

## background

Report # 91

Characteristics Of Racial-Ethnic Socialization

December 2007

## Race, Ethnicity And The Developing Child

# How They Learn About Race

*Racial-ethnic messages vary among minority families*

The messages children of racial and ethnic minorities receive about race, culture, identity and discrimination are not only important to their development, but have become an issue of growing importance for America as well. Children of today's minorities — particularly African American and Hispanic children — are expected to account for at least half of the U.S. school population by 2035.<sup>1</sup>

Much remains to be learned about racial-ethnic socialization within minority families. What is known is that how children learn about race and related issues is shaped by many factors ranging from where they are raised to the experiences of those who raise them.

The messages children receive from parents and other caregivers about race, ethnicity and related issues are important. Studies suggest the lessons children learn about race can influence such things as their self-esteem, their attitudes toward others and their ability to cope with discrimination.

Studies also provide insight into the characteristics of racial-ethnic socialization practices, including the types of messages given about culture and identity, the ways children are prepared to face bias, and the strategies parents use to discuss race and related issues with their children.

### Practices Vary

The ways children learn about race and related issues can vary widely among minority families. Studies, however, have identified several key characteristics that tend to shape racial-ethnic socialization practices. These characteristics include:

- **Children's age.** Studies have found that parents' messages about race, ethnicity, and discrimination tend to shift according to children's cognitive abilities and experiences. In one study, for example, African American mothers prepared their older children to cope with discrimination more than they did their younger children.<sup>2</sup>
- **Children's gender.** Several studies of African American families report that boys are more likely to receive messages about racial barriers, while the messages girls receive emphasize racial pride. But other studies report no significant gender differences.
- **Parents' immigration status.** Recent immigrants are more likely to teach their children about their ethnic origin, native language, and traditions than immigrants who have lived in the country longer.<sup>3</sup>
- **Parents' socioeconomic status.** Parents of higher socioeconomic status report more racial-ethnic socialization than lower socioeconomic parents. For example, studies suggest that parents with higher incomes and more years of schooling more frequently teach their children about cultural traditions, pride, and how to cope with discrimination.<sup>4</sup>
- **Neighborhood.** Few studies have looked at the influence of neighborhoods. But those that have suggest the more integrated the neighborhood is, the more likely parents are to teach their children how to cope with discrimination.
- **Experiences with discrimination.** Several studies suggest that parents who experience messages about discrimination at work or in the community are more likely to prepare their

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children for bias and pass on messages of caution about people of other races.

Several themes emerge from recent studies that help define the focus of the types of racial-ethnic socialization practices among minority families.

Some practices teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and culture. Some prepare minority children for discrimination. Others promote a wariness or mistrust of other races and cultures. On the other hand, some practices discourage racial or ethnic group membership and encourage children to value the individual qualities of people they encounter.

**Cultural Socialization**

Cultural socialization occurs when parents either deliberately or implicitly teach their children about racial and ethnic heritage and history and promote cultural customs and racial and ethnic pride. Such practices include talking about cultural figures, celebrating cultural holidays, and exposing children to books, music, and stories related to their race and ethnicity.

Promoting cultural knowledge, pride, and traditions is a key aspect of child rearing among minority parents, studies suggest. And researchers have reported that parents are more likely to engage in cultural socialization than other practices, such as preparing a child to deal with bias.

**Arming Against Prejudice**

It is not clear how widespread the practice of preparing children to cope with discrimination is among minority parents. Few report that they prepare their children for bias when asked open-ended questions about their socialization methods.

However, studies that use more probing in-depth interviews and survey

questions report that parents do discuss issues related to discrimination with their children. In one study, only 5% of African-American parents reported not discussing discrimination in conversations with their children.<sup>5</sup>

**Messages Of Mistrust**

In some cases, minority children are warned to be cautious and wary of people of other races. Such messages differ from the practice of preparing a child for discrimination, because they do not offer children advice on how to manage or cope with discrimination.

Few minority parents mention conveying such messages when surveyed with open-ended questions about their socialization methods. However, studies posing more in-depth interviews suggest that at least a subset of minority parents issue warnings to be wary of other races. One study reported that nearly one-third of African-American parents interviewed

said they convey messages of mistrust of other racial groups.<sup>6</sup>

**Egalitarian Messages**

Although minority parents have reported using such practices to prepare their children to manage prejudice, studies also suggest that some encourage their children to value individual qualities over racial group membership or avoid mentioning race at all.

For example, in interviews and focus groups, African-American parents said some of the messages they convey emphasize values such as hard work, virtue, self-acceptance, and equality.<sup>7</sup> Researchers have also found that teaching children not to notice race is another strategy embraced by some parents, although it is more prominent among white parents than among African American parents.




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## references

*This report is based on the following publications:*

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*References noted in the text follow:*

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. (2004). U.S. interim projections by age, sex, and Hispanic origin. U.S. Census Bureau website: [www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/](http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/)

<sup>2</sup> McHale, S., Crouter, A.C., Kim, J., Burton, L., Davis, K.D., Dotterer, A.M., & Swanson, D. (in press). Mothers' and fathers' racial socialization in African American families: Implications for youth. *Child Development*.

<sup>3</sup> Alba, R.D. (1990). *Ethnic identity: the transformation of White America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, D., & Chen, L. (1997). When and what parents tell children about race: An examination of race-related socialization among African American families. *Applied Developmental Science*, 1, 200-214.

<sup>5</sup> Frabutt, J.A., Walker, A.M., & MacKinnon-Lewis, C. (2002). Racial socialization messages and the quality of mother/child interactions in African American families. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 22, 200-217.

<sup>6</sup> Coard, S.J., Wallace, S.A., Stevenson, H.C., & Brotman, L.M. (2004). Towards culturally relevant preventive interventions: The consideration of racial socialization in parent training with African American families. *American Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 13, 277-293.

<sup>7</sup> Hughes, & DuMont, loc. cit.

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