

Study finds guided parent-child discussions are effective at addressing subtle racism

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Experts have long pointed out the need for white parents to have conversations that directly address racism with their children to reduce racial bias. But many parents fail to have these crucial discussions.

Psychology researchers at Northwestern University have now published the first study to demonstrate the immediate effectiveness of a guided discussion task to promote parent-child conversations about racial bias in white U.S. families.

The work appears in *Developmental Psychology*.

The researchers created a discussion guide that would support parents to have "color-conscious" conversations with their children that would explicitly acknowledge the existence and history of racism, and its continued presence.

According to the study, parents who engaged in color-conscious discussions with their 8- to 12-year-old child showed a significant decrease in anti-Black bias, and so did their children. However, even in conversations in which parents made comments that downplayed the importance of race or deflected blame away from white perpetrators of racism, the researchers saw reductions in bias.

"A lot of parents worry that talking to their kids about racism could increase their children's biases, and they also feel like they don't know how to do it," said corresponding author Sylvia Perry. "Our key finding, however, was that when parents used color-conscious language while discussing interpersonal racism, it was associated with a significant decrease in their child's negative implicit biases toward Black people."

Perry is an associate professor of psychology and principal investigator for the Social Cognition and Intergroup Processes Laboratory at Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences, and a faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern.

Perry said two questions prompted the research. First, if white parents and their children participated in a guided racism discussion task, would

they have color-conscious conversations? Second, if white parents and their children did have color-conscious conversations, would children show a measurable decrease in their anti-Black biases following the [conversation](#)?

Guided discussion as a tool

The researchers recruited 84 self-described white parent-child pairs to participate in the study.

Parents were asked to start a conversation with their child after watching videos that depicted interactions between a white child and a Black child. The series of scenes featured overt prejudice, subtle prejudice or neutral interactions between the children. Parents were provided with suggested discussion prompts such as, "Why did the white child do what they did?" and "How do you think the Black child felt after it happened?"—intended to encourage parents and children to articulate whether racial prejudice had occurred and to consider the negative impact of racism on Black children.

Parents and children individually completed implicit association tests to measure their degree of anti-Black bias before and after the guided discussion task.

Study findings

The researchers were surprised to find that even when parents used colorblind language in discussing the videos with their children, for example, saying, "Black and white people are all the same," their children still showed reductions in their biases; the effects were just smaller.

Perry noted, however, that the observed decreases occurred while parents and children were participating in a guided racism discussion task designed to mitigate prejudice. While some families used color-blind language at some point during their discussion, most of those families also used color-conscious language. Overall, 92% of parents and 95% of children, used color-conscious language during the discussion.

The children's anti-Black biases showed a significant decline after completion of the discussion task. Children showed a moderate preference for white over Black individuals, with an implicit bias score of 0.41 before the task. After the discussion task, the score was reduced to 0.16, bringing them closer to little or no bias. Parents' anti-Black biases also decreased significantly, from 0.53 to 0.34, after the discussion task.

Addressing subtle prejudice

Because subtle forms of prejudice have negative effects on the mental and physical health of Black individuals the researchers said it is a lost opportunity for parents to engage only in conversations about blatant racism.

"We specifically found beneficial effects of parents' language on their children's anti-Black biases when they were discussing subtle instances of racism," said Deborah Wu, an assistant professor of psychology at Stonehill College, and a co-author of the study. "Our results suggest that having these specific color-conscious conversations, as well as refraining from explaining away racism is especially helpful when discussing subtler forms of racism. This is especially important, as subtle forms of racism are far more common than overt racism and more likely to be dismissed by white individuals."

The researchers found that parents who made clear to their children that

the white child's racial prejudice was influencing the white child's attitudes or behaviors toward the Black child, such as feeling uncomfortable around Black children, had children who were most likely to show a reduction in negative biases towards Black people.

Two-way influence

The researchers also looked at the influence children had on their parents' attitudes. They found that when children made external attributions, such as saying a child might be prejudiced because they learned it from their parents, their parents showed bigger reductions in their anti-Black biases.

"Another key takeaway of this study is that it demonstrates the utility of family-level racism interventions to reduce [racial bias](#) in both adults and children," said Jamie L. Abaied, an associate professor of psychological science at the University of Vermont and a co-author of the study. "The experience of viewing and discussing vignettes depicting [racism](#) alongside one's child may be particularly eye-opening for [white parents](#), and it may help them grapple with the idea that if they do not take steps to prevent it, their own child could potentially engage in racist behaviors like the white children in the videos."

More information: White Parents' Racial Socialization During a Guided Discussion Predicts Declines in White Children's Pro-White Biases, *Developmental Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0001703](https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001703)

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