

ESSAY

Talking to young children about race: Using research evidence to move the needle in early childhood educational practice and policy

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Abstract

This essay tells the story of a unique collaboration among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to create and disseminate *Early Risers*, a podcast devoted to supporting racial equity in early childhood. *Early Risers* leverages research evidence to debunk common myths about how children learn about race. It showcases evidence-informed practices for teaching young children about race and racism and for supporting positive racial identity. I share lessons learned about how research can educate caregivers, early childhood educators, administrators, and policymakers on the importance of creating pathways toward conversations about race and racism. Our hope is that *Early Risers* can serve as a model for researcher–practitioner–policymaker collaboration to innovate and “wake up” the early childhood field.

INTRODUCTION

As of November 1, 2023, 40 race-related “gag orders” became legal in 21 states. These laws prevent educators from using specific books or teaching about certain race-based topics such as slavery and its legacy. These laws mark a pivot from the historic racial justice protests that emerged after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Their message is clear: many Americans do not want to talk about race. Growing up as an African American woman in Minnesota, I have long been aware of a breed of racism shrouded in secrecy and smiles. For my entire career, I have worked alongside dedicated and caring people with brilliant and creative ideas about early childhood development who care for diverse families and communities and the development of policies to support them—but who struggle to speak directly about race or racism. There were times I believed this was a defense mechanism to keep from having painful conversations. Nonjudgmental, constructive conversations about race are crucial, however. If we teach children to have these conversations, they could help dismantle the structures and systems that perpetuate racism. In conjunction with Little Moments Count, a statewide collaborative of organizations devoted to promoting parental and community investment in early child development, and Minnesota Public Radio,

I created a podcast, *Early Risers: Waking up to Racial Equity in Early Childhood* (Haulcy, 2021).

Early Risers leverages research evidence to debunk common myths about how children learn about race. It provides language for talking to young children about race. The podcast has provided a forum for parents, educators, and others who may feel uncomfortable talking about race but want to learn to guide children to have positive, affirming conversations that teach them that all people are special and gifted and that no race has supremacy over another. On emotionally charged topics such as race, research can be extremely helpful in debunking myths. It cuts through the emotions and can help clear a path forward.

In this essay, I describe the *Early Risers* journey as an example of productive collaboration among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. The *Early Risers* journey is one that is rooted in lived experience and research, supported by community, and lifted up by practitioners and policymakers.

THE STORY OF *EARLY RISERS*

I started *Early Risers* having worked in early childhood communities for over 20 years and having experienced countless meetings with early childhood educators,

administrators, state administrators, and elected officials. I knew what I was hearing in these spaces, and I knew much of it was not true. I knew I needed to call on experts to debunk myths about how children learn about race and to explain the positive aspects of talking about race with young children. At the time, I worked for Think Small, one of the collaborating organizations of the Little Moments Count statewide collaborative. We aimed to encourage parents and caregivers across the state of Minnesota to talk, read, sing, and play with their children to stimulate brain development. In 2020, Little Moments Count had just begun to cultivate a relationship with Minnesota Public Radio. One of my first and most ambitious assignments was to launch—and find funding for—a new podcast built on a blog post I wrote after the murder of George Floyd, *Wake Up Everybody* (Haulcy, 2020). *Wake Up* was an open letter to the early childhood community about how we need to get serious about equity because our lack of movement on this issue was killing Black people. I began to look for researchers and practitioners conducting innovative work in early childhood to combat racism.

The *Early Risers* podcast dropped its first episode in the middle of Derrick Chauvin's trial (for the murder of George Floyd) in 2021. On the podcast, I have interviewed professors, scientists, children's book authors, and others. Season Four exclusively featured parents of all races. We discussed their very personal encounters and conversations they have had with their children about race. Currently in the midst of Season Five, I am talking to educators, coaches, and researchers specifically about creating anti-biased classrooms.

LEVERAGING RESEARCH EVIDENCE TO DEBUNK MYTHS

My *Early Risers* conversations have debunked myths. For example, at the Think Small organization, I would often hear early childhood educators and caregivers say that children do not see race or color in other people and therefore that there is no reason to teach children how to talk about race—it is a nonissue for them. Another myth I often hear is that if we talk to young children about race, it will make them racist. Rather, we should wait until children get older, perhaps school-aged, when they might be exposed to a more diverse group of people.

This is not what the research tells us. For example, one study found that 3-month-old infants demonstrated a significant preference for faces from their own ethnic group (Kelly et al., 2005). Other research evidence points to toddlers as young as 2 years old using racial categories to reason about people's behaviors (Hirschfeld, 2008). Three- to five-year-olds not only categorize people by race but also express racial bias (Aboud, 2008). In *Early Risers* episode 19, “How

Babies Start to Learn about Race,” I interviewed Dr. Charisse Pickron of the University of Minnesota. She described her research on visual attention that showed 10-month-olds gazing longer into the eyes of same race people than those of a different race, suggesting a more intimate connection to those of the same race (Pickron et al., 2017).

In *Early Risers* episode 15, “Bias and the Developing Brain,” I interviewed Dr. Damien Fair of the University of Minnesota about his research using functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to track brain development during the first 1000 days of life. During this period, the child's experiences and environment contribute to neuronal “chipping” and “pruning” that in turn facilitate mental processing and interpretations, including biased perceptions. For instance, by age six, many children have developed an association between Black faces and negative words (Todd et al., 2016). Thus, during their first years, children learn to recognize race and put value to it.

Both White children and young children of color may, moreover, “internalize” racist values. For example, African American psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark's 1940's doll studies found that Black children overwhelmingly preferred to play with a White doll (Clark & Clark, 1947). Findings from this study supported the winning arguments in the landmark 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* case banning racial segregation in public schools. In an upcoming *Early Risers* episode, I will interview Dr. Toni Sturdivant of Texas A&M University about her research with a revised doll test in which children still rarely preferred the Black doll. Moreover, when children did play with the Black doll, they mistreated her (Sturdivant, 2020).

Talking about race to both young White children and young children of color is important, although for different reasons. White children need to learn that all children are special and there is no one superior race. For children of color, it is imperative to learn that they are capable and special regardless of what they might hear from their peers and adults. In addition, it is imperative to talk about race and racism to young children of color in order to help them process racialized incidents and not internalize racism.

EVIDENCE-INFORMED PROMISING PRACTICES

Emerging promising practices create spaces for young children to talk about race and racism. For example, the *Before Racism* program used research to develop an anti-bias curriculum for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (*Before Racism*, 2022). The program uses a facilitator coach model to work with teachers, child care providers, and parents to implement science-based practices in the classroom. The program began

in 2022 and is now in 12 pilot sites across the county. Initial evaluation has shown one of the most beneficial parts of the program is educators' increased confidence in both addressing and preventing racial bias in the classroom (Before Racism, 2023).

Dr. Nate Chomilo, general pediatrician and member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Minority Health Equity and Inclusion, leads another promising practice that we discussed on *Early Risers*, that of talking about racism with parents and caregivers during well child pediatric visits. For example, Dr. Chomilo has reflected with parents on how locking one's car doors when driving through certain neighborhoods can influence a child's perception of the people who live in that neighborhood. Dr. Chomilo not only talks about racism during pediatric visits but also encourages other pediatricians to do the same.

To combat internalized racism of African American children, Dr. Aisha White directs the Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (PRIDE) program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education (PRIDE, 2016). Positive racial identity is found in individuals and communities who understand the racial group they belong to, feel good about the fact they belong to a particular race, and understand these positive feelings. In addition, individuals have positive feelings about their physical traits and features.

The PRIDE program was initially developed in response to a 2016 study demonstrating vastly different experiences in the racial identity development of White young children and young children of color in Pittsburgh along with an urgent need for more resources and supports for African American children. The resulting program grew out of conversations with parents, teachers, and community members. It now includes a wide array of services: Parent Village, a 6-week program for parents and caregivers of Black children blending child development information with Africana history and culture by using interactive activities such as drumming and dancing; a speaker series to engage the public on issues of race and young children; professional development sessions held around Pittsburgh that encourage participants to examine race in their lives and those they serve; 9-month teacher cohorts that provide space for teachers to learn about resources to support young children's positive racial identity development; and a podcast called *In My Skin* (PRIDE, n.d) which examines the effects of racism and implicit bias on young children.

LESSONS LEARNED

What I have learned from talking to researchers and many other guests on *Early Risers* is that because children see color, we are able to talk with them about

it. Very young children are asking questions about race and pointing out differences in color and body features, which is developmentally appropriate. Often, however, adults feel uncomfortable and shut the conversation down. When adults talk to children about race, we help them contextualize it and learn to discuss it with peers. We also show children that talking and asking about race is OK. What I have also learned is that the research community has a wealth of knowledge and resources that practitioners can access to help us to create conversations with young children about race. The research can also help to educate caregivers, early childhood educators, administrators, and policymakers on the importance of creating space and pathways *toward* conversations about race and racism and *away from* race-related "gag orders." Research shows us this is not only developmentally appropriate but also that we are doing children a disservice if we leave them to learn about race from adults' and peers' implicit biases and other environmental cues. This research also supports giving parents and early childhood educators the time and space to unpack their own considerations about race so they can thoughtfully plan how to discuss race and racism with young children. The good news is that people are listening to this conversation.

CONCLUSION

Since 2021, *Early Risers* has produced 33 episodes. It has blossomed to include discussion guides for each episode, an annual audio hour aired on affiliate National Public Radio stations across the country, social media posts and engagement, live in-person events at the Minnesota State Fair, and speaking engagements. The *Early Risers* page on The Little Moments Count website is the most visited page outside of the home page. We are already discussing Season Six.

I now view a podcast as a good medium for teaching people about something uncomfortable. They can listen in the comfort of their own home and download the resources and discussion guides to share as they feel comfortable. Several professors of early childhood and policy have used *Early Risers* episodes in their coursework. I had the pleasure of making an invited visit to Minnesota state Representative Dave Pinto's course at the Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota, during which time students described their favorite podcast episodes and rich conversation ensued throughout the class.

Early Risers has shown how important it is to have interdisciplinary relationships. I was initially able to launch *Early Risers* quickly because of the many

relationships I had built in a 30-year career with researchers, politicians, and those with lived experience. It is easy to keep your head down and just do your job, but change rarely happens while your head is down. It is important to reach out and strategically get to know people of other disciplines with the thought that, “one day this person might be able to help me, and I could perhaps help them.” Partnership and collaboration are key to innovation. We hope that *Early Risers* can serve as a model for researcher-practitioner-policy maker collaboration to innovate and “wake up” the early childhood field.

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