

At the Children's Research Lab at the University of Texas, a database is kept of thousands of families in the Austin area who have volunteered to be available for scholarly research. In 2006, doctoral student Birgitte Vittrup recruited from the database about a hundred of these families, all of whom were Caucasian with a child five to seven years old. This project was her Ph.D. dissertation. The goal of Vittrup's study was to learn if typical children's videos with multicultural story lines actually have any beneficial effect on children's racial attitudes.

Her first step was to test the children, and their parents, with a Racial Attitude Measure designed by one of her mentors at the university, Dr. Rebecca Bigler. Using this measure, Vittrup asked the child a series of questions, such as:

*"How many White people are nice?"*

(Almost all) (A lot) (Some) (Not many) (None)

*"How many Black people are nice?"*

(Almost all) (A lot) (Some) (Not many) (None)

Over the test, the descriptive adjective "nice" was replaced with over twenty other adjectives like "Dishonest," "Pretty," "Curious," and "Snobby." If the kid was too shy to answer, he could point to a picture that corresponded to each of the possible answers.

## CHAPTER 3

WHY WHITE PARENTS DON'T  
TALK ABOUT RACE

NURTURE SHOCK: NEW

THINKING ABOUT CHILDREN

Of the families, Vittrup sent a third of them home with typical multicultural-themed videos for a week, such as an episode of *Sesame Street* where the characters visit an African American family's home, and an episode of *Little Bill*, where the entire neighborhood comes together to clean the local park.

In truth, Vittrup didn't expect that children's racial attitudes would change very much from just watching these videos. Prior research by Bigler had shown that multicultural curriculum in schools has far less impact than we intend it to—largely because the implicit message “We're all friends” is too vague for children to understand it refers to skin color.

Yet Vittrup figured that if the educational videos were supplemented with explicit conversations from parents, there would be a significant impact. So a second group of families got the videos, and Vittrup told these parents to use the videos as the jumping-off point for a conversation about interracial friendship. She gave these sets of parents a checklist of points to make, echoing the theme of the shows. “I really believed it was going to work,” Vittrup recalled. Her Ph.D. depended upon it.

The last third were also given the checklist of topics, but no videos. These parents were supposed to bring up racial equality on their own, every night for five nights. This was a bit tricky, especially if the parents had never put names to kids' races before. The parents were to say things like:

Some people on TV or at school have different skin color than us. White children and Black children and Mexican children often like the same things even though they come from different backgrounds. They are still good people and you can be their friend. If a child of a different skin color lived in our neighborhood, would you like to be his friend?

At this point, something interesting happened. Five of the families in the last group abruptly quit the study. Two directly told Vittrup, “We don't want to have these conversations with our child. We don't want to point out skin color.”

Vittrup was taken aback—these families had volunteered knowing full-well it was a study of children's racial attitudes. Yet once told this required talking openly about race, they started dropping out. Three others refused to say why they were quitting, but their silence made Vittrup suspect they were withdrawing for the same reason.

This avoidance of talking about race was something Vittrup also picked up in her initial test of parents' racial attitudes. It was no surprise that in a liberal city like Austin, every parent was a welcoming multiculturalist, embracing diversity. But Vittrup had also noticed, in the original surveys, that hardly any of these white parents had ever talked to their children directly about race. They might have asserted vague principles in the home—like “Everybody's equal” or “God made all of us” or “Under the skin, we're all the same”—but they had almost never called attention to racial differences.

They wanted their children to grow up color-blind. But Vittrup could also see from her first test of the kids that they weren't color-blind at all. Asked how many white people are mean, these children commonly answered “Almost none.” Asked how many blacks are mean, many answered “Some” or “A lot.” Even kids who attended diverse schools answered some of the questions this way.

More disturbingly, Vittrup had also asked all the kids a very blunt question: “Do your parents like black people?” If the white parents never talked about race explicitly, did the kids know that their parents liked black people?

Apparently not: 14% said, outright, “No, my parents don't like black people”; 38% of the kids answered, “I don't know.” In this supposed race-free vacuum being created by parents, kids were left to

improvise their own conclusions—many of which would be abhorrent to their parents.

Vittrup hoped the families she'd instructed to talk about race would follow through.

After watching the videos, the families returned to the Children's Research Lab for retesting. As Vittrup expected, for the families who had watched the videos without any parental reinforcement and conversation, there was no improvement over their scores from a week before. The message of multicultural harmony—seemingly so apparent in the episodes—wasn't affecting the kids at all.

But to her surprise, after she crunched the numbers, Vittrup learned that neither of the other two groups of children (whose parents talked to them about interracial friendship) had improved their racial attitudes. At first look, the study was a failure. She felt like she was watching her promising career vanish before her own eyes. She'd had visions of her findings published in a major journal—but now she was just wondering if she'd even make it through her dissertation defense and get her Ph.D.

Scrambling, Vittrup consulted her dissertation advisors until she eventually sought out Bigler.

"Whether the study worked or not," Bigler replied, "it's still telling you something." Maybe there was something interesting in why it had no effect?

Combing through the parents' study diaries, Vittrup noticed an aberration. When she'd given the parents the checklist of race topics to discuss with their kindergartners, she had also asked them to record whether this had been a meaningful interaction. Did the parents merely mention the item on the checklist? Did they expand on the checklist item? Did it lead to a true discussion?

Almost all the parents reported merely mentioning the checklist items, briefly, in passing. Many just couldn't talk about race, and they quickly reverted to the vague "Everybody's equal" phrasing.

Of all the parents who were told to talk openly about interracial friendship, only six managed to do so. All of those six kids greatly improved their racial attitudes.

Vittrup sailed through her dissertation and is now an assistant professor at Texas Woman's University in Dallas. Reflecting later about the study, Vittrup realized how challenging it had been for the families: "A lot of parents came to me afterwards and admitted they just didn't know what to say to their kids, and they didn't want the wrong thing coming out of the mouth of their kids."

We all want our children to be unintimidated by differences and have the social skills to integrate in a diverse world. The question is, do we make it worse, or do we make it better, by calling attention to race?

Of course, the election of President Barack Obama has marked the beginning of a new era in race relations in the United States—but it hasn't resolved the question as to what we should tell children about race. If anything, it's pushed that issue to the forefront. Many parents have explicitly pointed out Obama's brown skin to their young children, to reinforce the message that anyone can rise to become a leader, and anyone—regardless of skin color—can be a friend, be loved, and be admired.

But still others are thinking it's better to say nothing at all about the president's race or ethnicity—because saying something about it unavoidably teaches a child a racial construct. They worry that even a positive statement ("It's wonderful that a black person can be president") will still encourage the child to see divisions within society. For them, the better course is just to let a young child learn by the example; what kids see is what they'll think is normal. For their early formative years, at least, let the children know a time when skin color does not matter.

A 2007 study in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* found that out of 17,000 families with kindergartners, 45% said they'd never,

or almost never, discussed race issues with their children. But that was for all ethnicities. Nonwhite parents are about three times more likely to discuss race than white parents; 75% of the latter never, or almost never, talk about race.

For decades, we assumed that children will only see race when society points it out to them. That approach was shared by much of the scientific community—the view was that race was a societal issue best left to sociologists and demographers to figure out. However, child development researchers have increasingly begun to question that presumption. They argue that children see racial differences as much as they see the difference between pink and blue—but we tell kids that “pink” means for girls and “blue” is for boys. “White” and “black” are mysteries we leave them to figure out on their own.



It takes remarkably little for children to develop in-group preferences once a difference has been recognized. Bigler ran an experiment in three preschool classrooms, where four- and five-year-olds were lined up and given T-shirts. Half the kids were given blue T-shirts, half red. The children wore the shirts for three weeks. During that time, the teachers never mentioned their colors and never again grouped the kids by shirt color. The teachers never referred to the “Blues” or the “Reds.” Bigler wanted to see what would happen to the children naturally, once color groupings had been established.

The kids didn’t segregate in their behavior. They played with each other freely at recess. But when asked which color team was better to belong to, or which team might win a race, they chose their own color. They liked the kids in their own group more and believed they were smarter than the other color. “The Reds never showed hatred for Blues,” Bigler observed. “It was more like, ‘Blues are fine, but

not as good as us.’” When Reds were asked how many Reds were nice, they’d answer “All of us.” Asked how many Blues were nice, they’d answer “Some.” Some of the Blues were mean, and some were dumb—but not the Reds.

Bigler’s experiment seems to show how children will use whatever you give them to create divisions—seeming to confirm that race becomes an issue only if we make it an issue. So why does Bigler think it’s important to talk to children about race, as early as age three?

Her reasoning is that kids are *developmentally* prone to in-group favoritism; they’re going to form these preferences on their own. Children categorize everything from food to toys to people at a young age. However, it takes years before their cognitive abilities allow them to successfully use more than one attribute to categorize anything. In the meantime, the attribute they rely on is that which is the most clearly visible.

Bigler contends that once a child identifies someone as most closely resembling himself, the child likes that person the most. And the child extends their shared appearances much further—believing that everything else he likes, those who look similar to him like as well. Anything he doesn’t like thus belongs to those who look the least similar to him. The spontaneous tendency to assume your group shares characteristics—such as niceness, or smarts—is called *essentialism*. Kids never think groups are random.

We might imagine we’re creating color-blind environments for children, but differences in skin color or hair or weight are like differences in gender—they’re plainly visible. We don’t have to label them for them to become salient. Even if no teacher or parent mentions race, kids will use skin color on their own, the same way they use T-shirt colors.

Within the past decade or so, developmental psychologists have begun a handful of longitudinal studies to determine exactly when

children develop bias—the general premise being that the earlier the bias manifests itself, the more likely it is driven by developmental processes.

Dr. Phyllis Katz, then a professor at the University of Colorado, led one such study—following 100 black children and 100 white children for their first six years. She tested these children and their parents nine times during those six years, with the first test at six months old.

How do researchers test a six-month-old? It's actually a common test in child development research. They show babies photographs of faces, measuring how long the child's attention remains on the photographs. Looking at a photograph longer does not indicate a preference for that photo, or for that face. Rather, looking longer means the child's brain finds the face to be out of the ordinary; she stares at it longer because her brain is trying to make sense of it. So faces that are familiar actually get shorter visual attention. Children will stare significantly longer at photographs of faces that are a different race from their parents. Race itself has no ethnic meaning, *per se*—but children's brains are noticing skin color differences and trying to understand their meaning.

When the kids turned three, Katz showed them photographs of other children and asked them to choose whom they'd like to have as friends. Of the white children 86% picked children of their own race. When the kids were five and six, Katz gave these children a small deck of cards, with drawings of people on them. Katz told the children to sort the cards into two piles any way they wanted. Only 16% of the kids used gender to split the piles. Another 16% used a variety of other factors, like the age or the mood of the people depicted. But 68% of the kids used race to split the cards, without any prompting.

In reporting her findings, Katz concluded: "I think it is fair to say that at no point in the study did the children exhibit the Rousseau-type of color-blindness that many adults expect."

The point Katz emphasizes is that during this period of our children's lives when we imagine it's most important to *not* talk about race is the very developmental period when children's minds are forming their first conclusions about race.

Several studies point to the possibility of developmental windows—stages when children's attitudes might be most amenable to change. During one experiment, teachers divided their students into groups of six kids, making sure each child was in a racially diverse group. Twice a week, for eight weeks, the groups met. Each child in a group had to learn a piece of the lesson and then turn around and teach it to the other five. The groups received a grade collectively. Then, the scholars watched the kids on the playground, to see if it led to more interaction cross-race. Every time a child played with another child at recess, it was noted—as was the race of the other child.

The researchers found this worked wonders on the first-grade children. Having been in the cross-race study groups led to significantly more cross-race play. But it made no difference on the third-grade children. It's possible that by third grade, when parents usually recognize it's safe to start talking a little about race, the developmental window has already closed.



The other deeply held assumption modern parents have is what Ashley and I have come to call the Diverse Environment Theory. If you raise a child with a fair amount of exposure to people of other races and cultures, the environment becomes the message. You don't have to talk about race—in fact, it's better to *not* talk about race. Just expose the child to diverse environments and he'll think it's entirely normal.

I know this mindset, because it perfectly describes the approach

my wife and I took when our son, Luke, was born. When he was four months old, we enrolled him in a preschool located in San Francisco's Fillmore/Western Addition neighborhood. One of the many benefits of the school was its great racial diversity. For years he never once mentioned the color of anyone's skin—not at school or while watching television. We never once mentioned skin color either. We thought it was working perfectly.

Then came Martin Luther King Jr. Day at school, two months before his fifth birthday. Luke walked out of class that Friday before the weekend and started pointing at everyone, proudly announcing, "That guy comes from Africa. And she comes from Africa, too!" It was embarrassing how loudly he did this. Clearly, he had been taught to categorize skin color, and he was enchanted with his skill at doing so. "People with brown skin are from Africa," he'd repeat. He had not been taught the names for races—he had not heard the term "black" and he called us "people with pinkish-whitish skin." He named every kid in his schoolroom with brown skin, which was about half his class.

I was uncomfortable that the school hadn't warned us about the race-themed lesson. But my son's eagerness was revealing. It was obvious this was something he'd been wondering about for a while. He was relieved to have been finally given the key. Skin color was a sign of ancestral roots.

Over the next year, we started to overhear one of his white friends talking about the color of their skin. They still didn't know what to call their skin, so they used the phrase "skin like ours." And this notion of *ours versus theirs* started to take on a meaning of its own. As these kids searched for their identities, skin color had become salient. Soon, I overheard this particular white boy telling my son, "Parents don't like us to talk about our skin, so don't let them hear you."

Yet our son did mention it. When he watched basketball with us, he would say, "That guy's my favorite," and put his finger up to

the screen to point the player out. "The guy with skin like ours," he would add. I questioned him at length, and I came to understand what was really going on. My young son had become self-conscious about his curly blond-brown hair. His hair would never look like the black players' hairstyles. The one white, Latvian player on the Golden State Warriors had cool hair the same color as my son's. That was the guy to root for. My son was looking for his own identity, and looking for role models. Race and hairstyle had both become part of the identity formula. Making free throws and playing tough defense hadn't.

I kept being surprised. As a parent, I dealt with these moments explicitly, telling my son it was wrong to choose anyone as his friend, or his "favorite," on the basis of their skin color or even their hairstyle. We pointed out how certain friends wouldn't be in our lives if we picked friends for their color. He got the message, and over time he not only accepted but embraced this lesson. Now he talks openly about equality and the wrongfulness of discrimination.

Not knowing then what I do now, I had a hard time understanding my son's initial impulses. I'd always thought racism was taught. If a child grows up in a non-racist world, why was he spontaneously showing race-based preferences? When did the environment that we were so proud of no longer become the message he listened to?

The Diverse Environment Theory is the core principle behind school desegregation today. Like most people, I assumed that after thirty years of school desegregation, it would have a long track record of scientific research proving that the Diverse Environment Theory works. Then Ashley and I began talking to the scholars who've compiled that very research.

For instance, Dr. Gary Orfield runs the Civil Rights Project, a think tank that was long based at Harvard but has moved to UCLA. In the summer of 2007, Orfield and a dozen top scholars wrote an amicus brief to the United States Supreme Court supporting school

desegregation in Louisville, Kentucky, and Seattle, Washington. After completing the 86-page document, Orfield e-mailed it to all the social scientists on his mailing list, and he received 553 signatures of support. No fancy law firms put their stamp on it. Orfield was very proud that the brief was the work of scientists, not lawyers, thereby preserving its integrity and impartiality. "It was the authentic voice of social science," he recalled.

Privately, though, Orfield felt some frustration—even anger. He admitted the science available to make their case "wasn't what we really wanted." Despite having at their disposal at least a thousand research studies on desegregation's effects, "I was surprised none were longitudinal. It really has a substantial effect, but it has to be done the right way." Just throwing kids of different races into a school together isn't the right way, because they can self-segregate within the school. Orfield lamented the lack of funding to train teachers. Looking at the science available to make their case, Orfield recalled, "It depressed me that we've invested so little in finding the benefits of integration."

This ambiguity is visible in the text of the amicus brief. Scientists don't like to overstate their case. So the benefits of desegregation are qualified with words like "may lead" and "can improve." "Mere school integration is not a panacea," the brief warns.

UT's Bigler was one of the scholars who contributed to the brief, and she was heavily involved in the process of its creation. Her estimation of what they found is more candid than Orfield's. "In the end, I was disappointed with the amount of evidence social psychology could muster," she said. "Going to integrated schools gives you just as many chances to learn stereotypes as to unlearn them."

Calling attention to this can feel taboo. Bigler is an adamant proponent of desegregation in schools, on moral grounds. "It's an enormous step backward to increase social segregation," she commented. But it's important for parents to know that merely sending your child

to a diverse school is no guarantee they'll have better racial attitudes than children at homogenous schools.

Race appears to be especially complex, compared to other objects of bias and discrimination. Dr. Thomas Pettigrew of the University of California at Santa Cruz analyzed over 500 research studies, all of which were examples of how exposure to others can potentially reduce bias. The studies that were most successful weren't about racial bias—rather, they were about bias toward the disabled, the elderly, and gays. Studies in other countries show success—such as a reduction in bias among Jews and Palestinians, or whites and blacks in South Africa. When it comes to race in America, the studies show only consistent, modest benefit among college-aged students. In high schools and elementary schools, it's a different story.

Recently, the Civil Rights Project studied high school juniors in six school districts around the country. One of those was Louisville, which appears to be a place where desegregation has had the intended benefits. Surveys of high school juniors there show that over 80% of students (of all races) feel their school experience has helped them work with and get along with members of other races and ethnic groups. Over 85% feel their school's diversity has prepared them to work in a diverse job setting.

But other districts didn't look so great. Lynn, Massachusetts, which is ten miles northeast of Boston, is generally regarded as another model of diversity and successful school desegregation. When its students were polled if they'd like to live in a diverse neighborhood when they grow up, about 70% of the nonwhite high school juniors said they wanted to. But only 35% of whites wanted to.

Dr. Walter Stephan, a professor emeritus at New Mexico State University, made it his life's work to survey students' racial attitudes after their first year of desegregation. He found that in 16% of the desegregated schools examined, the attitudes of whites toward African Americans became more favorable. In 36% of the schools,

there was no difference. In 48% of the schools, white students' attitudes toward blacks became *worse*. Stephan is no segregationist—he signed the amicus brief, and he is one of the most respected scholars in the field.

The unfortunate twist of diverse schools is that they don't necessarily lead to more cross-race friendships. Often it's the opposite.

Duke University's Dr. James Moody—an expert on how adolescents form and maintain social networks—analyzed data on over 90,000 teenagers at 112 different schools from every region of the country. The students had been asked to name their five best male friends and their five best female friends. Moody matched the ethnicity of the student with the race of each of her named friends, then Moody compared the number of each student's cross-racial friendships with the school's overall diversity.

Moody found that the more diverse the school, the more the kids self-segregate by race and ethnicity within the school, and thus the likelihood that any two kids of different races have a friendship goes *down*.

As a result, junior high and high school children in diverse schools experience two completely-contrasting social cues on a daily basis. The first cue is inspiring—that many students have a friend of another race. The second cue is tragic—that far *more* kids just like to hang with their own. It's this second dynamic that becomes more and more visible as overall school diversity goes up. As a child circulates through school, she sees more groups that her race disqualifies her from, more tables in the lunchroom she can't sit at, and more implicit lines that are taboo to cross. This is unmissable even if she, personally, has friends of other races.

It's true that, for every extracurricular one kid has in common with a child of another race, the likelihood that they will be friends increases. But what's stunning about Moody's analysis is that he's taken that into account: Moody included statistical controls for

activities, sports, academic tracking, and other school-structural conditions that tend to desegregate (or segregate) students within the school. And the rule still holds true: more diversity translates into more division between students.

Having done its own analysis of teen friendships, a team from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, confirmed Moody's assessment. "More diverse schools have, overall, more potential interracial contact and hence more interracial dyads of 'potential' friends," these researchers explained—but this opportunity was being squandered: "The probability of interracial dyads being friends decreases in more diverse schools."

Those increased opportunities to interact are *also*, effectively, increased opportunities to reject each other. And that is what's happening.

"There has been a new resegregation among youth in primary and secondary schools and on college campuses across the country," wrote Dr. Brendesha Tynes of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Tynes concluded, "Even in multiracial schools, once young people leave the classroom very little interracial discussion takes place because a desire to associate with one's own ethnic group often discourages interaction between groups."

All told, the odds of a white high-schooler in America having a best friend of another race is only 8%. Those odds barely improve for the second-best friend, or the third best, or the fifth. For blacks, the odds aren't much better: 85% of black kids' best friends are also black. Cross-race friends also tend to share a single activity, rather than multiple activities; as a result, these friendships are more likely to be lost over time, as children transition from middle school to high school.

It is tempting to believe that because their generation is so diverse, today's children grow up knowing how to get along with people of every race. But numerous studies suggest that this is more of a fantasy than a fact.



I can't help but wonder—would the track record of desegregation be so mixed if parents reinforced it, rather than remaining silent?



Is it really so difficult to talk with children about race when they're very young? What jumped out at Phyllis Katz, in her study of 200 black and white children, was that parents are very comfortable talking to their children about gender, and they work very hard to counterprogram against boy-girl stereotypes. That ought to be our model for talking about race. The same way we remind our daughters, "Mommies can be doctors just like daddies," we ought to be telling all children that doctors can be any skin color. It's not complicated *what to say*. It's only a matter of how often we reinforce it.

Shushing children when they make an improper remark is an instinctive reflex, but often the wrong move. Prone to categorization, children's brains can't help but attempt to generalize rules from the examples they see. It's the worst kind of embarrassment when a child blurts out, "Only brown people can have breakfast at school," or "You can't play basketball, you're white, so you have to play baseball." But shushing them only sends the message that this topic is unspeakable, which makes race more loaded, and more intimidating.

Young children draw conclusions that may make parents cringe, even if they've seen a few counterexamples. Children are not passive absorbers of knowledge; rather, they are active constructors of concepts. Bigler has seen many examples where children distort their recollections of facts to fit the categories they've already formed in their minds. The brain's need for categories to fit perfectly is even stronger at age seven than at age five, so a second grader might make more distortions than a kindergartner to defend his categories. To a parent, it can seem as if the child is getting worse at understanding a diverse world, not better.

To be effective, researchers have found, conversations about race have to be explicit, in unmistakable terms that children understand. A friend of mine repeatedly told her five-year-old son, "Remember, everybody's equal." She thought she was getting the message across. Finally, after seven months of this, her boy asked, "Mommy, what's 'equal' mean?"

Bigler ran a study where children read brief historical biographies of famous African Americans. For instance, in a biography of Jackie Robinson, they read that he was the first African American in the major leagues. But only half heard about how he'd previously been relegated to the Negro leagues, and how he suffered taunts from white fans. Those facts—in five brief sentences—were omitted in the version given to the other half of the children.

After the two-week history class, the children were surveyed on their racial attitudes. White children who got the full story about historical discrimination had significantly better attitudes toward blacks than those who got the neutered version. Explicitness works.

"It also made them feel some guilt," Bigler added. "It knocked down their glorified view of white people." They couldn't justify in-group superiority.

Bigler is very cautious about taking the conclusion of her Jackie Robinson study too far. She notes the bios were explicit, but about *historical* discrimination. "If we'd had them read stories of contemporary discrimination from today's newspapers, it's quite possible it would have made the whites defensive, and only made the blacks angry at whites."

Another scholar has something close to an answer on that. Dr. April Harris-Britt, a clinical psychologist and professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, studies how minority parents help their children develop a racial identity from a young age. All minority parents at some point tell their children that discrimination is out there, but they shouldn't let it stop them. However,

these conversations are not triggered by their children bringing it up. Rather, the parent often suffers a discriminatory incident, and it pushes him to decide, "It's time I prepared my child for this."

Is it good for them? Harris-Britt found that some preparation for bias was beneficial to children, and that it was necessary—94% of African American eighth graders reported to Harris-Britt that they'd felt discriminated against in the prior three months. But if children heard these preparation-for-bias warnings often (rather than just occasionally), they were significantly less likely to connect their successes to effort, and much more likely to blame their failures on their teachers—whom they saw as biased against them.

Harris-Britt warns that frequent predictions of future discrimination ironically become as destructive as experiences of actual discrimination: "If you overfocus on those types of events, you give the children the message that the world is going to be hostile—you're just not valued and that's just the way the world is."

Preparation-for-bias is not, however, the only way minorities talk to their children about race. The other broad category of conversation, in Harris-Britt's analysis, is ethnic pride. From a very young age, minority children are coached to be proud of their ethnic history. She found that this was exceedingly good for children's self-confidence; in one study, black children who'd heard messages of ethnic pride were more engaged in school and more likely to attribute their success to their effort and ability.

That leads to the question that everyone wonders but rarely dares to ask. If "black pride" is good for African American children, where does that leave white children? It's horrifying to imagine kids being "proud to be white." Yet many scholars argue that's exactly what children's brains are already computing. Just as minority children are aware that they belong to an ethnic group with less status and wealth, most white children naturally decipher that they belong to the race that has more power, wealth, and control in society; this

provides security, if not confidence. So a pride message would not just be abhorrent—it'd be redundant.

When talking to teens, it's helpful to understand how their tendency to form groups and cliques is partly a consequence of American culture. In America, we encourage individuality. Children freely and openly develop strong preferences—defining their self-identity by the things they like and dislike. They learn to see differences. Though singular identity is the long-term goal, in high school this identity-quest is satisfied by forming and joining distinctive subgroups. So, in an ironic twist, the more a culture emphasizes individualism, the more the high school years will be marked by subgroupism. Japan, for instance, values social harmony over individualism, and children are discouraged from asserting personal preferences. Thus, less groupism is observed in their high schools.

The security that comes from belonging to a group, especially for teens, is palpable. Traits that mark this membership are—whether we like it or not—central to this developmental period. University of Michigan researchers did a study that shows just how powerful this need to belong is, and how much it can affect a teen.

The researchers brought 100 Detroit black high school students in for one-on-one interviews. They asked each teen to rate himself on how light or dark he considered his skin tone to be. Then the scholars asked about the teens' confidence levels in social circles and school. From the high schools, the researchers obtained the teens' grade point averages.

Particularly for the boys, those who rated themselves as dark-skinned blacks had the highest GPAs. They also had the highest ratings for social acceptance and academic confidence. The boys with lighter skin tones were less secure socially and academically.

The researchers subsequently replicated these results with students who "looked Latino."

The researchers concluded that doing well in school could get a

minority teen labeled as “acting white.” Teens who were visibly sure of membership within the minority community were protected from this insult and thus more willing to act outside the group norm. But the light-skinned blacks and the Anglo-appearing Hispanics—their status within the minority felt more precarious. So they acted more in keeping with their image of the minority identity—even if it was a negative stereotype—in order to solidify their status within the group.



Over the course of our research, we heard many stories of how people—from parents to teachers—were struggling to talk about race with their children. For some, the conversations came up after a child had made an embarrassing comment in public. A number had the issue thrust on them, because of an interracial marriage or an international adoption. Still others were just introducing children into a diverse environment, wondering when and if the timing was right.

But the story that most affected us came from a small town in rural Ohio. Two first-grade teachers, Joy Bowman and Angela Johnson, had agreed to let a professor from Ohio State University, Dr. Jeane Copenhaver-Johnson, observe their classrooms for the year. Of the 33 children, about two-thirds identified themselves as “white” or even “hillbilly,” while the others were black or of mixed-race descent.

It being December—just one month after Copenhaver’s project had begun—the teachers both decided to follow up a few other Santa stories they’d read to their classes with *Twas the Night B’fore Christmas*, Melody Rosales’ retelling of the Clement C. Moore classic.

The room already dotted with holiday paraphernalia, Johnson had all of her first graders gather around the carpet for story time. As she began reading, the kids were excited by the book’s depiction of a family waiting for Santa to come. A couple children burst out

with stories of planned Christmas decorations and expectations for Santa’s arrival to their own houses. A few of the children, however, quietly fidgeted. They seemed puzzled that this storybook was different: in this one, it was a black family all snug in their beds.

Then, there was the famed clatter on the roof. The children leaned in to get their first view of Santa and the sleigh as Johnson turned the page—

And they saw that Santa was black.

“He’s black!” gasped a white little girl.

Another white boy exclaimed, “I thought he was white!”

Immediately, the children began to chatter about the stunning development.

At the ripe old ages of six and seven, the children had no doubt that there was a Real Santa. Of that fact, they were absolutely sure. But suddenly—there was this huge question mark. Could Santa be black? And if so, what did that mean?

While some of the black children were delighted with the idea that Santa could be black, still others were unsure. Some of the white children initially rejected this idea out of hand: a black Santa couldn’t be real. But even the little girl who was the most adamant that the Real Santa must be white considered the possibility that a black Santa could fill in for White Santa if he was hurt. And she still gleefully yelled along with the black Santa’s final “Merry Christmas to All! Y’all Sleep Tight.” Still another of the white girls progressed from initially rejecting a black Santa outright to conceding that maybe Black Santa was a “Helper Santa.” By the end of the story, she was asking if this black Santa couldn’t somehow be a cousin or brother to the white Santa they already knew about. Her strong need that it was a white Santa who came to her house was clearly still intact—but those concessions were quite a switch in about ten pages.

Later that week, Copenhaver returned to see this play out again in another teacher’s class. Similar debates ensued. A couple of the

children offered the idea that perhaps Santa's "mixed with black and white"—perhaps Santa was something in the middle, like an Indian. One boy went with a Two-Santa Hypothesis: White Santa and Black Santa must be friends who take turns visiting children, he concluded. When Bowman made the apparently huge mistake of saying that she'd never seen Santa, the children all quickly corrected her: they knew everyone had seen Santa at the mall. Not that that clarified the situation any.

In both classes, the debate raged off-and-on for a week, until a school party. Santa was coming. And they were all sure it was the Real Santa who was coming.

Then Santa arrived at the party—and he was black. Just like in the picture book.

The black children were exultant—since this proved that Santa was black. Some of the white children said that this black Santa was too thin, and that meant that the Real Santa was the fat white one at Kmart. But one of the white girls retorted that she had met the man and was convinced. Santa was brown.

Amy, one of the white children who'd come up with the mixed-race Santa theory, abandoned that idea upon meeting Black Santa. But she wondered if maybe Black Santa went to the black kids' houses while White Santa delivered the white kids' presents. A black child also wondered if this Santa would take care of the white kids himself, or if perhaps he would pass along their toy requests to a white Santa hidden somewhere else.

Another black child, Brent, still doubted. He really wanted a black Santa to be true, but he wasn't convinced. So he bravely confronted Santa. "There ain't no black Santas!" Brent insisted.

"Son, what color do you see?" Santa replied.

"Black—but under your socks you might not be!"

"Lookit here." Santa pulled up a pant leg, to let Brent see the skin underneath.

A thrilled Brent was sold. "This is a black Santa!" he yelled. "He's got black skin and his black boots are like the white Santa's boots."

A black Santa storybook wasn't enough to change the children's mindsets. It didn't crush every stereotype. Even the black kids who were excited about a black Santa—when Johnson asked them to draw Santa—they still depicted a Santa whose skin was as snowy-white as his beard.

But the shock of the Santa storybook did allow the children to start talking about race in a way that had never before occurred to them. And their questions started a year-long dialogue about race issues.

By the end of the year, the teachers were regularly incorporating books that dealt directly with issues of racism into their reading. Both black and white children were collaborating on book projects on Martin Luther King Jr. And when the kids read one book about the civil rights movement, both a black and a white child noticed that white people were nowhere to be found in the story, and, troubled, they decided to find out just where in history both peoples were.