

Children develop prejudice at an early age

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Ymke de Bruijn. Credit: Leiden University

Children in the Netherlands develop prejudices based on ethnicity at an early age. Ymke de Bruijn came to this conclusion in her dissertation "Child Interethnic Prejudice in the Netherlands: Social Learning from Parents and Picture Books." For her Ph.D. project, she took a closer look at the behaviors and ideologies young children are exposed to by their parents and through picture books between the ages of six and ten. De Bruin will defend her thesis on 11 January.

De Bruijn took time to speak to us while on holiday to tell us more about her Ph.D. research, which is part of a larger research project run by Leiden University College (LUC) under the supervision of Professor Judi Mesman: "KidS: Kinderen in de Samenleving' (Children in Society). How do [children](#) perceive diversity in society? Which prejudice do they have against people from various ethnic backgrounds? De Bruijn: "I have a background in behavioral sciences and I think it's very interesting and important to look at the way in which children develop prejudice and how that's addressed. My research shows that it's not true that children do not distinguish between people from various ethnical backgrounds."

Nip prejudice in the bud

According to De Bruijn it is important to nip the development of prejudice in the bud at the earliest possible stage. This is what motivated her research. "Hardly any research has been done on this in the Netherlands, whereas it has in other countries. I wanted to gain an understanding of how prejudice manifests itself in children in the Netherlands. What do their [parents](#) or [picture books](#) teach them on this subject and how does that contribute—in both a positive and a negative sense—to possible [prejudice](#)?"

Recruitment massive undertaking

The research project started in 2017. Finding parents and children willing to participate was a massive undertaking. Parents and children were recruited through social media and at children's events, markets and indoor playgrounds. In the end, almost 300 children and their parents were visited at home and asked questions in interviews, games and computer assignments. De Bruin: "Before coronavirus we visited people at home, but then we had to do everything digitally. That was different from expected and took some getting used to for us and for the children and their parents."

Who would you like to invite to your birthday?

The children were shown pictures of children of different ethnicities: [white children](#), black children, and children with a Middle Eastern appearance. White children most often selected the white children in the pictures in response to positively formulated questions such as: Who would you like to play with, who would you like to invite to your birthday and who would you like to sit next to? "When we phrased these questions negatively, the white children were selected less often than the other children. The results show that white children in the Netherlands develop certain preferences at a young age," De Bruin explains.

Color blindness has counterproductive effect

De Bruin looked at various diversity ideologies and found that children whose parents lean strongly towards a multicultural ideology were less prejudiced, whereas a 'color-blind' ideology did not have a positive effect. Multiple conclusions on the influence of parents can be drawn here. "Simply not discussing it, 'color-blind parenting' has a counterproductive effect and isn't a very good idea. The child will start to feel uncomfortable if you don't talk it, because they do notice the differences and may come to see them as scary or negative." According

to De Bruijn, parents should be encouraged to discuss ethnicity and racism with their children.

Greater awareness needed from publishers and users of books

De Bruijn concludes that it continues to be important for children's book publishers to pay attention to diversity. "It seems that diversity in [books](#) won't automatically happen overnight. Publishers shouldn't only think: how often does a character of color appear in my book, but also: how are these characters portrayed?" For users of books, De Bruijn advises becoming more aware of the choices you make as, for example, a parent or teacher. "If you're not actively paying attention to it, chances are that you're not offering enough diversity."

Follow-up research required

De Bruijn hopes that follow-up research will provide practical tips for parents on how to start conversations on ethnicity with their children. "We've taken an important first step with this research, but for some parents it's still very difficult to put this into practice. What should or shouldn't they say and what is the resulting effect? That would be a good next step," says De Bruijn, who once she has received her Ph.D. will become a postdoc researcher on Mesman's team.

Provided by Leiden University

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