

Racism and Young Children: What Does the Research Say?

Louise Derman-Sparks states, “By 2 ½, children are beginning to be aware of cultural aspects of gender and ethnic identity.” (Derman-Sparks, 1989, p. 24) In “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*” Beverly Daniel Tatum comments,

Questions and confusion about racial issues begin early. Though adults often talk about the “colorblindness” of children, the fact is that children as young as three do notice physical differences such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape of one’s facial features. (Tatum, 1997, p. 32)

Clearly, ideas about race are communicated to young children. Feagin also documents this communication. “Much learning about white superiority and black inferiority comes from informal lessons learned as whites grow up and mature, as children at home and school and as adults socializing with relatives and friends. . . . However, a recent study of young white children in a preschool setting found that even three-to-four-year-olds interact with children of other racial groups using clear and often sophisticated understandings of racist ideas and epithets.” (Feagin, 2000, p. 130-131) Beverly Daniel Tatum notes that parents, afraid of saying something wrong often respond to preschoolers’ questions about race by silencing the child. She observes, “Children who have been silenced often enough learn not to talk about race publicly. Their questions don’t go away, they just go unasked.” (Tatum, 1997, p. 36)

Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin discuss how young children behave differently when adults are not present in *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*. Van Ausdale developed a research protocol “. . . to discover how children themselves perpetuated racial and ethnic patterns, away from the prying eyes and controlling activities of adults.” (Van Ausdale, 2001, p. 2) She observed three-, four, and five-year-olds in a day care setting over a year’s time.

She concluded “. . . three-, four-, and five-year-olds often hold a solid and applied understanding of the dynamics of race.” (Van Ausdale, 2001, p. 2)

Van Ausdale maintains the major theories of child development undergird a belief that young children are developmentally incapable of understanding race and therefore cannot engage in racist behavior. However during her research she observed behavior that clearly used race as a tool to isolate and hurt other children. She attributes this to children being exposed to the systemic racism in United States culture in general.

In our experience, children’s active construction of racial and ethnic meanings and attitudes occurs early and is in important ways very similar to the meanings and attitudes held by adult Americans. Despite the sometime contradictory nature of research findings, most researchers agree that the majority of children have a solid conception of racial and ethnic distinctions by the time they are about six. . . . Our data extend this finding to include much younger children. Well before they can speak clearly, children are exposed to racial and ethnic ideas through their immersion in and observation of the large social world. Since racism exists at all levels of society and is interwoven in all aspects of American social life, it is virtually impossible for alert young children either to miss or ignore it. Far from being oblivious to racial group and racism, children are inundated with it from the moment they enter society.

(Van Ausdale, 2001, p. 189-190)

This “immersion” (Van Ausdale, 2001, p.190) affects children of European-American heritage as well as Children of Color. “Not surprisingly, all children in this society learn at an early age that, generally speaking, whiteness is privileged and darkness is not--and thus their choices in this regard are usually not surprising.” (Van Ausdale, 2001, p. 57)

Racism learned by European-American children at a young age affects how they view People of Color as adults.

The concepts and categories learned as children shape how we experience the world around us, and these concepts and categories – including stereotypes and prejudices – are usually delineated in sets of words and phrases. When racially coded language is embedded in white minds, it and its associated concepts often guide everyday thinking and behavior. (Feagin, 2000, p. 119)

Van Ausdale and Feagin believe there are ways adults can change young children's unexamined absorption of racism. They suggest teachers and parents examine their own complicity in racism, take seriously actions and words from young children that seem to be racist, expose young children to multiracial/multicultural events, and lift up stories of people who are working for justice. They point out that friendships between children affect how children will view people different from themselves.

The friendship and peer relationships that children develop in their earliest years can generate or reinforce stereotyping or intolerance based on racial or ethnic origins. It can also facilitate and encourage friendship and mutual social esteem...Early friendships are often precursors of relationships formed later in children's lives. How and with whom children form relationships at this stage can influence how and with whom they will choose to affiliate with as they grow up.

(Van Ausdale, 2001, p. 126-127)

Compiled by Theresa V. Lee, 2008