



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

# Helping young children to think about race in the early years



This booklet is for early years professionals working with young children aged five and under in an educational or community setting.

**Author:** Dr Pamela Hamilton

**Editor:** Dr Bisi Showunmi

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## **About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families**

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 70 years. Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

#### **Registered address:**

Anna Freud Centre  
4-8 Rodney Street, London. N1 9JH  
Tel: 020 7794 2313

#### **Northern hub address:**

Anna Freud Centre,  
Huckletree Ancoats,  
The Express Building,  
9 Great Ancoats Street,  
Manchester. M4 5AD

[www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org)

Please contact [earlyyearsinmind@annafreud.org](mailto:earlyyearsinmind@annafreud.org) for further information.

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**“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”**

Lilla Watson, Murri (Indigenous Australian) visual artist, activist and academic.

# Introduction

## What does the booklet cover?

You may have already started to think about how race<sup>1</sup> and racism impact you, your work and the children around you. The concept of race has a complex and emotive history that brings about different feelings for different people. It can be difficult to talk about race and racism, especially if you have never experienced it or talked about it yourself. Therefore, we suggest that you work through this booklet with a colleague or colleagues and spend time reflecting on the ideas individually and together.

### The purpose of this booklet is to:

- highlight the various ways that race and racism impact children in the early years
- introduce the idea of racial socialisation and how it supports child development
- start to think about ways to support racial socialisation in the early years
- identify some ways to facilitate your journey in supporting racial socialisation in your setting.



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<sup>1</sup> 'Race' is used to define people who share similar physical characteristics and has, as a term, been widely accepted by society today. We understand that race is a social construct which is constantly changing, and that people have different views on the use of the term.

# Why should we think about racism in the early years?

## True or false statements

Work with a colleague or in a small group and think about the following statements – are they true or false?

***A. Racism is where an adult or child has a range of horrible and untrue thoughts about another group.***

True or false?

**A. False.**

Racism is not just mean things said or done by one person to another because of their race. Racism can be seen as a system of advantages and disadvantages based on race. It involves policies, practices, ideologies, systems, institutions and laws. These produce, allow and maintain the widespread unfair treatment of racially minoritised people. Racism is all around us; it can be seen in beauty standards, exclusions rates, and in the media. The impact of racism affects our everyday lives, whether we are aware of it or not.

***B. Children in early years cannot express racial preferences.***

True or false?

**B. False.**

Children become aware of race at an early age. Babies as young as three months old display a preference for their own ethnic group when shown the faces of people from a range of ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, children as young as two years of age are able to make judgements about people's behaviours based on race,<sup>3</sup> and by five years of age children can display play-based racial preferences.<sup>4</sup>

**C. Young children can only display racism if they are taught it at home.**

**True or false?**

**C. False.**

A child's beliefs about race and identity are developed from their surroundings and what they see and hear every day. As they develop, children are motivated to conform to the social and cultural norms around them. By the age of six, children are able to label an individual's perceived racial group. At this age, children are also able to attach positive and negative characteristics to different racial groups.<sup>5</sup> This affects how they compare their own race to the race of others.

This finding has been well replicated in studies since the 1940s, showing that racism in society has a great impact on young children.



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<sup>2</sup> Kelly, D. J., Quinn, P. C., Slater, A. M., Lee, K., Gibson, A., Smith, M., Ge, L., & Pascalis, O. (2005). Three-month-olds, but not newborns, prefer own-race faces. *Developmental Science*, 8(6), F31–F36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2005.0434a.x>

<sup>3</sup> Hirschfeld, L.A. (2008). Children's developing conceptions of race. In S.M. Quintana & C. McKown (Eds.), *Handbook of race, racism and the developing child* (pp.37-54). John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>4</sup> Kinzler, K. D., & Spelke, E. S. (2011). Do infants show social preferences for people differing in race? *Cognition*, 119(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2010.10.019>

<sup>5</sup> Spencer, M. B., & Markstrom-Adams, C. (1990). Identity processes among racial and ethnic minority children in America. *Child Development*, 61(2), 290–310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1131095>

It is not unusual for children to notice differences from a young age. The problem is the value that society places on these differences, and how these values present themselves, explicitly or implicitly, in the environments that children occupy.



In 1947, Mamie Phipps Clark and Kenneth Clark<sup>6</sup> asked children between the ages of three and seven to select a Black or White doll that best fitted named positive or negative attributes. The study found that the majority of children attributed positive characteristics, such as 'nice' and 'pretty', to the White dolls and negative characteristics to the Black dolls. The study also found that the children preferred the White doll.

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, K. B., & Clark, M. P. (1947). Racial identification and preference in Negro children. In T. M. Newcomb & E. L. Hartley (Eds.), *Readings in social psychology* (pp. 602–611). Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

## How can racism present itself in a young child's life?

Racism can present itself in different ways in a young child's life. A child may have direct or indirect experiences of racism, but the impact can be felt all the same.

### Here are some examples:

- A child seeing their older brother distressed after being repeatedly stopped and searched. The child may feel confused, fearful and upset about what is going on.
- A child having their teacher label them as being 'challenging' when displaying the same behaviour as their White peers. The child may feel upset and angry and think that they are a bad person.
- A young Black child being sent home from school due to their perceived "extreme" hairstyle. The child may feel rejected and unwanted by the school.
- A child seeing their parent's or carer's concerns about incidents that have taken place in the setting being openly dismissed by staff. They may have observed that this does not happen to parents and carers who look different from them. The child may feel unsafe and not valued by the staff in the setting.

There are many examples of experiences of racism that are not listed here. This list is a starting point for you to think about how racism may impact children in your setting.





# What are racial identity and racial socialisation?

## Racial identity development

Racial identity development can be thought of as the way in which people develop an understanding of themselves in relation to their race, within the society that they live in. Research has highlighted that having a positive racial identity<sup>7</sup> benefits psychological wellbeing and academic achievement. Children from racially minoritised backgrounds, who feel good about their race tend to have better self-esteem, an increased sense of pride and do better in school.

Educational settings, alongside families, have an important role to play in developing children's positive racial identities. Adults can support children in developing a positive racial identity.



Having a positive racial identity will help children to better manage and challenge situations in which racism is observed and/or experienced.

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<sup>7</sup> Developing a positive racial identity includes learning and knowing about the history of their racial group, developing a sense of security in their racial identity, and having an awareness of how their race impacts their every day lives (such as being aware of stereotypes and prejudices others may have about their racial group).

## What is racial socialisation and why is it important?

Racial socialisation is the process by which children receive direct and indirect messages about the ideas of race and racism in society. Racial socialisation takes place in families, nurseries, media, communities and various other environments that a child comes into contact with.

Children absorb messages about the world, and how it functions, from their surroundings. In situations where children are not supported in navigating and questioning these messages, they will often draw their own conclusions. Without support, children may unknowingly perpetuate racist messages they have absorbed.

### Racial socialisation in families

Racial socialisation practices are influenced by a range of factors, including the age of the child, parental experiences of racial socialisation and parental views. Racial socialisation in families can include cultural socialisation and preparation for bias.<sup>8</sup>



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<sup>8</sup> Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents' ethnic-racial socialization practices: a review of research and directions for future study. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(5), 747–770. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.747>

## Cultural socialisation

involves teaching children about their history, customs, heritage and traditions. Cultural socialisation is often used to elevate and promote a sense of cultural pride in order to counteract the negative effects of racism. In a family, this may look like children absorbing information about their heritage through family stories or by participating in cultural events; encouraging children to use their native language; and taking children to visit their ancestral homeland.

## Preparation for bias

involves raising awareness of racial discrimination and helping children from racially minoritised groups to develop the coping skills and resilience they need for when they experience racism. In early years this may look like parents and carers speaking to their child about experiences connected to their racial identity, from having their hair touched or receiving undue attention through to having a racial slur used against them.



Racial socialisation happens in the home, both overtly and inadvertently. However, the above practices are not present in all families. Conversations around race and active racial socialisation have been found to occur much less frequently in White families, where there can sometimes be an emphasis on adopting a 'colourblind approach', which is characterised by the phrase 'I don't see colour'.

## How can racial socialisation make a difference in the early years?

Children in the early years can spend more than half of their week in their settings. These settings are important as they assist the mental, social, emotional and educational development of children from birth to five years of age.

Staff in early years settings are figures that young children look up to for guidance on how to understand the world around them. In the setting, messages relating to values and race can be seen through things like teaching resources, parental interactions, behavioural sanctions and cultural appreciation.

Adults can help to reduce the impact of negative racial messages by supporting children to develop: a positive racial identity, an appreciation of the racial identity of others, and critical thinking skills to question the world around them. Having an open approach to teaching and talking about racism and race can help support children's growth and learning across many areas of development.

It is important for adults working in educational settings to be aware of the level of racial socialisation going on in the home environment. This will assist educators in their racial reflections and will help them to actively create and respond to teachable moments. Staff may be hesitant in talking about race and racism due to their own inexperience or anxieties about parental responses. It is important to establish clear anti-racist values and goals which are aligned with your racial socialisation teaching practices. These goals should be developed with contributions from parents, carers and staff. It may be helpful for the setting to think about and prepare responses to questions and concerns that they feel parents and carers may share.

# Ways to support your journey into teaching racial socialisation

## 1. Explore your own identity and racial socialisation

Before thinking about the steps you will take to support the racial socialisation of the children you work with, it is important that you think about your own racial socialisation and identity. This could include taking time to think about the messages you received about race as a child.

### **These questions may help support your thinking:**

- Can you remember when you first realised that people looked different to you?
- Do you remember any adult giving you help to support your thinking about racial differences? If yes, what did they do to help you?
- At what point did you become aware of your racial identity?
- In your opinion, what are the privileges and disadvantages of belonging to your racial group?
- In what ways would your life be different if you were part of another racial group?

For more information on ways to explore your racial identity, please see *The racial healing handbook: Practical activities to help you challenge privilege, confront systemic racism and engage in collective healing*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Singh, A. A. (2019). *The racial healing handbook: Practical activities to help you challenge privilege, confront systemic racism and engage in collective healing*. New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Through talking, reflecting and exploring with others you can increase your knowledge and confidence around the topics of race, racism and racial socialisation, which may support you in managing any feelings of stress or anxiety associated with these topics.

## 2. Reflect on your current practice

**Think about the current practices in your setting, do they:**

### a) Inadvertently reinforce bias and stereotypes?

For example, this could look like hushing a child when they ask why another child has brown skin, the angels in stories or activities always being White, or having visibly better relationships with White parents and carers.

### b) Promote respect and support an anti-racist education?

It is helpful to have a list of questions that children may ask about race and discussing developmental-stage-appropriate responses with your colleagues; learn how to correctly pronounce the names of the children and parents and carers you come into contact with; talk about influential people from a range of racial backgrounds throughout the year, and not just during specific months; and initiate conversations about race, rather than waiting for children to bring up the subject.



### **c) Encourage discussion about the world around you.**

Talking about race and racism is not racist. However, silence can be harmful. Over the past few years, issues relating to racial justice have been topics for discussion in many households. This has especially been the case since conversations around leaving the European Union began and, more recently, the murder of George Floyd which raised awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Talking about race may be difficult and painful. Some people may find it racially traumatising or may just feel like they do not have the words. However, there will be times when children will ask questions and make statements about racial issues in their communities and the world around them. Therefore, it is important that discussions are had within your team about how to handle such moments, especially in cases involving racial justice where there has been press coverage.

If we do not respond to children when they talk about race, they will be left to figure things out for themselves using limited knowledge, understanding and vocabulary. Silence can also result in children using their peers to make sense of racial justice issues and can make them feel that talking about race is taboo.

### **3. Allow enough time**

Adults need sufficient time to think, organise and prepare for conversations around race and to develop their curriculum materials and resources to support racial socialisation. Adults also need time to develop their understanding of their own beliefs, thoughts and opinions when it comes to race and racism. Someone who was racially socialised to be 'colourblind' will be at a different point in their journey than someone who was socialised to be racially aware. Allocate dedicated time, throughout the year, to meaningfully support staff in this process.

# Things that may impact your commitment, delivery and support of racial socialisation

**“I feel nervous discussing topics related to race and racism with children.”**

This is a common feeling to have. Research has found that often, a teacher’s hesitance to discuss race and racism with children comes from unfamiliarity with and lack of understanding of these topics. If this is the case, take time to speak with colleagues and research and develop your understanding of your own racial identity. You are not expected to know everything straight away or provide a perfect answer to every child’s questions about race.

**“I think that children in early years are too young to engage in critical discussions about race.”**

Young children are able to think about complicated social constructs such as race. By the age of five children have been found able to understand the power dynamics associated with race.<sup>10</sup> Young children are developing their understanding of



race and how it operates in the world around them. Children need to be supported with their emerging understanding.

## **“My reception class is very diverse and there is an Asian head teacher.”**

The presence of people from racially minoritised groups in senior positions does not mean that racism does not exist within a setting or society. In addition, it may be problematic to assume that these members of staff automatically have the skills and abilities to lead or participate in racial socialisation work. Active racial socialisation needs to take place irrespective of the racial makeup of the setting.

## **“I am a White childminder and the children I look after are mainly White. Is there any point in doing this?”**

Adults who work in settings where the children around them are predominantly White may feel that discussions about race and racism are something they do not have to engage in. This may be due to thinking that issues relating to racial justice and diversity do not apply to their children, as it is only relevant to children who live in more racially diverse areas.

However, racial socialisation is important for all children so that, as they get older, they can better navigate the world around them. It is important that children are able to function in a diverse society and do not have to rely on racial stereotypes and misinformation.



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<sup>10</sup> Van Ausdale, D., & Feagin, J. R. (1996). Using racial and ethnic concepts: The critical case of very young children. *American Sociological Review*, 61(5), 779–793. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2096453>

# Activities and suggestions to support racial socialisation

## Similarities and differences

Young children often ask about similarities and differences as they try to understand the world around them. If a child asks about a similarity or difference, it is important that an adult has a 'clarifying conversation' with them. Clarifying conversations support the child in thinking carefully about what they have shared and provides the child with accurate information which they may not be aware of. For example, if a child asks why another child has light skin, the response could be "It's fantastic that we are all different shades, isn't it? We all have something called melanin in our skin, it protects us from the sun. Some people have more than others. At nursery, you are the child with the most."<sup>11</sup> Depending on the developmental stage of the child, the adult could give further explanation of melanin.

## Feeling special, feeling seen

When a child starts at their setting, they could be given a special pencil case which has colouring pencils that match their eye, hair and skin colour. The adult can support the child in finding the appropriate colours. This could be achieved in different ways such as using mirrors to identify the child's unique characteristics, with the adult modelling the activity.

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<sup>11</sup> Tatum, B. D. (2021). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. Penguin Books, Limited.

## Sharing social identities

It is important for adults to share their social identities with children. This supports and encourages children to share their own stories in an environment where they feel safe and appreciated. By sharing stories related to their heritage, adults are able to model having pride in their background. Adults can invite parents, carers and members of staff (such as lunchtime supervisors and receptionists) to make their cultural heritage more visible to the children. For example, one person could be invited each week to make a dish, read a book or tell a story about an item they associate with their heritage.



## Teachable moments

Adults need to identify how race is present within each developmental milestone and social interaction. It is the adult's role to identify opportunities to discuss issues relating to race and take advantage of teachable moments, by using a range of resources and through experiential learning.

For example, if a child with brown skin cuts their finger and the 'skin coloured' plaster is pink, the adult can support conversation around this and then plan a lesson or further conversation with the group about what happened. The lesson can include helping children to think about what they could do to make sure everyone in the class had a plaster to match their skin tone.

## Representation in the classroom and curriculum

Diverse classroom materials and objects, such as colouring pencils, dolls and books, can be incorporated into the setting. The direct and indirect messages young children absorb from books (and other sources) influence the way they see themselves and others. It is, therefore, important to avoid stories that incorporate tokenism and stereotypical representation when selecting books.

Pictures and descriptions of people and cultures that have contributed to the resources, materials and topics you are discussing can be incorporated into learning activities. For example, when talking about the moon, adults could show a picture of the astronaut Mae Jemison and discuss her accomplishments.

## Use what you have

There are many objects and resources in your setting that can be used to talk to children about racial justice issues. For example, you could use toy buses to introduce the story of the 1963 Bristol Bus Boycott, and the positive changes that happened as a result. This is a teaching moment that can be used to educate and empower children in a developmentally appropriate way.

## Persona Dolls

Persona Dolls can be used with children to help them develop empathy and 'unlearn' racial stereotypes, and to stand up for others they feel are being discriminated against. Persona Dolls have also been used to help children develop an increased sense of self-worth and cultural identity.

### How to use Persona Dolls

Persona Dolls are dolls which are given their own unique personality, history, family and cultural backgrounds. The dolls come to see groups of children and speak about situations that have happened in their lives. By talking about what has happened to the dolls, children are able to share happiness, joy and empathy. During this time, children are able to share their views and opinions about what the doll has shared. They are also able to think about and share their ideas on how to address the situation.

## Racial socialisation in predominantly White settings

Some may assume that racial socialisation is not relevant in predominantly White settings. The basis of this statement may rely on incorrect assumptions. These assumptions may include: a) White people are homogenous group, and b) racial socialisation is only for children from racially minoritised groups.

Researchers suggest the following steps to support the racial socialisation of children in a predominately White setting and to address the above assumptions:

1. Help children explore their culture identities based on their personal abilities, interests and family background.
2. Support children to learn that White people have a range of differences and similarities and are not all alike.
3. Extend children's understanding of differences and similarities beyond their immediate family, community and setting.<sup>12</sup>

You may wish to consider linking with another setting to share ideas and thinking about the steps you could take.



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<sup>12</sup> Adapted from Derman-Sparks, L., Ramsey, P.G., & Edwards, J. O. (2011). *What if all the kids are White? Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families*. Teachers College Press.

## Responding to parental concerns about discrimination

Racial socialisation by parents and carers can, at times, include the promotion of mistrust of people from other racial groups. Promotion of mistrust can have a detrimental effect on children's experiences of early years settings. Therefore, it is important that parents and carers feel able to address issues related to race with the setting, and that children see any issues that they shared with their parents resolved. It is important that policies and procedures are developed that make adults feel comfortable in raising such issues.

While this booklet seeks to support thinking, activities and knowledge of racial socialisation, it is the consistent daily behaviour and practices of adults that support racial socialisation – going further than having one-off multicultural experiences and resources.



We hope this booklet has stimulated your thinking and given you a good starting point to support children in early years to think about race.

# Where can I go to for more information?

## Books

Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O. (2020). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves* (2nd ed.). The National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Kissinger, K. (2017). *Anti-bias education in the early childhood classroom: Hand in hand, step by step*. Routledge.

## Website and videos

Efe McKinney, F. (Director). (2021). *Reflecting on anti-bias education in action: The early years* [Film]. Brave Sprout Productions. <https://www.antibiasleadersece.com/the-film-reflecting-on-anti-bias-education-in-action/>

EmbraceRace. (n.d.). *Racial socialization as resistance to racism, the early years*. <https://www.embracerace.org/resources/racial-socialization-in-the-early-years-guidance-for-parents-and-educators>

## Resources for education staff working with older children

Anna Freud Centre. (2022). *Anti-racism and mental health in schools resources*. <https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/anti-racism-and-mental-health-in-schools/anti-racism-and-mental-health-in-schools-resources/>





# Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

The Early Years in Mind learning network is a free network for early years staff and practitioners hosted by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

The network was developed by mental health experts at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

**To join the Early Years in Mind learning network, please visit [www.annafreud.org/eyim](http://www.annafreud.org/eyim).**

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**Registered address:**

Anna Freud Centre  
4-8 Rodney Street, London. N1 9JH  
Tel: 020 7794 2313

**Northern hub address:**

Anna Freud Centre,  
Huckletree Ancoats,  
The Express Building,  
9 Great Ancoats Street,  
Manchester. M4 5AD

[www.annafreud.org](http://www.annafreud.org)

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