

Letter of Intent

*Child Development* Special Section: Advancing Scholarship on Anti-racism within  
Developmental Science

Title: Raising an Anti-Racist Child: Black American Parents' Perceptions of and  
Recommendations for White Parents

Meghan George  
Northwestern University

James Wages  
Northwestern University

Elisa Rapadas  
Northwestern University

Sylvia Perry  
Northwestern University

White American parents typically report that they value promoting egalitarianism and discussing race with their children (Abaied & Perry, 2020; Pahlke et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2019). Discussions about race and discrimination — a component of racial socialization (Hughes, 2003) — offer a potential pathway for anti-racist attitude development and bias reduction among White children (Hagerman, 2014; Vittrup, 2008). These discussions are particularly influential when they occur with parents, as opposed to other adults such as teachers (White-Johnson et al., 2010). However, researchers have consistently found that White parents rarely talk to their children about racism and instead engage in behaviors that may actually perpetuate bias (e.g., using colorblind language in which they avoid mentioning race; Abaied & Perry, 2020; Norton et al., 2006; Plaut et al., 2018; Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). To identify ways that White parents could better promote anti-racism among their children, we sought to incorporate the perspectives of those directly affected by White parents' racial socialization practices: Black parents.

In the current exploratory study, we asked Black parents how they thought White parents talk to their children about race, and what they thought White parents *should* say to promote anti-racism. We also examined whether responses varied as a function of contact with White people.

### **Method**

Self-identified Black parents in the U.S. ( $N = 111$ ; 81 moms, 29 dads, 1 non-binary;  $M_{age} = 34.77$ ,  $SD_{age} = 6.32$ ) who reported having children between the ages 3 to 17 ( $M = 9.07$ ,  $SD = 3.80$ ) were recruited using the online participant recruitment platform Prolific to participate in an online study. Parents completed open-ended and Likert-type scale questions, including questions such as, “In general, how do you think White parents tend to talk to their child(ren) about race?...what do you think the content of those discussions are like?” and “...[H]ow should White

parents talk to their child(ren) about race so that their children are less likely to engage in prejudiced behaviors?” Participants described a number of additional variables, such as their experiences with discrimination, which will be discussed further in the final manuscript. Finally, information about participants’ interracial interactions was collected. Parents’ responses to open-ended questions were coded for relevant themes including egalitarianism, multiculturalism, and colorblindness. Each response could be coded for as many of the themes that applied, because theme codings were not necessarily mutually exclusive (e.g., a response could include both egalitarian and colorblind sentiments).

## **Results**

### **White Parents’ Discussions About Race**

When asked to describe how White parents talk to their children, 42% of Black parents thought White parents did not talk about race at all. Black parents believed that when conversations do occur, they are reactive (e.g., only in response to a racial incident involving the White parents’ child; 16%), superficially address racial issues (12%), or directly encourage racism (e.g., “...some tell them that black is an ugly color and not worthy. That black people are nothing and that they have to go through things;” 22%).

In response to how White parents should talk to their children about race to discourage prejudice, Black parents most frequently suggested promoting egalitarianism (46%; e.g., “They should tell them that all humans are equal, no matter what race or color they are, and they should be treated equally”). Twenty-three percent of parents recommended addressing the history of racism (e.g., “They should discuss why things that were done in the past were wrong and why they should not participate in hate speech or discrimination”). Twenty-one percent of parents suggested talking about multiculturalism, with responses indicating a need to “celebrate

differences in race” and “understand that differences make us unique...” Discussions addressing social justice were mentioned by 15% of parents (e.g., “I believe that white parents should speak to their children about being an advocate (not a white savior) for all people of color”).

Surprisingly, 24% of Black parents suggested White parents should use a colorblind approach with their children (e.g., “I think white parents should teach their children to ignore race”).

### **Interracial Contact**

We investigated whether interracial contact predicted Black parents’ responses. Those who reported greater quantity and quality of contact with White people were more likely to perceive White parents’ discussions with their children as reactive,  $r = .27$ . Greater contact was also associated with a belief that White parents (a) lacked the skill to discuss race with their children,  $r = .23$ , (b) were less likely to promote egalitarianism,  $r = -.26$ , and (c) should promote social justice,  $r = .24$ . Although colorblind language can increase bias by weakening White children’s ability to identify racism (Plaut et al., 2018), quality of contact was associated with Black parents’ recommendations that White parents use colorblind language,  $r = .27$ . This finding is consistent with research demonstrating positive contact decreases minorities’ perceptions of racial inequality and support for policies that promote racial equality (Saguy et al., 2009).

### **Discussion**

Consistent with previous research on White parents’ racial socialization practices, Black parents largely thought that White parents did not talk to their children about race (Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). When asked what White parents should be talking about, Black parents most frequently recommended egalitarianism. Surprisingly, although egalitarianism was most frequently described as a method to counter racial disparities, almost a quarter of Black

parents emphasized talking to children about prejudice using a colorblind approach. This finding appears to be associated with the amount and type of interactions Black parents have with White people.

Our study uses a multi-method approach to understand the racial socialization practices of White parents from the perspective of Black parents. Extending previous racial socialization research, the current work addresses perceptions of these practices across racial group boundaries (i.e., how Black parents view the racial socialization approaches of White parents). It highlights Black parents' viewpoints and recommendations for reducing bias in future generations. Future directions could include developing interventions based on Black parents' suggestions, tailoring racial socialization to specific developmental stages, and testing interventions for their efficacy in reducing racial bias in children. The present research informs our understanding of what racial socialization in White families should look like if we hope to provide children with the information and tools they need to become egalitarian and anti-racist.

## References

- Abaied, J. L., & Perry, S. P. (in press). Socialization of racial ideology by White parents. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0011990>
- Hagerman, M. A. (2014). White families and race: Color-blind and color-conscious approaches to white racial socialization. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 37(14), 2598-2614. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.848289>
- Hughes, D. (2003). Correlates of African American and Latino parents' messages to children about ethnicity and race: A comparative study of racial socialization. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(1-2), 15-33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.747>
- Norton, M. I., Sommers, S. R., Apfelbaum, E. P., Pura, N., & Ariely, D. (2006). Color blindness and interracial interaction: Playing the political correctness game. *Psychological Science*, 17(11), 949-953. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01810.x>
- Pahlke, E., Bigler, R. S., & Suizzo, M. A. (2012). Relations between colorblind socialization and children's racial bias: Evidence from European American mothers and their preschool children. *Child Development*, 83(4), 1164-1179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2012.01770.x>
- Perry, S. P., Skinner, A. L., & Abaied, J. L. (2019). Bias awareness predicts color conscious racial socialization methods among White parents. *Journal of Social Issues*, 75(4), 1035-1056. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12348>
- Plaut, V. C., Thomas, K. M., Hurd, K., & Romano, C. A. (2018). Do color blindness and multiculturalism remedy or foster discrimination and racism?. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(3), 200-206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721418766068>

Saguy, T., Tausch, N., Dovidio, J. F., & Pratto, F. (2009). The irony of harmony: Intergroup contact can produce false expectations for equality. *Psychological Science*, *20*(1), 114-121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2008.02261.x>

Vittrup, B. (2018). Color blind or color conscious? White American mothers' approaches to racial socialization. *Journal of Family Issues*, *39*(3), 668-692. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X16676858>

White-Johnson, R. L., Ford, K. R., & Sellers, R. M. (2010). Parental racial socialization profiles: Association with demographic factors, racial discrimination, childhood socialization, and racial identity. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, *16*(2), 237. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016111>

Zucker, J. K., & Patterson, M. M. (2018). Racial socialization practices among White American parents: Relations to racial attitudes, racial identity, and school diversity. *Journal of Family Issues*, *39*(16), 3903-3930. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18800766>