Action needed to protect kids from COVID-19 racism spike
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Urgent attention is needed during this pandemic to protect children from the harms of rising racism, experts say.

A series of recommendations published in the Medical Journal of Australia (MJA) outline steps to combat racism and improve child health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors note that with the spread of the pandemic Asian-Australians, including children, experienced racism. But experiences of racial discrimination are not limited to children of Asian backgrounds, neither before or during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Lead author Associate Professor Naomi Priest, from The Australian National University (ANU), says racism is common and harmful for many children and their families, yet often overlooked in health responses.

"There are many children in our community who experience the harmful health effects of racism and this is even more pressing during this pandemic," she said.

"Strong epidemiological evidence shows racism is associated with increased child and adolescent depression, anxiety, suicide risk, behavior difficulties, as well as with chronic disease markers such as inflammation, blood pressure and obesity risk."

Associate Professor Priest says these negative health effects of racism on children are not limited to direct experiences.

"As with second-hand smoking, second-hand exposure to racism also harms children's mental and physical health," she said.

"Racism must be seen as a core issue for child health, now more than ever."

According to Associate Professor Priest, second-hand exposure includes witnessing racism directed to their peers, caregivers and families, as well as hearing about racism towards their communities and towards other marginalized groups in the media and online.

Amid rising racism related to COVID-19, the MJA paper by Associate Professor Priest and colleagues outlines five recommendations to address the impacts of racism on child health for the pandemic and beyond.

"All healthcare professionals need to be able to discuss racism and its effects and to be able to support children and families, especially important during times of crisis and increased stress when overt racism is even higher than usual," Associate Professor Priest said.

"Data about experiences and impacts of COVID-19 must include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, and those from ethnic minorities. It must also include data on racism and discrimination wherever possible."
Co-author Ms Roxanne Jones, a Palawa woman, pediatric nurse and Ph.D. student said: "We need to ensure all children and families know they are welcome in healthcare settings and they will be treated with respect and care regardless of their backgrounds."

The authors also highlight the importance of support for community action to address inequities, as well as working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healthcare workers and communities; workers from ethnic minority backgrounds; and community cultural groups.

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