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Report # 92

How Racial-Ethnic Socialization Affects Children

December 2007

Race, Ethnicity And The Developing Child

Impact Of Racial Socialization

Racial-ethnic messages may influence child outcomes

As more is learned about racial and ethnic socialization, it is becoming clear that what minority children are told about race and related issues and how those messages are delivered can be powerful influences in their lives – shaping, to some degree, their racial and ethnic identities, self-esteem and other important outcomes, including academic achievement, depression and anger management.

Measuring the impact of what children are taught about race and ethnicity remains an underdeveloped field of study. Available studies, however, suggest that racial-ethnic socialization is a important responsibility for families when raising their children.

The ways children learn about race and related issues can vary widely 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. Still others discourage racial or ethnic group membership and encourage children to value the individual qualities of people they encounter.

Some of these practices have consistently been found to result in favorable outcomes among minority children, such as higher self-esteem, while others are tempered by less favorable outcomes, such as a heightened sense of mistrust of people of other races.

Ethnic Identity

Racial-ethnic socialization practices among minority families that promote racial or ethnic identities have largely been found to result in favorable

child outcomes.

Research suggests cultural socialization is the practice that is the most effective in helping children develop their racial and ethnic identity. This practice among families includes conveying to children messages that emphasize racial and ethnic pride, history and cultural traditions.

Several studies of African-American and Mexican adolescents, for example, associate the cultural socialization practices of their parents to more advanced identity development, identity exploration, positive group attitudes and more group-oriented ethnic behaviors. Among younger children, most studies report that cultural socialization helps children develop knowledge about their racial or ethnic group and positive attitudes about that group.

Efforts to prepare minority children for discrimination have also been associated with identity development.

Related Reports

The ways children learn about race and related issues vary widely among minority families, ranging from teaching children about their racial or ethnic heritage to preparing them to cope with discrimination.

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Advanced stages of racial-ethnic identity development, for example, are more often found among adolescents who strongly believe that teaching about racism is important.¹

Self-Esteem

The self-esteem of minority adolescents may be sensitive to the racial-ethnic messages they receive from their parents.

Studies report that messages about race and culture intended to prepare minority children for discrimination, as well as certain cultural socialization practices, are associated with higher family self-esteem.

Cultural socialization practices within families have also been associated with higher peer self-esteem.

However, parent messages that encourage minority children to blend with the mainstream culture have in some cases been associated with children having lower self-esteem in school.²

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Coping With Prejudice

The efforts of minority parents to prepare their children to deal with prejudice and discrimination have been found to influence how children handle those situations.

Studies suggest that minority adolescents whose parents discuss discrimination with them are more likely to use effective ways of dealing with it, such as seeking support and direct problem solving strategies, rather than ineffective coping strategies, such as engaging in verbal banter.³

Researchers also report that children's experiences with discrimination are significantly associated with poorer mental health outcomes only among those who do not receive racial-ethnic socialization messages from their parents.⁴

However, studies that associate such protective outcomes with preparing minority children to cope with bias are tempered by findings that some children learn to expect discrimination and develop a mistrust of other races.

Psychosocial Outcomes

In studies involving minority adolescents, researchers report finding an association between some racial-ethnic socialization practices used by their parents and psychosocial outcomes, such as depression, anger management and fighting.

The practice of cultural socialization tends to be protective, according to researchers. But messages that focus on discrimination may result in both protective outcomes and unfavorable psychosocial outcomes.

For example, one study found that African-American boys who believed in emphasizing cultural pride and heritage were better able to control anger than those who focused on discrimination.⁵

However, another study reported that Asian and African-American adolescents who expected to be discriminated against showed more symptoms of depression and had more conflicts with their parents than those who did not have such expectations.⁶

Academic Outcomes

Few studies have examined whether parents' racial-ethnic socialization practices influence their children's academic outcomes and the findings of those that have addressed the issue are mixed.

Other studies, however, suggest that such practices have the potential to influence a child's learning and school performance. For example, positive eth-

nic identity and high self-esteem have both been associated with better academic outcomes among children.⁷

Policy Implications

Racial-ethnic socialization among minority families is a complex issue and an emerging field of study. Although much remains to be learned about this process, studies suggest that what children are taught about race and related issues influence, to some degree, important outcomes in their lives.

This process is gaining importance in light of estimates that today's minorities will account for as much as half of the U.S. school population by 2035.⁸



references

This report is based on the following publication:

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¹ Stevenson, H.C. (1995). Relationship of adolescent perceptions of racial socialization to racial identity. *Journal of Black Psychology, 21*, 49-70.

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⁴ Fischer, A.R., & Shaw, C.M. (1999). African Americans' mental health and perceptions of racist discrimination: The moderating effects of racial socialization experiences and self-esteem. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 46*, 395-407.

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⁸ 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/

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