



Home and Family

By Paul Kivel

Although your family members may all be white and your neighbors appear so, there may well be people of other cultures, people in interracial families, people of mixed heritage or people who are passing as white among your friends. People of color may also be providing childcare, cleaning, maintenance or healthcare services for you, your children or other relatives. Our environment is seldom as white as we assume it to be because we generally don't notice people of color when their presence doesn't challenge our sense of their proper role.

Our homes are less separable from the greater community than they have ever been. They are connected to the outside world via TV, computer games, the Internet, toys, CDs, radio, books, magazines, the daily newspaper and direct market catalogues. Each of these provides a vehicle by which racism can enter your home, but they also give you opportunities to respond to it.

Talking about racism is not easy for most of us to do. Few of us grew up in homes where racism or other difficult and emotional issues were mentioned at all. We come from backgrounds of silence, ignorance or a false belief that to talk about racism is to further it. When talk about race did occur, some of us experienced conflict with family members because we disagreed over racial issues. We can acknowledge these past experiences and create an atmosphere in our own homes where we can openly and respectfully talk about issues of race, gender or class.

- Do you talk about racism where you live?
- When you and other family members watch a movie, discuss the news or talk about daily events, do you notice and discuss racism?

It is challenging to raise white children in the highly racist society we



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live in. When babies are born, they are unaware of racial difference and attach no intrinsic value to skin color. We know that they begin to notice racial differences and their effects between the ages of two and four.¹ Throughout their childhood, they are bombarded with stereotypes, misinformation and lies about race. Without our intervention, they may or may not become members of extremist groups or commit hate crimes, but they may well become white people who accept the injustice, racial discrimination and violence in our society and perpetuate racism through their collusion. That is why we must begin teaching them at an early age to embrace differences and to become anti-racist activists. We can start this process by assessing our home and family environment for evidence of racism. Do the calendars, pictures and posters on your walls reflect the diverse society we live in? Are there books by women and men, lesbian, straight and gay people from many different cultures? Are there magazines from communities of color? We don't get extra points if there are. Nor are we trying to create an ethnic museum. But paying attention to our environment broadens our perspective and counters the stream of negative racial stereotypes that otherwise enter our home through the media.

It is even more important to discuss racism and to pay attention to our home if we have children. As responsible parents, we need to think about the toys, games, computer games, dolls, books and pictures that our young ones are exposed to. It is not just children of color who need Latino/a, Asian American, Native American and African American dolls. It is not just children of color who are hurt by computer games that portray people of color as evil, dangerous and expendable.

I am not recommending that you purge your house of favorite games and toys or become fanatical about the racism you find in your child's life. Children don't need to be protected from racism. They see it all the time. They need to be given critical thinking tools for recognizing, analyzing and responding to the different forms that racism takes. Discussing the racism (or sexism) in a children's book or movie, helping them think about the injustices of racism and providing alternative anti-racist materials — all these contribute to your children's awareness and their ability to respond to injustice. Our children need opportunities to listen to the experiences of people of color.² Placing our children in multicultural childcare settings, encouraging multiracial friendships, reaching out to co-workers and colleagues who are of diverse backgrounds and choosing professionals like doctors and dentists who are people of color are all ways to broaden our children's experience. Our society is so highly segregated that any of these efforts may turn out to be more complex than we imagined. But that complexity also can become material for understanding how racism operates and for introducing our children to the issues.

If our neighborhood or school is segregated, we can still introduce our



children to a multicultural world experience that breaks down stereotypes. The best and often most accurate way is to read what people of color write about their lives. Many new children's books realistically portray the lives of adults and children who are African American. There are a substantial number of books about the lives of Latino/as and Jews. Books by Native American, Arab American, Asian American and Muslim writers for young people may be harder to find, but there are some good ones available.³ Many of us, especially if we live or visit large cities, have access to photo exhibits, live musical performances, museums and cultural centers where we can take our children. Hearing and seeing examples of other people's diverse experiences is extremely valuable for our children.

If we understand that we live in a multicultural society, we will begin to question any situation where people of color are not present. For example, if our children are in a Scout troop, sports team, Math Olympics team or a religious school class that is all white, we will ask ourselves, "Why is this group all white? Are there any barriers that keep children of color out?" Then we might question the curriculum or program. "Is it multicultural? Does it reflect the diversity of the larger community? What values are being taught? Are issues of racism being addressed? Are other groups excluded, such as girls or gay youth?" Children notice differences in people and how they are treated. Many of us want to teach children not to judge people in biased and unkind ways, and therefore, we may downplay the significance of differences. But this can sometimes lead children to conclude that avoiding discrimination means avoiding differences. On the contrary, we want children to notice differences and similarities in people and to notice when differences lead to people being treated unfairly because of them. As early childhood teachers Ann Pelo and Fran Davidson have discovered, "Children who notice differences and who are comfortable with them can identify discrimination more clearly and can explore the unfairness that arises from biased understandings of difference. This is the beginning of activism."⁴

When we notice and remark on the ways that people are separated and treated differently, we validate our children's own perceptions and encourage them to build a sharper awareness of how racism works. When my son was caught shoplifting a couple of years ago, the store manager called me and released him to my care without calling the police and having him arrested. Of course my son was scared when he was caught and was relieved that he was not taken to jail. He was fined and banned from the store, but did not get an arrest on his record. Afterwards, when we talked about this incident, I asked him how Charles, an African American friend of his, might have been treated if he had been the one caught shoplifting. I didn't tell him he would have been treated differently. I asked him what difference he thought it might make. We had a thoughtful discussion of what might have happened if the store had



called the police, how his friend might have been treated, what it would have meant if he had an arrest record. I brought this up not to make him feel guilty or lucky, but to give him practice in noticing that race makes a constant difference in how people are treated.

It is hard to know at what age we should begin talking about institutionalized racism and the history of racial injustice, because we don't want to overwhelm our children. I think that, certainly by age six to eight, young people are capable of understanding patterns of discrimination such as slavery, the Jewish holocaust or the genocide of Native Americans when the information is presented to them in age-appropriate ways. They can begin to see the differences between individual white responses to people of color and government or corporate policies.

I think it is crucial that we be honest with our children about racial inequality in the larger society. When we are answering their questions about poverty, homelessness or AIDS, we can discuss the ways that racism makes people of color more vulnerable to these problems and less able to access resources and support. We can point out how people of color are blamed for having these problems while the large number of white people in the same situation are not blamed as much — or perhaps not at all. For instance, there are substantial numbers of white people on welfare in the United States, but the media most often present images of welfare mothers who are black, not white.⁵ Biased representations of people of color reinforce the unstated belief that white people are superior. In almost every interpersonal and institutional setting, the assumption is that white is better because white people are in charge, white images are taken for granted, white history is taught in our schools and white people receive more respect. This instills in white children a sense that they are entitled to respect, power and inclusion, and can even justify disrespect for, violence towards and exclusion of people of color. Our children need to hear from us that white is not superior, that all white people are not smarter, nor do they work harder than all people of color. Young people will understand this once they have a grasp of how racism works as a system, a set of interlocking institutions that deny equal opportunity in education, housing and jobs to people of color.

When we talk about poverty, for example, we can discuss job discrimination and unequal funding for education. This will help our children understand the social roots of individual problems. Whether the issue is race, gender, economics or disability, nothing is more important than to give our children insight into the systemic nature of power, violence and blame at a level at which they can absorb it. We do this not to excuse abusive or destructive behavior, but to put it into context and to help our children move beyond blaming individuals for social problems.

It empowers white children when they see that they have a role to play in ending racism and all forms of social injustice. White people fight against



hate crimes, police brutality, housing and job discrimination and environmental racism. There are probably local people, possibly members of your extended family or community, who are also models of white people who have been allies to people of color in the fight for racial justice. We can give our children models of white people (particularly young white people) who have resisted racism so that they know it is racism as a system that is the problem, not every white person.

At the same time, we can help our white children recognize that white people in general have been resistant to acknowledging and ending racism. We need to be honest about our own role and the roles of our foreparents. Many of us have relatives who did not support the civil rights movement or the struggles for racial justice by Latino/as and Native Americans. Adult whites, either actively or passively, are the biggest supporters of racism in the US. Some of us have family members who are today speaking out against or acting against equal opportunity, immigrant rights, affirmative action and religious tolerance. These stories need to be told as well.

Questions And Actions – Home And Family

- Were people of color and racism talked about in your childhood home? Think about particular incidents when they were. Who initiated discussions, and who resisted them? Was there tension around it? What was the general tone?
- Were Jews, the Jewish holocaust or anti-Jewish oppression talked about? Think about particular incidents. What was the general tone? Who initiated discussions, and how was tension handled if there was any?
- Was there silence in your home on issues of racism or other forms of oppressions? What did you learn from the silence?
- Was the conflict within your family because of racism (over integration, interracial or interfaith dating, music or busing)? Think of particular incidents. How was the conflict dealt with?
- Were there people of color who cared for you, your parents, house or yard? If so, how were they treated? How did their presence and your family's attitudes toward them influence you?
- As a child, what stories, TV shows or books influenced you the most in your attitudes about people of color? About people who were not Christian? What do you carry with you from that exposure?
- Talk with your partner, housemates and friends about these issues. Notice the whiteness of your surroundings out loud to family and friends. This shouldn't be done aggressively or with anger. You don't need to attack other people. Ask questions, notice things about loud,



express your concerns and give people room to think about and respond to what you say.

- Bring up feelings or thoughts about reading this book at dinner or other family time. What is difficult or awkward about doing this? What is the response?
- Do an assessment of your home including the following items:
 - a. books
 - b. posters
 - c. cookbooks
 - d. calendars
 - e. paintings
 - f. magazines
 - g. newspaper
 - h. videos
 - i. games
 - j. computer games
 - k. toys
 - l. art materials
 - m. religious articles
 - n. sports paraphernalia
 - o. music
- What would you like to remove?
- What would you like to add to what you have? Try to go beyond the tokenism of putting up pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr. or LeBron James or adding a book or two to your children's collection. Explore the roles and contributions of people of color in areas where you and other family members share an interest—such as sports, science, music, books or movies.
- Are women well represented in the items in your home? Are poor and working-class people? Are people with disabilities? Are Muslims, Jews and Buddhists? Are lesbians and gay men? Are children? Are the creations of children themselves included?
- Do you employ people of color? How well are they paid? How well are they treated? How do your children respond and relate to them? How will you talk with your children about these relationships? How will you balance these relationships with friends and neighbors from different cultures who are not employees? Are your children exposed to professionals such as teachers, doctors and dentists who are people of color? How could you increase such exposure?

Young white people need to see that they can choose to support racist policies or they can choose to become anti-racist activists. We can present all sides — the complex dimensions of white responses to racism — so that our children will see that they have moral choices to make. When they understand how racism is institutionalized, they will know



that they are not responsible for it, but they are responsible for how they respond to it. Will they stand for racial justice and equal opportunity? Will they stand with people of color? Their answers to these questions will begin to form through the ways we raise them. You might want to initiate family discussions about racism by talking about this book and how you don't want your home to support racism. You can solicit their help in doing an assessment of your home and thinking about how different games, books, videos or posters might be racist. Let your children help decide what to do to make your home different. It is one thing to create an anti-racist, multicultural environment by yourself. It is an entirely different level of education, empowerment and activism to include your children as valued participants in the process. The goal is to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of people and cultures in our society. Obviously, this kind of assessment and interactive process should address issues of gender, class, disability, sexual orientation and religious and cultural difference as well as race. We don't want to foster stereotypes that people of color are not also women, poor or working-class, people with disabilities, lesbian, gay or bisexual and/or Muslim, Buddhist or Jewish. These differences are inseparable. When dealt with in a context of social justice, young people are quick to develop principles of fair treatment and equality, eager to become co-participants in creating a healthier environment and challenging injustice. They may well end up inspiring and leading us with their readiness to challenge authority, take risks and stand up for fairness.

These are small personal steps, but they have two important consequences. The more contact we have with people of color and with images and information about them, the more we are motivated and equipped to challenge racism. We are able to see more clearly the tremendous gap between average white perceptions about people of color and their actual lives and communities. This awareness can guide our action and enrich our lives.

Second, we prepare our children to notice how racism operates and to become champions for racial justice. Uprooting Racism provides resources and a bibliography to enhance your parenting skills and continue this process.

Notes

1. See, for example, Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin. *The First R: How Children Learn about Race and Racism*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
2. The following paragraphs are adapted from my book *Boys Will Be Men*.



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3. One useful resource to begin with is Daphne Muse. *The New Press Guide to Multicultural Resources for Young Readers*. New Press, 1997.
4. Ann Pelo and Fran Davidson. *That's Not Fair! A Teacher's Guide to Activism with Young Children*. Red Leaf, 2000, p. 31.
5. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Table 8 Temporary Assistance for Needy Families — Active Cases: Percent Distribution of TANF Families by Ethnicity/Race October 2007 – September 2008. [online]. [cited March 4, 2011]. acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/character/FY2008/tab08.htm.

