

# African-American parents focus on equality when teaching preschoolers about race

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African American parents and caregivers most often use messages of egalitarianism - emphasizing equal rights, opportunities, and shared humanity across lines of ethnicity and race - when talking with their young preschool-aged children about race, finds a study led by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. The findings are published online in the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.

Ethnic-racial socialization is the verbal and non-verbal messages and practices that shape the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of [children](#) on race. A child's age has been shown to influence the kind of racial messages [parents](#) use, with parents of younger children providing more messages about culture and ethnicity compared to older children, who receive more messages about discrimination.

"Our study asked, 'What should young Black children know about race?' We were particularly interested in the content of ethnic-racial socialization messages among parents of preschool children preparing for the transition to school," said Fabienne Doucet, associate professor of education at NYU Steinhardt.

In this study of African American parents and caregivers of [preschool children](#), Doucet and her colleagues sought to explore how the intersection of African American parents' social class and experiences with racial discrimination play a role in the race-related socialization of their children during the early years. The researchers focused on how

parents or caregivers used messaging promoting either egalitarianism or messages preparing the children for bias.

Through narrative interviews with 26 African American parents and caregivers in Greensboro, North Carolina, the researchers found that 84 percent provided some type of ethnic-racial socialization message to children.

The most common message was egalitarianism (55 percent) although differences emerged between working-class and middle-class parents. Working-class parents (75 percent) were more likely to use messages of egalitarianism than were their middle-class counterparts (43 percent). By contrast, the researchers found messages preparing children for bias among middle-class participants (38 percent), but not working-class participants.

In the stories parents and caregivers shared, working-class participants were less likely to recount instances of [racial discrimination](#) (54 percent) than were middle-class participants (86 percent). However, when working-class participants shared personal experiences with racism, all tied them explicitly to the importance of teaching egalitarianism.

"What is interesting is two patterns emerged: first, families favored messages of egalitarianism as opposed to preparing children for bias; second, middle-class participants were more likely to share their racism experiences, talk about ethnic-racial socialization, and draw a connection between the two," said Doucet.

The researchers also suggest that caregivers may have tailored the [messages](#) they used to their young children's developmental stage and capacity to grasp issues like race and racism.

"For African American [caregivers](#), race is a fact of life. At a turning

point in their young children's development, the study's participants reflected the life lessons they had learned from their experiences, as well as the imagined future into which their children were being launched," said Doucet.

Provided by New York University

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