

# Racial biases emerge in childhood

## How caregiver behaviour can promote anti-racist worldviews

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**By 5 years old, most children from culturally dominant groups will hold some form of racial or ethnic bias (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Umaña-Taylor, 2016). Yes, even your child (Scott et al., 2020). Racial and ethnic biases are ubiquitous throughout history and across cultures. No behavioural intervention has yet reduced them in a long-term, generalisable way. However, it would be problematic to conclude that racism is innate, for three reasons.**

First, race is a social – not biological or genetic – construct (Roberts, 2011; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Second, children vary widely in when and to what extent they develop racial biases (Rizzo et al., 2021, *in press*). And third, viewing racial biases as inevitable removes accountability from the adults in children’s lives for ensuring they develop anti-racist worldviews (Bigler et al., 2022; Eberhardt, 2019; Kendi, 2019; Salter et al., 2018).

How, then, do racial biases develop? And what can we do to disrupt this process and promote anti-racist worldviews?

### How do racial biases emerge?

Children learn by observing patterns in the world and forming beliefs about why those patterns exist. Racial and ethnic segregation and inequality are pervasive throughout societies around the globe, and everyday life provides ample opportunities for children to observe how interpersonal and structural racism work (Devakumar et al., 2020; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Salter et al., 2018).

**“Children naturally pick up on patterns of racial segregation, inequality and prejudice, and do so whether parents realise it or not.”**

Various experiences – such as walking to school with a parent, a playdate at a friend’s home, or visiting a local park – will tell the child a lot about the racial segregation, inequality, and prejudices in their

neighbourhoods. For example, how do teachers treat students from different racial backgrounds (Brey & Pauker, 2019)? Who lives in higher- and lower-income neighbourhoods (Olson et al., 2012)? Who plays with whom in the playground (Killen et al., 2017)? How does mum respond when a person of a different race walks by (Richeson & Shelton, 2005)?

Through experiences like these, children naturally pick up on patterns of racial segregation, inequality and prejudice, and do so whether parents realise it or not. By as young as 4–5 years old, 68% of US children expect their friends to prefer playing with same-race peers and 63% associate White people with wealth and Black people with poverty. Similar percentages are documented cross-culturally, and they increase with age (Olson et al., 2012; Rizzo et al., 2021, *in press*; Shutts, 2015).

### **“Children draw conclusions from observing how adults in their life behave towards others.”**

Awareness of racial segregation and inequality is not necessarily problematic – being aware of racism is the first step in fighting against it – but harmful biases can emerge when children form beliefs to explain why these things exist. Around 70% of 4- to 5-year-old children think their parents would prefer they played with a same-race peer and 48% assume that racial inequalities are caused by internal differences between racial groups. Children who hold beliefs like these are known to develop more racial biases over time (Rizzo et al., 2021, *in press*).

These early-emerging attitudes and beliefs have important implications for children’s behaviours, including decisions about who they befriend, who takes leadership positions, and how to allocate resources (Elenbaas et al., 2016; Shutts, 2015; Williams et al., 2021). Children from marginalised groups experience increased stress, decreased wellbeing and sense of belonging, and restricted educational and extracurricular opportunities



because of their peers’ biased behaviours (Sellers et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor, 2016).

To disrupt the cycle of racial segregation and inequality, interventions need to address how children make sense of the interpersonal and structural racism they see in the world around them and emphasise them as unjust and changeable systems that should be fought against.



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## How to promote anti-racist worldviews?

More research is needed to identify robust and generalisable guidelines on how to promote anti-racist worldviews during early childhood, especially among dominant- or majority-group children, who are more likely to develop racial biases (Dunham et al., 2015; Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). We do, however, have three suggestions for caregivers.

### 1 Take active steps to reduce racism in children's worlds.

Children develop racial attitudes through their observations of the world around them. By taking active steps to redress the racial inequality, segregation and prejudice that exist in children's worlds, caregivers can help children see how the world ought to be and serve as a role model for anti-racist change.

## **2 Monitor your own actions and the actions of people around you.**

Children draw conclusions from observing how adults in their life behave towards others (Pahlke et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2022; Xiao et al., 2022) – for example, a parent tensing up when a Black man walks by, or a shopkeeper frowning at a Spanish-speaking person in a store (Brey & Pauker, 2019).

**“Do not wait until a child behaves in a biased way, as by then the underlying beliefs will have been formed.”**

Caregivers need to reflect carefully on their own biases and those of the adults around them and work to fully address these biases. For example, if an adult in a child’s life expresses racist views, educate them and closely monitor the time they spend with the child. Caregivers should also talk to their children about these adults and explain why what they are saying is hurtful and wrong. Anti-bias workshops provide effective reflection and training opportunities to prepare folks for these experiences.

## **3 Focus on children’s *beliefs*, not just their behaviours.**

Do not wait until a child behaves in a biased way, as by then the underlying beliefs will have been formed. Instead be proactive in understanding children’s developing beliefs and correcting problematic beliefs and stereotypes before they lead to discriminatory behaviours.

Research finds that discussions that explicitly point out and condemn racist behaviour lead to less racial bias among children (Perry et al., 2022). If the child attends a racially or ethnically diverse school, ask them about how people get along, who others in the class want to play with the most, and if there is anyone in the class people don’t like playing with. Look for racialised patterns and address them immediately.

If the child attends a racially or ethnically homogeneous school, talk to them about children from different groups – for example, characters from books or television shows – and ask how they might get along in their school. As you drive through different neighbourhoods, ask your child what they think about the houses and the people they see. Do they notice that some are larger than others? Talk to them – in words they can understand – about how some people have more privileges and opportunities than others, and how these privileges make it easier for some folks to afford larger houses.

The goal of these conversations should not be to minimise racial segregation or inequality, but to *explain* it. When children understand that interpersonal and structural racism characterise unfair systems that need to be fought against and actively challenged, the cycle of bias can begin to be broken.

↗ Find this article online at [earlychildhoodmatters.online/2022-7](https://earlychildhoodmatters.online/2022-7)

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