

Children as young as seven suffer effects of discrimination, study shows

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A new UC Riverside study finds children are sensitive to and suffer the impacts of discrimination as young as 7 years old.

Previous studies have shown [children](#) can identify racism at that age, but the study from Tuppett Yates, a UC Riverside psychology professor, and Ana Marcelo, an assistant professor of psychology at Clark University, is the first to study the impacts on children under 10 years old. The study also suggests that a strong sense of ethnic-racial identity is a significant buffer against these negative effects.

"We must recognize that ethnicity-race is an important part of a person's identity and development even at an early age, rather than profess to operate as a colorblind society," Yates said.

Research has long documented the [negative effects](#) of discrimination on human development. Among black and Latino teens, these impacts manifest themselves in substance abuse, depression, and risky sexual behavior. Among adults, those who report experiencing discrimination are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

Yates' and Marcelo's study, recently published in the *Journal of Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, looked at experiences of discrimination in a sample of 172 7-year-old children—half girls, half boys. Fifty-six percent of the children were Latino, 19 percent were black, and the rest were multiethnic-racial.

First, children were given the following definition of discrimination:

When people discriminate against other people, it means they treat people badly or do not respect them because of the color of their skin, because they speak a different language or have an accent, or because they come from a different country or culture. For each of the following situations, think whether you have ever felt discriminated against because of the color of your skin, your language or accent, or because of your culture or country of origin.

The children were asked questions, all of which began: "Have you ever in your life experienced _____ because of the color of your skin, your language or accent, or your culture or country of origin..." The range of experiences spanned relationships with peers (e.g., "had someone not be friends with you"), teachers (e.g., "been treated badly or unfairly by a teacher"), and general relationships (e.g., "been called an insulting name."

One year later, children received a definition of ethnicity that began by explaining that many ethnic groups exist in the U.S., stating: "Every person is born into one or more [ethnic groups](#), but people differ on how important their ethnicity is to them, how they feel about it, and how much their behavior is affected by it."

Then, children were asked to rate statements such as: "I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group," and, "I understand pretty well what my [ethnic background](#) means to me."

Yates and Marcelo then factored ethnic-racial identity, or ERI, which reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic and racial groups. They found that experiences of discrimination predicted increased internalized and externalized behavior problems (e.g., anxiety, depression, oppositionality) among children with below-

average ethnic-racial identity, or ERI, scores, but these same experiences did not significantly predict problems among children with better-developed ERI.

Previous research has shown that teens with a greater interest in their ethnic background, and a greater sense of belonging to their ethnic-racial group, demonstrate greater psychological well-being, and fewer negative behavioral impacts in the wake of discrimination experiences than their peers who are less well-informed and connected to their ethnic-racial group.

The new research affirmed the same phenomenon among younger children. Yates said the new research suggests that efforts to promote a sense of understanding about and belonging to one's ethnic-racial group in early development can help to buffer children who are vulnerable to discrimination.

"Parents and caregivers should acknowledge that ethnicity, race, and culture are active elements in a child's life," said Marcelo, who worked in Yates' lab as a graduate student. "Talking with children about how they experience their ethnicity-race is very important."

The researchers suggested having books and learning materials in school that represent people of color can help, as well as community events that allow children to experience their cultures through food, art, and music.

Yates and Marcelo said the recently published study is all the more salient as young children encounter increasing exposure to racial and ethnic divisions represented by the Black Lives Matter movement and the Trump administration's high-profile actions regarding immigration and foreign travel.

"These findings highlight the importance of reducing [discrimination](#) and

its pernicious effects, as well as promoting a positive sense of ethnic-racial identity and belonging to partially buffer children in the interim," Yates said.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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