

Having the Talk when our Little Ones Just Learned to Walk:  
Racial Socialization with Young Children in Contemporary Times

Chardée A. Galán, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Ann C. Yu<sup>2</sup>, John P. O'Connor<sup>2</sup>, Deborah T. Akinbola<sup>2</sup>, & Riana Elyse  
Anderson, PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Southern California

<sup>2</sup>University of Michigan

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to:

Dr. Riana Elyse Anderson, [rianae@umich.edu](mailto:rianae@umich.edu), 3822 SPH I, 1415 Washington Heights, Ann  
Arbor, MI 48109

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**Abstract**

The world as we know it changed abruptly in 2020. Whether due to COVID-19, or subsequent events, including the murder of George Floyd, the election of Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris, or the U.S. Capital Insurrection, racialized events became a focal point for families who found themselves gathering together much more frequently due to government encouraged stay-at-home mandates. Caregivers across races and developmental ages began asking themselves the same question: how can I talk to my child about race? Here, we seek to provide psychoeducation around racial socialization, or the ways we have “The Talk” to our children about race and racism, along with practical strategies to be competent in these conversations with young children in particular. Three steps for parents, including unpacking racial beliefs, practicing with supportive others, and utilizing media to enhance The Talk with children, are advanced. We conclude by considering the future as a guidepost by which we can measure our hopes and successes of raising children in a racism-free society.

### Having the Talk when our Little Ones Just Learned to Walk:

#### Racial Socialization with Young Children in Contemporary Times

Racism, which is defined as a system of advantage based on race (e.g., Tatum, 2017) continues to be a pressing issue in the United States (U.S.), as underscored by the countless murders of people perpetrated by armed civilians and police, increases in racially motivated hate crimes, and racist political rhetoric (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). The majority of racially and ethnically marginalized (REM) children as young as 8-years-old report their own discriminatory experiences (Pachter & Garcia-Coll, 2009), yet early elementary school children express racialized behaviors and attitudes through stereotype, play, and intergroup processes (Cristol & Gimbert, 2008). Even infants demonstrate a preference for own-race faces through prolonged staring (Kelly et al., 2005). As such, racial processes occur early and often for young children and serve as a basis for lifelong beliefs, behaviors, and experiences (see Rogers et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020).

To navigate through and thrive in the midst of these racial processes, parents increasingly engage in racial socialization throughout their child's development. Racial socialization refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages and practices that parents communicate to their children regarding racial matters (Lesane-Brown, 2006; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020), which, even for younger children, may be practiced through everyday activities like hair combing (Lewis, 1999). The content of parents' racial socialization practices has focused primarily on REM youth, Black youth in particular, and is often categorized into four types: (1) *preparation for bias*, or messages that increase youths' awareness of racism and discrimination they are likely to encounter and provide youth with the skills to cope in such situations; (2) *cultural socialization*, or messages

that emphasize racial pride, traditions, and ancestral legacy; (3) *promotion of egalitarianism*, or promoting colorblind beliefs, avoiding explicit discussions of race, and encouraging cultural assimilation with mainstream values; and (4) *promotion of mistrust*, or messages that emphasize caution in or avoidance of interracial interactions (Hughes et al., 2006). Despite variability in the specific messages that parents emphasize, the majority of REM parents tend to engage in racial socialization practices in some capacity, with cultural socialization and preparation for bias being the strategies most commonly endorsed, particularly by Black parents (Peck et al., 2014). Socialization is even spread through neglectful and unintentional processes, which represents a more common process amongst White families who do not name racism or indicate that all children are equally treated and capable of the same outcomes despite race (Hagerman, 2014).

Studies have generally found that racial socialization for REM youth is positively associated with youth psychological well-being and academic adjustment (Wang, Henry, et al., 2020; Wang, Smith, et al., 2020). As a result of the communication and emotional support afforded by this communication, youth develop greater confidence in their ability to successfully cope when faced with racial discrimination (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). Although racial socialization has historically been defined as the frequency with which parents communicate specific types of messages to their child, the sheer *quantity* of racial socialization messages may be less important than their *quality*. As articulated by the racial encounter coping appraisal and socialization theory (RECAST; Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Stevenson, 2014), racial socialization competency—defined as parents' skill, confidence, and stress while in engaging in racial communication—is critical to ensuring that REM youth not only receive these messages but also understand them and can apply them to cope with race-related stressors in the real world. And, while these practices are typically focused on REM youth, it is imperative that

White families engage in discussions with their children to prevent race-related occurrences from happening in the first place. Given the immense stress parents may feel at the notion of these family discussions, particularly with the major occurrences of 2020-2021, caregivers' skill and confidence in the ability to effectively communicate racial socialization strategies to children requires the identification and management of the stress of racial conversation. Parents may be asking what *does* competent racial communication look like, especially for children ages 3 through 10? In the sections that follow, we provide developmental recommendations for competently delivering common racial socialization messages that are anchored in contemporary sociopolitical contexts and examples.

### **Competent Tips for Common Racial Socialization Strategies**

Having a "racial literacy" means working towards comprehension of a racial "script" with a child (Stevenson, 2014). In other words, we would not give a Shakespearean novel to a three-year-old, rather, we would provide an age-appropriate reading or coloring book to that child and work gradually to help them understand what race and racism means for their age. Moreover, REM parents often have to process their own racial trauma and experiences of racism as they simultaneously help their child navigate these racial stressors. This is a source of stress with which White parents often do not have to contend. As such, let us think about parental competency and content by focusing first on building parental skills, confidence, and resilience to stress in these conversations before talking with children.

- **Skills:** Becoming more skillful at these kinds of interactions might involve preparation for and practice using inquiries or questions to ask children: "*What did you notice?*" or "*How did that make you feel?*"

- **Confidence:** Confidence comes from practicing racial communication more. Maybe that means practicing with yourself in the mirror like you do before a job interview. Maybe you practice it with your loved ones. Regardless of how you practice, the goal is to conceptualize the issue in a clear, concise, and age-appropriate way for yourself first. Once you have established confidence in your ability to unpack the complex issue of racial communication in practice, you are one step closer to delivering quality messages to your children.
- **Stress:** Focus on “*What are the things that are within my control when I talk to my child? Maybe I cannot change the entire system, but I can help my child to navigate that one specific thing that they have going on. What is that?*” These present-oriented questions can reduce stress, along with inquiry-based questions and practice of the various content-based conversations.

### **Preparation for Bias**

Preparation for bias refers to messages focused on increasing youths’ awareness of racism and, for REM youth in particular, skills with which to cope (Hughes et al., 2006; Peck et al., 2014). Highly publicized acts of racial violence (e.g., the state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor), especially towards REM youth (e.g., the murders of Trayvon Martin, Adam Toledo, and countless others), and other major racial traumas often necessitate family discussions of racial bias within Black families. While vicarious racism experiences provide salient opportunities to prepare REM youth for coping within a racialized society, preparation for bias messages can also focus on structural or institutional racism. One of many examples of systemic racism that parents can discuss with older children (e.g., 8-10-years-old) is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disproportionately affected Black and Latino communities (Tai et al.,

2021). In addition to highlighting disparities in COVID-19 infections and death, parents can also talk to their children about racial disparities in vaccines, noting that early on in the vaccine rollout, only five percent of vaccinations were administered to Black Americans compared to 60 percent of vaccinations administered to non-Hispanic White Americans (Painter et al., 2021). It is critical that parents not only inform children of these racial disparities, but that they also provide context for why such inequities exist. That is, long-standing discriminatory practices in employment, housing, transportation, and other sectors of society have contributed to poorer physical health and the unequal distribution of resources, increasing risk of exposure and transmission of the virus (Tai et al., 2021). Further, disparities in vaccination stem not only from limited access to healthcare, but also the historical exploitation of and experimentation on Black people and bodies in medical research (e.g., Tuskegee Syphilis Study, “HeLa” cells), which have led to warranted mistrust of the healthcare system among Black Americans in particular (Scharff et al., 2010).

Before attempting to engage youth in conversation, it is important for parents to self-assess their knowledge of these issues, as parents with limited knowledge will likely benefit from researching these topics before talking to their children. Such preparation may decrease parents’ own stress and increase their skill and confidence in their ability to effectively socialize their children. Second, parents should tailor complex, nuanced topics of health disparities and systemic racism to their child’s developmental level. Parents of younger children (e.g., ~2-5) can talk about the concept of racial disparities by using other comprehensible, non-racial groups like grade level or eye color (see Brown & Anderson, 2019). Parents can provide hypothetical situations involving fairness (e.g., *“What if your teacher made a rule that everyone with [insert your child’s eye colors] had to eat lunch an hour later than the rest of the class. Does that seem*

*fair?*”) to work on ways to identify mistreatment and inequality. Children witness and comprehend bias throughout society, so these familial conversations, no matter how basic, are an essential step toward dismantling bias. For older children in middle childhood or adolescence, these conversations can address the historical roots of social inequalities, underscoring how systemic racism increases risk of exposure to COVID among certain racial groups. Parents may also consider asking their child what they can do to address these inequities (e.g., “*How do you think we can make things fairer for all kids?*”). Inviting their input communicates that you value what they have to say and increases their confidence in being able to navigate future racial conversations.

### **Cultural Socialization**

Although it is important for parents to increase youth’s awareness of racism, prior studies have yielded mixed findings regarding the association between preparation for bias messages and youth outcomes in REM youth. One reason for these mixed findings may be that messages about racial bias need to be balanced with messages that instill racial pride (Neblett et al., 2008). Preparation for bias messages in the absence of cultural pride messages may lead to negative outcomes in REM youth such as depression, hopelessness, and low self-esteem (Liu & Lau, 2013). In contrast, messages that emphasize knowledge of and pride in one’s cultural heritage, history, and traditions, also known as cultural socialization, have been linked with a host of positive outcomes for Black youth, including positive racial identity development (Murry et al., 2009), greater academic persistence (Neblett et al., 2006), and fewer depressive symptoms (Liu & Lau, 2013).

One of many opportunities for parents to promote racial pride includes the recent inauguration of the administration of the 46th president of the United States. Although the



ceremony has existed for centuries, this year's inauguration was the most racially diverse. The on-stage fist bump between former President Barack Obama and Vice President Kamala Harris was more than a greeting between two politicians: it was a powerful, symbolic moment between two history-making figures – the first Black President and first Black, Asian American, female Vice President. The inauguration also featured 22-year-old African American Amanda Gorman who became the youngest inaugural poet in U.S. history with her poem, “The Hill We Climb”. During her poem, Gorman reflected on her ancestry and noted how, “*a skinny Black girl/Descended from slaves and raised by a single mother/Can dream of becoming president/Only to find herself reciting for one*” (Gorman, 2021). By addressing both the history of slavery as well as Gorman's accomplishment as a Black inaugural poet, this quote provides an ideal opportunity for Black parents to balance increasing awareness of racism and oppression with instilling cultural pride. Additionally, this administration brought with other firsts, including the first Indigenous cabinet member (Deb Halaand), first Latino to lead the Department of Health and Human Services (Xavier Becerra), and other cultural and ethnic breakthroughs in appointments.

Exposing REM youth to accomplished people who look like them can help them build racial confidence and protect them from racial slights. To skillfully introduce messages of cultural socialization, parents can utilize the text from the poem or the visuals from the stage to inquire about the child's awareness and understanding of this historic moment. By utilizing specific situations and additional text from books or visual media (e.g., Sesame Street), parents can more effectively evoke pride and better self-imagery in their child of color (a mirror) or a vantage point into the lives of other children (a window; Tschida et al., 2014). Other examples

may differ depending on age, hobbies or background but eating cultural foods, attending cultural festivals, reading books, or listening to music can all be used to promote racial pride.

White parents should also assess the racial diversity of their child's environment. Are the kids that your children play with all White or have they cultivated meaningful relationships with REM children? What race are the characters of your children's favorite television shows? What about the books they read or the dolls that they play with? What race is their dentist, their teacher, and their pediatrician? If you notice a lack of diversity in the educational content and people your child is exposed to, point this out to them, ask them to reflect on why such inequities in representation exist, and brainstorm how you can work together to change this.

### **Promotion of Mistrust**

Promotion of mistrust refers to messages that emphasize the need to be wary of individuals from other races (Hughes et al., 2006). Although not a common form of racial socialization by any parent, some REM parents may be tempted to use the recent attack on the U.S. Capitol as an example to promote their children's mistrust of White individuals. On January 6th, 2021, the world watched on television screens, handheld tablets, and smartphones as thousands of rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol, many of whom were armed with military-style weapons and armor. While this event has been described as an attack on our democracy, it is clear that the U.S. government was not the only victim. REM families were traumatized as they heard insurrectionists yelling disgusting racial slurs, waving the Confederate Flag, and erecting a noose attached to a wooden beam; this was not only an attack on democracy but an attempt to assert White supremacy and intimidate REM individuals.

Although it is completely understandable that parents might draw on their own pain and anger when discussing this event, research finds that messages that promote mistrust of other

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racial groups predict increased depressive symptoms and greater pessimism in youth (Liu & Lau, 2013). Rather than using the event to encourage generalizing and stereotyping of White individuals, REM parents may instead use this event as an opportunity to increase awareness of racism by highlighting disparities in how law enforcement responded to the U.S. Capitol riot compared to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. While violent White insurrectionists took selfies with Capitol Police and were permitted to return home without arrest, peaceful BLM protesters during the summer of 2020 were faced with excessive tear gas use, rubber bullets, and brute force and were quickly condemned by the 45<sup>th</sup> President as thugs. Parents can use this example to highlight the duality of how society treats individuals based on race. We highlight a few considerations that parents should be mindful of when navigating these conversations in the following paragraph.

First, it may be helpful for parents to initiate the conversation by asking their child what they have seen on television and the media regarding the attack on the U.S. Capitol. Responses to this question can help parents clarify what their child already knows and identify potential misconceptions that need to be corrected. However, it is important for parents to be mindful of *how* they deliver corrective feedback, as feedback that is overly critical, dismissive, or invalidating may lead children to shut down or become defensive. When this happens, we are unlikely to be very competent in our racial socialization practices. To ensure that children remain open and engaged in the conversation, parents may consider using the “sandwich” method in which they first provide praise followed by gentle critique followed by more praise. Providing corrective feedback in a way that is encouraging and supportive can create a safe space to encourage future conversations around these sensitive subjects (Cooper & McLoyd, 2011).

Second, although it may be tempting to share graphic images and videos of the event as

educational material, it is important for parents to reflect on whether doing so will be helpful or induce further stress for them and or their child. Third, it is important for parents to consider when and where to have this conversation. For example, because it is often stressful to engage in racial discussions, having these discussions after a long day at work is likely not ideal; selecting a time when parents are less stressed is likely to result in more competent racial socialization practices. Nonetheless, conversations about racism should not be isolated to highly publicized events such as the attack on the U.S. Capitol, but instead, should occur on a frequent basis as parents notice racial biases and inequities.

### **Egalitarianism**

Egalitarianism is a common racial socialization practice used primarily, but not exclusively, by White families that traditionally emphasizes that all races are the same to help encourage their children to focus more on hard work, self-acceptance, virtue, and equality (Hagerman, 2014; Hughes et al., 2006). In some research, egalitarianism includes colorblindness, in which parents avoid any mention of race or states that they do not see race, which implicitly minimizes racial inequities and leaves children ill prepared to challenge White supremacy (Gilleen-O'Neel, 2021; Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Sapon-Shevin, 2017). Still, it is critical to evaluate why this particular strategy is being deployed. For example, when the racial uprisings erupted from George Floyd's murder, parents who may not have introduced topics of race to their children in the past may have found themselves relying on strategies that emphasized how wrong it is for the police to kill anyone. Yet it is important to improve your skills by examining your beliefs and where they came from before engaging in "The Talk" with your children (Threlfall, 2018). Did your own parents talk about race growing up? Were you raised in an openly racist household? That is - do you default to not talking about race because you do not

know how to? Asking yourself these tough questions and reflecting on why you default to colorblind strategies is necessary if we want to raise children who are race conscious and committed to anti-racism.

While you may believe that you are protecting your children from learning about the harsh realities of racism in the United States, families that only utilize egalitarianism can propel a “colorblind” mentality, ensuring harm for the next generation of REM children (Perry et al., 2019). A main concern of egalitarianism within communities that have historically and contemporaneously been oppressed by White individuals is that it can downplay racial issues and experiences that happen in society by avoiding such topics in discussions (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). For example, young children are naturally curious, and it is not uncommon for them to verbalize racial and cultural differences they observe in other people based on skin color, hair, attire, or other features. While children often make these observations at inopportune times, such as in line at the grocery store, telling them to keep quiet communicates that race-related topics are inappropriate to discuss. Instead, acknowledge your child’s observations and keep the conversation going. If you feel uncomfortable having the conversation in public, briefly recognize what your child said and then suggest that you revisit the topic (e.g., *“That’s a good observation! I want to hear more about what you noticed. Let’s talk more about this in the car/when we get home.”*).

### **Conclusion**

It is necessary for all families to develop the skills to confidently address racism with our young ones. And yes, even as experts of this topic, we include ourselves in the following: when we say we are afraid to talk to our children about race, it is not about them; it is because *we* are afraid. *We* do not know how to talk about it, and *we* are concerned about how *we* will be

perceived. Our child is never too young to have a discussion about race (Brown & Anderson, 2019), and we cannot allow our fear to continue interfering with raising racially conscious children. We can start by improving our **skills** (e.g., grabbing a book that provides “windows” to various American cultures), **confidence** (e.g., asking to have The Talk *again* with our own parents), and **stress** levels (e.g., stating the mantra “*I acknowledge that I will make a mistake in this conversation - that is a part of parenting*”). It is important to balance accepting that we are going to make mistakes with also taking the necessary steps to address any missteps in future discussions with our children. Finally, combining egalitarianism with other racial socialization strategies, including cultural socialization and preparation for bias, will help children understand the realities of ongoing racism and discrimination as well as make changes for the best America we can cultivate.

As we imagine the world 20 years from now, we must consider how shaping that future for our young children begins today. It is imperative to consider the ways in which conversation and behaviors with our children, especially when young, act as the foundation of radical racial change for future generations. If we strive for a country that is free of race-related violence in the coming decades, it is crucial to develop a greater competency in our racial practices with our children. This can be done by considering real-world events as learning opportunities to share our feelings and knowledge with our children, but, importantly, it must start with self-reflection. As a parent, have you given thought to what you want to say to your child? What about the events and experiences that have shaped your knowledge? How might you engage in self-work to increase your confidence and skill while lowering your stress? It is our desire to provide those strategies today so that our children can live free of a racially traumatic world tomorrow.

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Anderson, PhD<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Southern California

<sup>2</sup>University of Michigan

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to:

Dr. Riana Elyse Anderson, [rianae@umich.edu](mailto:rianae@umich.edu), 3822 SPH I, 1415 Washington Heights, Ann  
Arbor, MI 48109