



# What do White parents want their kids to know about race?

Cari Gillen-O’Neel, an Associate Professor of psychology at Macalester College, interviewed White parents about their racial goals for their children. The resulting research paper, written with colleagues Virginia W. Huynh, Taylor Hazelbaker, and Asya Harrison and entitled “From kindness and diversity to justice and action: White parents’ ethnic-racial socialization goals” was published in the Journal of Family Issues in March 2021.

## BACKGROUND

For children to thrive in our increasingly diverse society, they must be prepared to engage with issues of race and racism. Parents are one of the most powerful socializers of children, yet to date, developmental research has largely acted as though White families’ socialization is “race-neutral”.

In contrast to research with families of color, few studies have examined the racial goals that White families hold for their kids. The limited research that does exist suggests that most White parents either want their kids to be “colorblind” (ignore race), or they are only comfortable engaging with the “feel good” aspects of race (e.g., celebrating diversity). But there have always been White parents who have aimed beyond colorblindness and many of our current events make it difficult to ignore race.

In this study, we intentionally recruited White parents from a time and place where we believed race would be especially salient: in 2018 from a school that includes social justice as part of its mission. Our study aimed to identify the goals these White parents have for their White children’s race-related thoughts, attitudes, emotions, values, and behaviors.

## METHOD

We interviewed 35 White parents (31 mothers and 4 fathers). Their children (who attended the school) ranged in age from Kindergarten to 8th grade.

## RESULTS

- ▶ Parents expressed many unique goals, but these can be grouped into 11 themes. (The %s are the percentage of interviewed families who expressed that goal):
  - ▷ **Privilege Awareness (77%)**: be aware of their racial privilege.
  - ▷ **Take Action (77%)**: take some action to confront or dismantle racism.
  - ▷ **Racism (74%)**: understand that people of color in the United States have experienced racism in the past and continue to experience it today.
  - ▷ **Value Diversity (69%)**: be exposed to and comfortable with people from different backgrounds; appreciate the benefits that diversity can bring.
  - ▷ **Egalitarianism (69%)**: avoid stereotyping and be able to look past race when forming relationships.

- ▷ **Children Lead the Way (51%):** develop their own racial goals and be part of the next generation of racial progress.
  - ▷ **Informed (51%):** be open to learning about race, curious about racial and cultural differences, and informed consumers of racial information.
  - ▷ **Embracing the Difficulty of Being Anti-Racist (49%):** know that becoming anti-racist is not easy; it requires humility and the ability to move past discomfort.
  - ▷ **Empathy (43%):** try to understand others' racial perspectives and experiences.
  - ▷ **Protection (37%):** be protected from racial discomfort and/or information that feels developmentally inappropriate.
  - ▷ **Racial and Ethnic Identity (34%):** develop a racial or ethnic identity.
- ▶ In contrast to previous research, most families did not promote colorblindness because it fails to acknowledge racial inequalities.
  - ▶ In fact, most parents wanted their kids to engage with racial issues and, specifically, with issues of racial inequality (e.g., topics like racism and privilege).
  - ▶ Within these difficult topics, however, parents' goals spanned a range from shallow to deeper engagement. For example, within the goal of privilege awareness, some parents wanted their kids to have vague notions of privilege (e.g., feel "lucky" and appreciate the things that they have), whereas other parents wanted their kids to understand the specific ways that Whiteness in particular has benefitted them and their family.
  - ▶ Our results suggest that some White parents are interested in having difficult dialogues that move beyond kindness and diversity to involve children in their own anti-racist journey.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Although goals are important, what's critical to understand next are the actual steps that parents take to reach these goals. We're analyzing data to answer this question right now!

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- ▶ If you would like to read the full academic paper, email Cari Gillen-O'Neel at [cgilleno@macalester.edu](mailto:cgilleno@macalester.edu)
- ▶ Community and resources for educating young children on race and racism ([www.embracerace.org](http://www.embracerace.org))
- ▶ Research and advocacy group advancing racial justice ([www.raceforward.org](http://www.raceforward.org))
- ▶ Charis Books maintains a great list of books about race and racism ([bit.ly/charis-race](http://bit.ly/charis-race))
- ▶ Antiracism books for kids ([bit.ly/charis-kids](http://bit.ly/charis-kids))
- ▶ Scene on Radio: *Seeing White*, a well-done podcast about Whiteness in America ([www.sceneonradio.org/tag/season-2](http://www.sceneonradio.org/tag/season-2))



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