues.

Sometimes racial socialization is intentional, such as a mom buying her daughter books with black main characters. Other times, racial socialization is happenstance, such as a son observing his father looking disturbed when he is watching a news broadcast about an unarmed black boy being shot by police. What some parents also may not realize is that they are socializing their children around race whether they talk about race or not. Even choosing not to explicitly discuss race, race-related values or current events, communicates values and beliefs about race (Gaskin, 2105).

Children understand race, culture and ethnicity differently at different developmental stages, and this understanding impacts not only their identity formation, but also their place in their family, especially if they are a member of a racially and culturally diverse family.

Children become aware of race and ethnicity as early as age 3, but their understanding of these concepts changes over time as they incorporate their experiences of prejudice and bias. Let’s look at how children view racial differences at different developmental ages.

By the age of 2 or 3, children are aware of differences in skin color and other physical characteristics but think of differences in a simplistic way. For instance, they may think that skin color can be changed by washing it off or staying in the sun too long.



By the time they are 4 or 5, they are beginning to incorporate the stereotypes and biases they hear around them and are greatly influenced by what they hear from the adults and other children. They begin to understand the power differential of certain groups as compared to others.

Between the ages of 6-10, children are becoming aware of the broader implications of race and ethnicity, including that different people might eat different food, listen to different music, speak a different language, and have different customs. They are also aware that race and ethnicity are linked to favor and power, and that some people have more privilege than others.

As they move from 10-15, children realize that race and ethnicity can be linked to social class. As they learn in school and are more aware of the resources in their neighborhoods as compared to others, they understand that resources are allocated unevenly, and that this difference is often linked to race, ethnicity and class. Often interracial and inter-ethnic friendships developed in elementary school end as social groups become more racially segregated.

By later adolescence, teenagers are working on solidifying their identity. They may express pride in their heritage and a sense of belonging to a group, or they might express self-hate or prejudice against their own group as they are sorting out their identity. Their sense of racial identity will depend greatly on the messages they have been given by their parents and their community, whether positive or negative.

Parents need to recognize that some children have already internalized negative implicit bias; meaning that a child unconsciously holds negative beliefs or attitudes about themselves as a member of a racial, ethnic or cultural group or associates negative stereotypes to themselves. Children can internalize negative implicit bias about their own culture, and others have learned to associate their race or culture with trauma experiences, before they come to your family. It is important to assess the child's experience with race and culture and approach any conversation with humility. For most children, exposure to positive role models from their



culture, positive cultural events and practices, and learning about their culture of origin in positive ways can help build a more positive identity or reinforce a sense of safety that will support talking about race and culture.

Parents should be aware that when a child resists talking about race or culture we can see it as a reflection of how our society deals with the topic, or as the child having little or no knowledge or language to describe their experience. Approaching the topic with curiosity and a positive non-judgmental attitude can help open a topic the child has never spoken of before. That said, it is also important for parents to validate a child's experience of overt discrimination or micro-aggressions, even if it is not a parent's shared experience.

Research tells us that among black parents, racial socialization is a protective factor against pervasive institutional racism in America in education, health care, the workplace and other significant social institutions that directly and often negatively structure the daily lives and experiences of African Americans. Children are given explicit and implicit messages about values, norms and beliefs about what it means to be black in America. This same socialization occurs in other cultures, as immigrant families teach their children about assimilation, and American Indian/Alaska Native parents teach their children about how to live in a society that might target them for discrimination or afford them privilege based on stereotypes.

In the case of racially and culturally diverse foster and adoptive families, parents must be comfortable talking about race, culture and diversity in order to have meaningful conversations with their children. They also must be able to socialize their children of color so that they are prepared to navigate in a society in which they will experience discrimination and insure that conversations about race are openly encouraged. Keeping the child connected with their culture and maintaining authentic relationships with mentors and friends who reflect the child's race and culture, will assist in the child's development of a positive racial identity. The idealistic view that families can be "colorblind" creates danger for the child of color who will experience discrimination and is unprepared to handle it.



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References

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