"Finally! Jennifer Harvey provides a long-awaited and much-needed answer to a question often posed by white antiracist allies: How do we raise our children to be allies in the struggle against racism? *Raising White Kids* provides practical advice and examples for parents that are well-grounded in the scholarship on racial identity and racial socialization. It would be a mistake, however, to think that this book is only for parents of white children. It is a critical resource for educators whose efforts to teach about racial oppression are routinely hampered by the wide knowledge gap between white students and students of color. Harvey helps faculty to understand why white students often need intense remediation around issues of race and racism, and provides both faculty and students with language and tools to grapple with the culture shock that comes with learning about racism for the first time."

—**Chanequa Walker-Barnes**, PhD, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, McAfee School of Theology

"*Raising White Kids* asks parents to reconsider the conventional yet failed strategies of promoting colorblindness and valuing diversity (without addressing whiteness), which prove inadequate in the face of our racial crisis by ignoring or white-washing racial difference. Instead, Harvey proposes a 'race-conscious' approach to raising white children that helps children not only to perceive racism in ways a colorblind approach veils but also to contest racism through directly engaging with children about race and racial injustice—early and often. Combining research on child development with her extensive scholarship on racial formation and practices of antiracism, Harvey has written an easily readable book full of examples and concrete practices that helps parents give their children the tools they need to develop a healthy white racial identity. *Raising White Kids* is urgent, important, and practical reading for anyone involved in the rearing of white children."

—**Dr. Kristopher Norris**, Visiting Distinguished Professor of Public Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

FOREWORD BY **TIM WISE**

Author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*

RAISING WHITE KIDS

BRINGING UP CHILDREN
IN A **RACIALLY UNJUST AMERICA**

JENNIFER HARVEY

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GOOD PARENTS, HARD CONVERSATIONS

Standing outside the bathroom at Stedman Elementary where I was in first grade, my friend J. walked up to me. "You know, Jenny," she said. "We should start a white girls club." I must have looked as confused as I felt, because she continued, "You know. Because there are only six white girls in this class."

I had never before considered such a thing. Now, I looked down at my arm. And for the first time in my six years of life it occurred to me that's exactly what I was: a white girl. This new recognition started to wash over me. But I had no time to think about what it might mean before we were sharply interrupted.

"Girls, that's enough!" snapped Ms. B., our teacher who had overheard our exchange. Then more fiercely, "I don't ever want to hear you talk like that again!"

At such a young age, having had not a single adult talk openly about race and its potential meanings in my

life, I had no clue what J. and I had done wrong that afternoon. But I knew we had said or done something very, very wrong. More important, I was so ashamed by the rebuke we received from Ms. B. (also white)—a teacher I adored—that I was determined to not go near that something again.

The United States is on a rapid path of becoming one of the most racially diverse nations in the world. It's also a nation full of racial tension. These two realities existing at the same time creates a challenging paradox for parents who want to equip their children to be active and able participants in a multiracial, pluralistic society.

The difficulties faced by parents of white children, however, are different from those faced by parents of children of color. That truth is not something we talk about very often in public conversations about race. But it's true nonetheless. Being committed to equity and justice while living in a society that is not only racially unjust and deeply segregated, but which privileges your racial group at the same time, creates unique conundrums for white people. These conundrums begin early in life and impact the racial development of white children in powerful ways.

How should parents best navigate the many complex situations race creates for us? Should we teach our children to be "color-blind"? Or should we teach them to notice race (and, if so, how)? What strategies will help our children learn to function well in a diverse nation? What roles do we want them to

play in addressing racism when they encounter it? How do we equip them for these roles? How do we talk about race honestly with our children, which means naming white privilege as well as many hard truths about what white people have done, without making our children feel bad about being white? Most important, how do we do any of this in age-appropriate ways?

There are so many questions here. But as difficult as these questions are, they bring into view issues parents need to engage with intention and care if we are raising white children. These questions were important since long before the civil rights movement. But the last three years in the United States have made it painfully obvious that they are urgent for the good of this nation and our collective future as a society.

Racial Tension in the United States

Many US Americans were stunned when they woke up to the news the morning of August 10, 2014. Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis most of us had never heard of, was engulfed in chaos. In the weeks that followed, the images that poured out of Ferguson—of fire, smoke, protests, riot-geared police, and young people fleeing tear gas—were almost indistinguishable from those that poured out of Selma, Alabama, in 1965, or Detroit, Michigan, in 1967.

Ferguson didn't come out of nowhere, and it's not as if we've had peace and justice from the late 1960s until now. I vividly remember waking up in Santa Barbara, California, to news coming out of Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Only two hours south of where I was a college student, swaths of the city

had erupted in rebellion after an all-white jury exonerated the police officers who had brutally beaten Rodney King, despite their violence having been caught on tape. I remember joining the thousands upon thousands who poured into the New York City streets in 1999 after four police officers killed Amadou Diallo—an unarmed Bronx resident coming peacefully home after a long day's work—in a hail of forty-one bullets. These officers, too, were declared not guilty.

But in the years since Ferguson, pervasive racial tension in the United States has been exposed at new levels. A steady stream of incidents involving police officers killing unarmed African American men and children have continued to flood public awareness. Racial divisions between whites and Blacks, but also between whites and other whites, have intensified. Public debate over the meanings of such deaths has been rancorous, with the gap between those who see such killings as racially motivated and those who do not deep, wide, and polarized.

Others can't figure out if they're supposed to notice race (that is, value diversity) or be color-blind (that is, not see it).

The turmoil is palpable. In the summer of 2015 nine African American Christians in Charleston, South Carolina, were massacred by a young white man during a Bible study in their church. A national discussion ensued over the presence of the Confederate flag at the South Carolina courthouse. Then, in 2016, in one summer week police killed two Black men as videotape rolled, communities across

the nation erupted in furious protest, and a sniper killed seven police officers at a massive, peaceful rally in Dallas, Texas. That same summer we were a year into a presidential campaign that was not merely divisive, but which further exacerbated racial tensions and in which accusations of racism came to take center stage.

When the election was over, thousands of people protested the outcome and many of the protests emphasized race. Hundreds of high school students, many too young to vote, walked out of school to denounce the rhetoric of the president-elect with chants of "No justice, no peace!" "Black Lives Matter," and "Undocumented and unafraid!" Schools reported an uptick in racial harassment. White students made jokes to Latino/a students about the deportations to come or—as a teacher friend of mine experienced in his school in Iowa—mused within earshot of African American students as to whether the election means "we get to have slavery again."

Racial trouble—violence, division, mistrust, and unrest—is alive and well. It will surely remain so for some time to come.

For many white US Americans, this turmoil has generated an acute awareness of how much work remains undone. Many of these same folks, whites who are committed to equality, are eager to be part of solutions to our racial trouble. At the same time, many of us are not sure what to do. The question "What do we do?" has been asked by equality-committed white people with increasing frequency in public discussions about race since we woke up to Ferguson. This book offers one constructive response to that question.

The response *Raising White Kids* offers is very specific. At the very least, the current racial crisis has made clear that the strategies we have used for a long time in the hopes of creating just and diverse communities have failed us. Among the many arenas of social life in which this question urgently needs to be addressed, a powerful and formative, but easily overlooked one is the arena of raising white children. The difficult reality is this: the dominant strategies the nation as a whole has tried are the same ones that equality- and justice-minded parents of white children have used since the civil rights era in the hope of teaching tolerance, fairness, equality and justice. And, as with the nation as a whole, these strategies have proven themselves inadequate to the task of facing the racial challenges with which we are living in this nation.

This recognition may be difficult to acknowledge. It may even be painful. But it need not be the end of the story. If the tried and true has not worked, then it's time for something new.

Let's Talk About Bringing Up Children

A multiracial group of students sit together in a high school or college classroom. The teacher walks in and says, "Today we're going to start our unit on race." White students who were previously talkative and engaged suddenly become quiet and withdrawn. A few look like deer in headlights.

In more than a decade of teaching ethics to college students, I have seen such fear and silence fall across a college classroom more times than I can count. In fact, my white students find it

easier to talk about the controversial topic of abortion than they do race. The students depicted in this classroom story are prime examples of the long-term consequences of adults' inadequate racial engagement with white children.

Parents of Black, Latino/a and other children of color have to teach their children about race as a basic matter of their children's well-being and survival, usually from very young ages.* Consider a micro-level example: hearing a racial epithet on the playground becomes a moment in which these parents have to teach something explicit about race, taking into account their child's age. They must do so even if the children using or hearing the epithet have no clue what it means. Or consider a macro-level example: these same parents know they have to sit their children down and have "the talk" at some point. They have to explain to their children, in the hopes of creating safety,

* You may notice that throughout this book, I never capitalize *white* but I always capitalize *Black*. This may seem to be either an unfair, or at least a grammatically inappropriate nonparallel use of racial terms. But white identity and Black identity are not parallels. And while language is never perfect, it's my sense that this is the best way to indicate these different identities. As will become clear in later chapters, African American communities have created Black identity as a conscious, collective, intentional, historical, and constructive way to self-identify. While different writers make different choices, many of the African American thinkers I am most indebted to use Black and not black. In contrast, to this point in US racial history, white is not a similarly constructive, conscious, and collective identity that has been claimed—at least not for the purposes of antiracism. Thus, I always indicate white with the lowercase *w*.

how to conduct themselves if or when they encounter police.

In countless day-to-day life moments, parents of children of color make difficult choices about when, what, and how much to say. They consider how to be effective in making their children aware of US racial realities and dangers, while simultaneously nurturing their children's emotional resilience and a healthy sense of racial identity. They navigate a difficult path: not damaging their child's psyche by causing him/her to internalize the notion that because others perceive or treat him/her negatively there must, in fact, be something negative about themselves, without sugarcoating the truth that their children will experience racialized and racist encounters as they go about their daily lives. To sugarcoat leaves their children more vulnerable than they already are.

Such nuanced, complex, challenging conversations are a fundamental necessity of parenting children of color. No obvious parallels exist for white families. As a result, racial conversations in white families tend to be one-dimensional.

In contrast to "the talk," for example, a one-dimensional teaching becomes "police are safe; go find one if you are in trouble." In contrast to "we should all be equal, we all have equal worth, but we don't yet all experience equality," a one-dimensional teaching becomes "we are all equal."

The relatively poor quality of racial conversations between white parents and their children is a key reason my white students look like deer in headlights. For white students in my college classroom the fear is different from what students of color may experience. Because, prior to this point, they are less

likely to have been actively nurtured in their understanding of race and its meaning in their lives, white students are generally far, far behind their peers of color. Their racial understanding is underdeveloped, at best, deeply confused at worst. Their experience is something like having only ever been taught basic addition and suddenly being thrown into a calculus class.

Imagine being told your entire life that the most important thing you need to know about race in your daily life experience is that "we're all equal." Then, imagine being suddenly expected at the age of nineteen to make sense out of a news story coming out of Ferguson, let alone be an informed and able discussant in a high school or college classroom about social realities that make clear *such equality is actually not the case*. Some of these white students struggle to hear their peers' life experiences or engage data about race in the United States because they have only been taught that we're all, at core, the same. Some of them are afraid to talk because they worry they'll say something racist. This is understandable. They've had little practice talking about race openly. Some believe they have little to offer to the conversation. Others can't figure out if they're supposed to notice race (that is, value diversity) or be color-blind (that is, not see it).

These students are justified in all of this worry and confusion. After all, a child who's only been taught addition *is* going to fail calculus! By being placed in such a class unequipped, that child has been set up by adults to fail.

Meanwhile, the harms caused by inadequate attention to the development of white racial identity in our children's lives

run even deeper than the fears that show up in this classroom discussion. These same young people are often aware that racial tensions exist. Many of them know or sense that these tensions have to do with injustices white people have committed. Such awareness—combined with the absence of nuanced, supportive, complex discussions—has long since impacted these young white people. It shows up as anxiety, guilt, cognitive dissonance, or even anger when race does come up. White youth struggle to find or experience a truly meaningful place from which to participate fully in conversations about diversity and multiculturalism, even while they get pressure from adults to do so as they grow older.

Racial development is no different than physical, intellectual, or emotional development.

On top of all of this, that whites are behind when it comes to race makes racial tensions worse. For example, when these same white students are reluctant to talk about, are ill-equipped to understand, or show anxiety and resistance to honest engagement with race, students of color in the room get the message that their white peers just don't care. Such white reactions are just further evidence to them that most white people are, in fact, "racist."

Whether or not this is a fair interpretation is irrelevant. The impact of such a perception is profound. Students of color become frustrated and angry that their white peers won't engage. Their frustration is understandable given the

extent to which racism is a life-or-death social reality for them. Meanwhile, most students of color have lots of firsthand experience by the age of nineteen that makes it safe to presume whites don't and don't really want to understand the realities they face. At the end of the day, one disastrous result of white people being so far behind is deeper racial alienation and greater misunderstanding still.

So Now What?

The questions that became more obviously urgent beginning in the fall of 2014 weren't actually new. Race in the United States has long been loaded. My childhood experience with Ms. B. illustrates just how loaded race can be. That experience also illustrates how powerfully adults' engagement impacts children.

Ms. B.'s response to me and my friend J. came from a well-intentioned place. She was afraid something "bad" was going on. The exchange she overheard sounded to her like J. and I were making observations that were, or had the potential to become, racist.

As an educator and a white American who valued equality, Ms. B. was right to intervene in a six-year-old reasoning process that (1) noticed race and (2) concluded racial difference is a good reason to stick with one's own kind. But her desire to make clear that what we were contemplating was unacceptable was accompanied by so much anxiety that Ms. B. silenced what was actually a developmentally innocent exploration. Her failure to come back later and help us understand why it so upset her made that silence even worse.

Ironically, Ms. B.'s response made more likely the very results she was hoping to avoid. Her reaction transmitted adult racial tension to J. and me. Without age-appropriate support to understand, we became vulnerable to internalizing this tension. We became likely to learn that staying on our "side" of the racial divide was the safest thing to do. We became unlikely to engage adults with our questions, experiences, and observations about race. In this, as in so many other transactions like it, such teachings are transmitted without any racial words being used by the adult at all.

It's not exactly that our experience made J. and me more likely to become racist. But we learned clearly that something hard, bad, even scary hovered around this issue of skin color and difference. And that learning, over time, translates into behavior that looks like—or may become or cause—racial division, tension, or even overt racism.

This story surfaces one of the challenges that exist in the racially fraught moments parents (and teachers and other important caregivers) may encounter with children of diverse racial groups and identities. Many parents recognize and experience these challenges. Indeed, few parents can fail to identify with the anxiety of being in Ms. B.'s shoes. But we may not realize that ineffective handling of many small racial encounters like this one, over time, has very serious long-term consequences.

Whether they begin as early (or even earlier) as first grade in an encounter outside a lavatory, or show up, predictably, among white college students, such cycles and dynamics need

not remain as they are. White parents have significant power to positively intervene in and fundamentally change them.

Racial development is no different than physical, intellectual, or emotional development. Children develop physically, intellectually, or emotionally regardless of what kind of attention their parents offer them. But the outcomes are dramatically different depending on the kind of attention they are given. So it is with racial development, which takes place whether parents nurture it or not. In terms of racial development, then, the one-dimensional conversations that tend to take place in white households are the equivalent of having offered our children sugar ("we're all the same underneath our skin") when they need protein- and vitamin-rich food ("we believe in equality and it's important to figure out how to stand up for that when it's not there").

But parents today may have been raised on Frosted Flakes and still decide to learn about nutrition and commit to healthier eating once they have had children. We who are parents of white children can similarly learn about racial development and commit to practices that offer racial nurture. We can come to understand the urgency of offering our children the tools they need to develop a healthy white racial identity. We can learn how to actually offer them. *Raising White Kids* is a book that supports such parents in doing so.

We face difficult and complex racial realities in this nation today. The challenges will not be overcome quickly or with one dramatic solution. It will certainly take more than different parenting strategies in white families to create a just racial future.

It will take more than courageous teachers engaging race and racism directly with their young students. We have a very long way to go. But the practices explored in this book can move us a significant distance in the right direction. In other words, we may have far to go, but *we can go.*

What to Expect from This Book

It's probably already obvious that I wrote *Raising White Kids* primarily with parents in mind. Part of the reason I did so is because of my own journey. I've worked on and for antiracism and the role of white people in it for a long time. But becoming a parent changed so much about what I thought I knew. I realized how few of the strategies I relied on helped me engage my children, and how many new strategies I desperately needed. Meanwhile, I'm also aware that parents and primary caretakers really are on the front lines in terms of the most urgent and difficult dimensions of bringing up white children in a racially unjust nation. Day in and day out, children in our lives are learning about race, and we must be ready to engage them if we want them to learn the right things.

Why not all kids? Shouldn't racial justice matters address everybody?

Yet I've also learned a lot about youth, whiteness, and antiracism through my work as a teacher. And I know the impact teachers can have. In addition, children are deeply and powerfully impacted by an array of beloved adults besides parents. Godparents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, religious education teachers, and so many others bear an important responsibility when it comes to bringing up white children for racial justice. All of us who are adults can make a significant and positive impact in the lives of white children who are not our own.

So the focus of this book and the language primarily used within it refers to *parents*. At the same time, I'm clear this book is potentially meaningful for anyone who has children in their lives (including children of color who may themselves have white friends) and I've written it with that awareness. The working principles and many of the examples shared here are easily applied to a variety of adult-children relationships. It's just as vital that any adult committed to racial justice who has significant relationships with white children learn these approaches as it is for their parents. It also may be the case that parents who engage the content here will find they want to share this book with other adults who have relationships with their own children.

At this point, yet a different matter in terms of reader expectations needs to be addressed. It may be the case, in fact, that the specificity of this book—raising *white* kids—already raised a few eyebrows. Why not all kids? Shouldn't racial justice matters address everybody?

The reality is that the challenges addressed and insights offered here simply can't be generalized. They just don't apply in the same way to *all* children. (The reasons this is the case will become more obvious the farther we go.) Because the quandaries of being white are different than those posed by being of

color, therefore, this book is written specifically for parents of white children, and other caregivers and teachers involved in bringing up white kids.

But the larger truth is that committing to nurturing healthy white racial identity is not ultimately about or for the good of white children only. When we bring up white children—who grow to be white teenagers, twentysomethings, full-blown adults—who are able, engaged, and high-functioning when it comes to matters of race, diversity, and, most important, anti-racism, we are parenting in ways that are good for everyone's children.

Raising White Kids takes on the two approaches to race that impact the ways adults engage white children the most: that is, strategies of color-blindness and diversity. It explains precisely why color-blind teaching, the most prevalent approach, has failed. It pays attention to the kinds of anxieties that overt discussions of race (like those seen in my encounter with Ms. B.) elicit in white adults. It points out the silence and silencing responses that both cause color-blind teaching, as well as becoming the outcomes to which color-blind teaching leads.

This book also explores the complexities that exist when we teach white children they should value diversity. Diversity approaches have not overtaken color-blindness as the dominant approach to race. But a focus on diversity has been on the rise in recent years, especially in schools. Teaching children they should embrace and celebrate difference—or "value diversity"—is a significant improvement over color-blind teaching. But it, too, is inadequate, largely because it doesn't address

some of the unique issues faced by whites when we move past color-blindness.

For example, I've heard countless parents attempting to engage issues of race with their children share experiences and concerns such as these:

> *"I worry about what to say to my second-grader about racism. He has lots of Black friends. I don't want him to start to treat them as being somehow different. I also don't want to say something to him about racism that then he repeats to his friends in a way that hurts them."*

> *"I don't want to lie to my kids about the United States. But how do I talk about its violent history—such as what slavery or treatment of Native Americans was like? I don't even let my kids watch violent TV."*

> *"I've gone out of my way to put my kids in diverse situations their entire lives. And yet the older they've gotten, the whiter their friend group seems to get. I don't really know what's going on, let alone what to do about it."*

Each of these concerns is a reflection of the real dilemmas that attend attempts to raise healthy white children in a deeply racialized and hierarchical society.

We want to raise white children who have a good understanding of race and its meanings. We want to raise children who are comfortable in their own skin while simultaneously living authentically in diverse and multicultural spaces. We

want our children to be able to contribute productively to making things racially better in the United States. To move closer to all of these things, we have to understand how race and racism impact white children. And we need strategies to respond effectively to complex and challenging racial moments, whether such moments are as obvious as was my own with Ms. B. or so subtle an adult might not even realize, at first, something racial is taking place.

Raising White Kids provides such strategies. It supports parents in developing the broader base of knowledge they need to create their own strategies through various stages of their children's development. Throughout this book, you will find numerous examples of real-life scenarios, as well as numerous real experiences of actual parents and teachers. Some of these experiences were shared with me. Others are experiences I have faced myself in my journey of parenting two young white children (my children are currently under the age of ten).

In place of both color-blindness and diversity teachings this book offers a race-conscious approach to parenting. Race-conscious parenting acknowledges, names, discusses, and otherwise engages racial difference and racial justice with children. It does so early and often. It assumes that antiracism must be a central and deep-seated commitment when it comes to how we parent white children and in what we want them to learn.

You may be familiar with ways of talking about children and racial difference in which the importance of teaching children *not to be racist* is emphasized. This way of thinking usually means trying to prevent the formation of negative stereo-

types about people of different races, or undo those that have already been adopted.

But *nonracism* is not the same thing as *antiracism*. It is important to combat stereotypes and biases. But in any context where racism and racial injustice already run rampant, nonracism isn't enough to create equity or justice. In such a context, antiracism is required. A commitment to antiracism goes well beyond nonracism. It means actively countering and challenging racism. And given that racism is, tragically, far too normal and pervasive in the United States, *Raising White Kids* presumes that cultivating antiracism in our children and living it ourselves is a key commitment to bringing up healthy white children in this nation.

The stories I share in this book illustrate the differences between color-blind and race-conscious parental responses. They explore the distinct outcomes to which such distinct responses lead. Sharing them will enable parents to imagine other practical and constructive responses they might enact with their own children in different scenarios and at various ages.

The chapters are not organized by chronological age. Whatever our racial identity, we cycle through various stages of racial identity in processes that are not linear. Moreover, children in distinct familial and geographical contexts will experience and manifest different responses to their racial environment. These may correlate with various stages of racial identity development but do not necessarily nor strictly pertain to age. Having said that, it is the case that earlier chapters

in this book do tend to offer strategies that make more sense with younger children, while later chapters address issues more likely to emerge among older kids.

The chapters are organized thematically. Chapter 1 starts us off by exploring the basic differences between color-blind and race-conscious parenting. From there we'll engage one of the first questions parents tend to ask: where do I start (chapter 2)? Then, after discussing the basic question of what a healthy white racial identity looks like (chapter 3), the remaining chapters each take up common and particular questions that emerge in parenting white children.

In the last several years, I have spent countless hours working with white people on how to become strong allies and advocates for racial justice; especially in the current national racial crisis that is impacting us all. Time and time again, parents have asked me how the theories and tools I have offered for adults in those spaces might translate to parenting practices—especially with younger children who are developmentally not yet able to talk about race and racism in the ways older youth might be able to.

It was a result of working with these parents and resonating with their questions as a parent myself that I decided to write *Raising White Kids*. More important, it was as a result of taking these parents' questions seriously that I have written it to be practical, concrete, and constructive. In every chapter, parents and other caregivers will find examples of what implementing race-conscious engagement of children looks like. It's my hope adults can take these examples, and what they learn

from them, and envision age-appropriate, context-specific practices with the children in their lives.

But here's the most important thing you need to know to get started: another world is possible. We have the capacity to transform this racial crisis. To transform it we must have both the will and a different set of tools and frameworks than those that got us to this point. *Raising White Kids* offers one important set of tools. I will say it again. Know this: we have a long way to go, but *we can go.*