

Talking about Racism and Race with Children
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What is race socialization?

Race socialization is the process through which caregivers talk to their children about racism in everyday interactions. Race socialization refers to the ways in which families use language to communicate messages about culture, bias, mistrust, and equality. Most research on race socialization has taken place in the U.S. with African American families to understand how Black children learn to deal with racism, but these concepts and strategies are also useful for parents and children around the world. All children can benefit from intentional and planned antiracist socialization.

What role does using racialized languages play?

When it comes to the significance of race socialization, we find a strong connection between language and race. Language is interwoven with and linked to people's racial and ethnic identities. Parents may fear that using a home language such as African American Language (AAL) or any other non-standard language stigmatized by the dominant society (e.g., Russian in Finland or Kurdish in Turkey) could lead to stereotyping or racism directed toward their children. However, the use of home languages can strengthen children's sense of belonging in their communities and their racial and ethnic pride. Discussing when, where, and how to code-switch can be beneficial to help children make informed language decisions contingent on the social context.

What other language practices are important for race socialization?

Race socialization is not just about language use, but also involves family members telling and commenting on intergenerational stories of racist incidents, providing instructions about what to do in racially charged or threatening situations, commenting on racialized or racist events on tv or in the media, and talking about racial pride, history, and ancestry. These are practices documented in Black families in the U.S. that facilitate children's ability to resist bigotry and oppression and become critical consumers of media. These practices further engender understanding of the instruments of structural racism, such as the historic consequences of oppression, enslavement, and/or segregation that shape access to education, wealth, and power. Such conversations can occur as top-down (parent-initiated) and bottom-up (child-initiated) topics.

How should parents have conversations about racism with children?

It is helpful for parents to have a plan to engage in the discussion of racism and race with their children and to have a set of guidelines for children to use in high-pressure situations, such as police encounters, exposure to racial slurs, or racializing incidents at school with teachers or classmates. These guidelines may vary depending on the age, gender, and individual needs of the child, the communities in which children spend their time, and the values and beliefs of the family.

Many conversations are child-initiated and motivated by external events such as a racist incident at school or police violence in the news. Caregivers can listen to their children's perspectives, answer questions, and collaborate about the action they want to take as a family (e.g., talking to teachers or school officials, attending protests, contacting support groups, or meeting with therapists for coping strategies).

What are the implications of not engaging in direct race socialization?

There is little research on other racial and ethnic groups about race socialization. White parents in the U.S. in particular have been found to not talk about racism and race with their children, and a small amount of data point to gaps for other non-Black racial/ethnic groups. Parents who opt not to talk to their children about racism accept a passive or colorblind approach in which all people are said to be equal. In this way they reproduce racial inequities by failing to educate their children and denying the existence and effects of racism in society.

In sum, all parents can talk about the value of using different languages and linguistic diversity in society. Parents can discuss racism with their children in ways that both promote strategies for responding to racist incidents and an understanding of structural racism shapes people's opportunities. Race socialization makes talk about racism and antiracist stances, by being conscious of racism and taking action to end inequities, a part of everyday conversation that can lead to resilience, action, and social change.

Further Readings

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Authors’ Biography

Lyn Wright is Professor of Applied Linguistics/TESOL at the University of Memphis. She is the author of *Second language socialization and learner agency: Adoptive family talk* (Multilingual Matters) and *Critical perspectives on language and kinship in multilingual families* (Bloomsbury Academic).

Daryl Anderson is an academic advisor/college instructor at the University of Memphis. His research interests include promoting the utilization of non-standard language varieties in classrooms, raciolinguistics, and studying African American Language. He is the first Black male to graduate with a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics at the UofM.