"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

ABINGDON PRESS
NASHVILLE

Ch. 2

CHAPTER 2

Where Do I Start?

I carried my three-year-old on a carrier on my back, while my five-year-old played on the steps. On the way to the protest I had explained to my children, "An African American teenager was hurt terribly by a white police officer. We're going downtown to be with a whole bunch of people who are sad and angry about it. We want to let the government know we want everyone to be treated fairly and kept safe in this country."

Partway through the protest my five-year-old stopped playing and looked up at me. In a tone imitating a few of the protest's speakers she announced loudly, "Black people aren't safe!" Then she said (just as loudly): "But we're white, so we're safe! Right?"

Thick layers of silence have tended to pervade white communities when it comes to honest, explicit discussions of race. Whether a result of anxiety, awareness of racial tension, or ingrained habits created by the discourse of color-blindness,

the long-term effects of silence are powerful. They make it difficult for many white adults to begin to speak about race openly and explicitly. But as with any skill set, we only learn to do it and get better at it, and—in that process—develop even clearer insights into how to do it well through practice. There's simply no way around the awkward, challenging feelings of starting to talk about race. We have to go straight through them by doing it.

Children begin to work out their racial perceptions, concepts, and ideas long before they can articulate them.

Even if we know the only route is through, it can still be difficult to know where to begin. This chapter is intended to help with that. Exploring examples and comparisons can help us better understand what the principles of race-conscious parenting look like in action. The kinds of examples I use vary, because our children vary in their ages, context, personalities, and on and on. We need lots of stories of trial and error in order to feed our parental imaginations so we can create responses to our own kids.

Most of the examples used to flesh out the "getting started" discussions in this chapter reflect the types of moves and needs that emerge in response to younger children. Still, even as such examples may not pertain precisely to readers whose kids are already a bit older, the why and the how behind various responses shared here align with the goals of cultivating healthy white identity among kids of any age.

It's Never Too Early to Start

Wherever we are in our parenting journey there's a fundamental principle at work in this notion of getting started. It's this: there isn't an age later in our children's lives at which we can suddenly safely begin doing so. There's no moment after which they are suddenly old enough or cognitively ready to discuss race and antiracism. There's not a day at which point it becomes newly appropriate to share with them the more difficult truths about racism, whereas it somehow hadn't been the day before. As with any other development, our children begin to work out their racial perceptions, concepts, and ideas long before they can articulate them verbally or discuss them in an intellectually clear manner. So even while the specific ways we engage will vary from child to child, personality to personality, age to age, the basic principle is that we must start this engagement as soon as we parents are aware there's something to start!

For parents with younger kids, it's worth knowing that if we wait to engage in explicit race talk we may find ourselves engaging, for example, a fifteen-year-old who is still in an early and underdeveloped stage of racial identity (we're going to talk about how racial identity develops in chapter 3). He won't be further along developmentally simply because he's older chronologically. If we wait, our children and youth will have already moved through various racial experiences that will have impacted them. They will have seen people being treated differently because of race, for example, and thus been

thrown into cognitive dissonance because they've also been told "we believe in equality" in this country. Without adult interpretive support, they may draw any number of conclusions about why inequity exists that *we wouldn't endorse*. If we wait, our children and youth will have long since internalized racist assumptions and conclusions to some extent—often without even recognizing it.

We need to invite conversation and reflection even when we don't have all the answers or quite know how to do it "right."

But even if our child hasn't experienced such dissonance or internalized racism, abruptly letting her in on a truly distressing new learning may well cause her to respond in confusion or frustration, "Why wouldn't you tell me this sooner?" I see this kind of reaction among nineteen-year-olds in my college classes all the time. They are angry no one has told them the truth and feel like they've been living a lie.

However that fifteen-year-old responds, even if she's open to new knowledge and the conversation goes well, she'll still be well behind her peers of color in terms of her facility in antiracist understanding and growth. She'll certainly be well behind where she might have been if we had made different parental choices.

What if your child is already fifteen when you've picked up this book? The way we go about the work described as necessary in this chapter will be different. But the underlying principles are the same. We need to get explicit and be direct about race. We need to invite conversation and reflection even

There is no "too young" in terms of introducing race and racism.

when we don't have all the answers or quite know how to do it "right." This will require us to create opportunities with our kids where race will come up—a protest, watching the news together. We need to be consistently honest about the reality of racial inequity. We need to ask our kids about interracial relationships and racial dynamics at school, make it part of our dialogue with them. Though the how will look different with a teenager, grappling with the principles described in this chapter will help parents of older kids begin to imagine what some specific moves might look like. (And more examples are coming for you later!)

My experience taking my young kids to protest the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson raises a number of issues. One is the complex question of taking children to protests. Discerning the wisdom (or not) of such a decision is explored later. A second came up when my daughter loudly vocalized a sense of relief that being white made her safe, in a public space where people of color were grieving and protesting their radical lack of safety. I'll return to this part of the experience later in this chapter.

I begin with a third issue this experience raised, which is the central focus of this chapter: there is no "too young" in terms of introducing race and racism. My children were too young to fully understand what was going on at that protest. But I took them nonetheless because I was clear that important development having to do with cultivating their race-conscious schema was taking place in that experience.

Creating a Race-Conscious Schema

Children take in awareness of race and racism long before they have language for it. Adults tend to think of racism as a set of cognitive beliefs or ideas about race. But we often experience race or the presence of racial differences in our bodies. Sometimes we perceive fraught racial dynamics or the presence of racial tensions through body language, speech tones, or even the use of silence, as opposed to particular words being used in a given moment.

The question of where to start, then, begins with our children's deepest assumptions about the world. Our parental work is to knit together, as part of our children's most basic, formative *schema*, a notion of race as visible and normal, an awareness of racial injustice, and a working presumption that people can and do take actions against racism.

Schemas are deep underlying organizational patterns through which we make sense of the world. They are conceptual frameworks. They make up our most fundamental working assumptions about what is normal or true in life—how things simply *are*. When it comes to race, we want the schema through which our children view the world to be one in which race is always visible to them and is just assumed by them to be something we should notice and name. Again, this requires attention to race from the youngest of ages, long before our kids have cognitive capacity to conceptualize racism as an abstract concept.

A race-conscious schema can become the operative schema from where our children begin and through which

they look out into and take action in the world. When it does we are already much better poised to naturally support them in developing language for such observations and experiences, and moving along to active antiracist commitments in the world.

But every single day, the society in which we live offers our kids, at best, a color-blind schema and, at worst, a racist one. They are told in many places and in many ways that "we're all the same underneath our skin." They are told that race doesn't really matter. At the same time, they observe and internalize many incidents of racially disparate treatment and negative images and messages about people of color.

Because this happens long before they have words to ask about such things, it's especially critical we take the initiative to talk early and often about race and racism. Doing so is essential for countering the pervasive presence and power of society's constant socialization. As with any powerful collective socializing messages, parents have to go above and beyond what we otherwise would in an environment that was actually race- and difference-neutral or in which antiracism got equal air time to apathetic or racist engagements in the world. But the scales are not balanced. If a child receives messages about color-blindness ten times a day, then the much, much smaller number of people who insist on race-consciousness have to amplify their voices a lot. They need to make sure to insist on race-consciousness at least eleven times a day—each!

What I'm trying to get us to think about here is our role as adult caregivers in proactively helping to form the most deep-

seated and taken-for-granted backdrop of assumptions our kids have about what is true and what reality is like. An example by way of analogy can make this clearer.

My children have always known families can have two moms. They won't need to be told this surprising new information when they are suddenly old enough to understand the concept of sexual orientation. This reality has just long been assumed by them—built into their basic schema from the beginning. It shapes the lens through which they see the world. As soon as they experienced "mom," they knew a kid could have two of these. This knowledge was part of their schema before they could even say *mom* or count to the number two.

As our kids got a little older and began to have increased exposure to other families and different family's cultures, their understanding of what makes a family was already on our side. Here's what I mean. At times my kids have experienced social messages or occasional statements by other kids at school that "two girls can't get married" or "you have to have a mom and a dad." But even though such messages are the dominant discourse about families, my kids experienced such beliefs and perceptions as cultural outliers. *These messages are strange and need explanation.* It has never occurred to my kids that they might somehow be the outliers who have to justify the legitimacy of their family. Their schema has long since already assumed two-mom-families as normal. This was (and is) a powerful starting point. From here it will be much easier to support them in navigating the pervasive heterosexism they will encounter in the world as they grow.

Of course, like any children in a heterosexually oriented culture, my kids recognized early—before they had words for it—that their family was less common. They probably even observed negative interpretations of LGBT families early as well. This probably happened in moments that we, their parents, didn't even notice. But we've never had to justify or make a case for two moms. We've simply had to start slowly, in age-appropriate ways, explaining heterosexism to them.

Meanwhile this analogy makes it possible to see something else that pertains directly to cultivating race-conscious schema. It's been easier to knit two-mom-families-are-normal into our kids' schema because they have two. But children being raised by a mom and a dad can also be supported in cultivating a pro-LGBT, pro-diverse families schema as well. Heterosexual parents can (and some do) actively teach their children from early ages that families are all different. They can make sure to constantly disrupt the ideas and images that socialize children early to believe there is only one kind of family (heterosexual) and other kinds of families aren't really legitimate. So even kids who don't have two moms can similarly start from an inclusive norm in regard to which heterosexism is the outlier that eventually needs explanation.

All of this is parallel to what I'm advocating for parents of white kids to work for in intentionally creating race-conscious schemas in and with our young children. Children begin to knit schemas together immediately. They do it all the time and about everything. Their minds are developing rapidly from before the moment of birth. In any area of developmental life left to be formed without active parental engagement, prevailing social messaging and cultural contexts in which our children are developing will form it first.

It becomes obvious, then, why explicit race talk early in our children's lives is critical. Without it they will have long since knit together a schema somewhere on a continuum of colorblind-to-racist simply because they'll have absorbed it from the broader culture. Once they've done that we have a heck of a lot more teaching and dismantling to do when we finally realize we need to step in and teach our white kids how to challenge racism.

In contrast, raising antiracist children on a journey toward healthy white identities is much easier when we've been actively knitting a race-conscious schema with them from the beginning. It proactively shapes their intellectual development and explicitly forms their powers of observation. In addition, we effectively start a running dialogue with them, which helps us to discover and develop age-appropriate language between ourselves as parent and child. Race talk itself—and antiracist commitments and strategies—become simply a normal, necessary part of life.

Talking About Difference Early and Often

I'm sure you've noticed many parents babble at their young kids. Before you had kids this might have even looked really silly to you. Maybe you thought, "I'll never do that when I'm a parent!" Then you became a parent.

We spend hours pointing out and describing the world to our babies, toddlers, and young children. We do it without even

noticing we're doing it. We chatter about what our kids are seeing, point out and name the color of sky, ask them the same questions over and over—questions we know the answer to and know they know the answer to ("what does a cow say?"). *All of this engagement is building schemas*. Such parent–child work not only grows our kids' abilities to interact with the outside world, it also shapes and frames for them what the world is like, and how they should see and understand it.

At the earliest ages, then, we need to chatter with them explicitly about skin tone and other kinds of physical differences. Because many of us have been deeply impacted by the practice of silence in white communities, engaging in this kind of chatter may require us to willfully override deep ambivalence about pointing out and talking about racial differences. But this intentional decision, awkward as it may feel as first, is worth it.

If we believe racial differences are beautiful and we want our children to learn to see people of color as beautiful, we have to constantly and early name aloud and describe as beautiful the different colors of skin. Such a practice impacts our children's racial development in several ways. It's a preemptive counter to the negative messaging our children will be exposed to and are at risk of absorbing very early in life.

Such chatter also normalizes a parent-children dialogue about observable physical difference from the earliest stages of our children's awareness of such. It prevents taboos about observing differences from developing and inserting themselves between parents and children. We know that preschool-age

children have already begun to assume they should hide their observations about race from adults; they know there's a taboo. So we must signal to them over and over that race talk is welcome.[1] Affirmation that talking about race is welcome cannot be overdone in white culture.

When I say chatter, I mean chatter. If you want some really helpful examples, the highly acclaimed online teaching site *Raising Race Conscious Children* is a great resource.[2] This site is replete with parents describing the ways they chatter about difference with their children. And because the short articles there involve actual dialogues with real kids, you get a sense of how the chatter goes! Dark skin, light skin, brown skin, peach skin. Curly hair, blonde hair, coarse hair, thick hair. These stories also often end up describing amazing conversations that unexpectedly emerge out of such chatter.

To be sure, skin tone differences are not the same thing as race. Suggesting the kind of chatter I've just described doesn't mean we shouldn't also use the language of African American, Black, Latino/a, Native American, and so forth with our children. We should, even when they are too young yet to understand what these categories mean. But it's also true, at even younger ages than race can be understood, that we need to learn to let the language of observing the physical differences roll off of our tongues and become part of the fabric of our everyday conversations. When our children are young they are so deeply engaged in the developmental work of constantly describing the world. Chatter about physical differences should be part of that development.

Obviously this strategy only makes sense with very young kids; this way of naming difference isn't all that relevant to those of us whose children are already older. But even though the method would be different, the principle of preventing or undoing powerful taboos that congeal around race- and difference-talk *does* pertain to older kids. Part of the point of chatter is to prevent silence about race from forming or interrupting it if or as it already has. For those of us with older children who maybe haven't yet used many race-conscious approaches, the same goal exists. We just need to embody it in more age-appropriate ways.

On the one hand the chatter about difference relates directly to a diversity strategy many parents are aware of and may be comfortable with. Namely *it's important we have diverse toys and books in which diversity is represented in our kids' lives.* When we are reading with them, we should point out and have them point out and talk about characters who look different from one another, including observations about features that tend to signify race. If our kids have differently raced dolls, the different features of their dolls should be a topic of our dialogue with them, just as we might talk in a playful way about the kinds of clothes their dolls are wearing.

I can't say enough how important it is that we be explicit. I know this requires some of us to face and persist through really thick and long-standing taboos of our own. We get lots of pressure in white culture even now to not make such differences an object of pointing or explicit dialogue. But having diverse books and dolls alone actually doesn't do much

for kids. We have studies that show that being surrounded by diverse images, media, and toys simply doesn't teach children to value diversity.[3] We have to make explicit conversation and pointing out a part of the mix to get any results.

White Isn't *Standard*

It's also important to make sure we're conscious about pointing out and naming light skin (or white people) too. Everybody's skin tone, hair texture, beautiful fingers, and whatever other physical attributes we are noting gets discussed and named. Being intentional about this is important because there's a strong socializing tendency for whiteness to go as an unnamed racial category, so we must counter this formation as well.

We need to talk about "light" skin as one difference among many kinds of difference. Inadvertently treating white as a norm against which other differences are named will create a schema that sees nonwhite as different while seeing light or white as standard. As with so much of race-conscious parenting, therefore, this, too, requires intention. It's not just that our children are taught that white is the norm and everyone else is different. We've been taught to think and speak in such a manner too. Plus, in US contexts, white characters in books, white dolls in children's toy boxes, and white images on television are in the vast majority. It's really easy to miss realizing that we've fallen into the trap of only naming darker skin tones or pointing out difference *when it isn't white.*

Because white gets centered and treated constantly as a default, decentralizing and counteracting that messaging is

a critical component of race-conscious parenting. This same principle needs to be given attention and intention when we start teaching our kids to learn the language of race as well (see below).

Race Isn't *Taboo*

On the other hand, outside the world of play the dialogue and chatter I'm describing also affirms and invites our children's inclination to notice difference at whatever point that inclination shows up. This inclination may emerge at different points for different children, depending on a host of factors. But as I've noted, even as we know that children in the United States notice race long before they are aware they are noticing it, we also know that many learn early to hide their race-talk from adults. The social taboos against explicitly discussing difference are strong. Even if we've never knowingly contributed to such taboos, they can easily insert themselves into parent–child interactions without our awareness. Making a commitment to normalize talk about difference preempts the pressures our children experience in a color-blind-obsessed but highly racist culture to treat difference as a taboo.

If our kids notice difference but we've never talked about difference, they will notice that silence. (Indeed, some of our most powerful taboos are ones we internalize without even realizing we were doing so.) And because adults don't always catch it that kids are noticing—since they do so before they have language for it—they may notice silence even when we

don't realize we're being silent. In contrast, when our kids consistently experience us bringing observations of difference into the normal, everyday terrain of life they will assume—without realizing they are assuming it—that this is how they should see reality.

There's a helpful comparison here from sexuality educators who are clear how important it is to teach our kids anatomically correct labels for private parts of the body. Teaching children the correct names of all of their body parts has nothing to do with setting them up to do well later in biology class. It's about supporting them in having a healthy and positive view of bodies and sexuality. When we call an elbow an *elbow* but call a vagina a *private part* or a penis a *wee wee* our children notice. They conclude there's something secret and shameful about their genitalia, which easily feeds into larger cultural shame messages about sexuality generally.

> We cannot teach the values and experiences we want our kids to have if we allow taboos to set the dialogue.

In contrast, explicit naming of body parts works against associations of shame. Such practices make it more likely our children can successfully develop a positive view of their bodies and of sexuality. Another benefit is safety. If they don't develop a sense of taboo about their bodies, our kids are more likely to refuse to keep it a secret if they experience a violation of their bodies and boundaries. As educator Kate Ott writes, accurate language about bodies is a way to

"support and nurture curiosity while also teaching privacy and respect."[4] We cannot teach the values and experiences we want our kids to have if we allow taboos to set the dialogue.

These insights are helpful when it comes to thinking about taboos about race. We can't teach the values and experiences we want our kids to have if we allow taboos to constrain our dialogue with them. If we don't talk about physical difference, we teach them there is something forbidden, bad, and shameful about difference. On the flip side, there are so many potential benefits of lots of chatter. We name, acknowledge, and are explicit about race because supporting and nurturing our children is part of helping them grow the values and practices we want for them when it comes to race, difference, and racial justice.

From Skin Tone to Race

Chattering about skin or hair is not the same as talking about race. At some point, we also have to also give our children the language of race itself. What does that look like?

Another story, using a different attribute of identity, can help us think about that. When my daughter was in kindergarten she came home one day having learned about Hanukkah. I was impressed because she'd learned about much more than menorahs. She'd gotten a good deal of the story, and in great detail, of a struggle for independence waged by a minoritized, oppressed people and about how oil burning in a lamp well beyond the number of days it should have was a miracle for liberation and freedom.

It became clear as she engaged in her excited, rapid-fire telling of the story, that H. couldn't remember who the people were. After a short stumble as she tried to recall what they were called, she gave up, continued her account, and started referring to the resistors as "Hanukkah people." This incredible history was so vivid and large in her young mind and it just tumbled out. It was beautiful and really sweet. And it also all began to sound like a mythological account. The Hanukkah people to whom she referred over and over in her high-pitched, small-child voice began sounding more like fairies who lived in a far-off land than actual people.

I relished every minute of listening to her tell this story in her very five-year-old, non-Jewish way. And I knew, of course, it was important she learn who and what these people were and are actually called. When H. was totally done with her story, the first thing I did was join her in her excitement. I asked her a lot of questions and kept inviting her to share more. Then at some point I said, "By the way, you know the Hanukkah people? They are actually called Jewish. Jewish people *celebrate* Hanukkah. And guess what? Your friend B. is Jewish. That story about the oil and the miracle is an amazing story about Jewish people, like your friend B.!" She took all of this in and we continued on in our wonderful discussion about Jewish people, Hanukkah, miracles, liberation, and, of course about her friend B., who was very large on her radar those days.

The parallel here is strong. As sweet as this experience was, I wouldn't want my daughter to go around calling Jewish people *Hanukkah people*. Chatter about difference will need active

adult engagement to transition into children learning and using appropriate and acceptable language for race.

Until my other daughter was almost six, she often referred to white people as light-skinned people and African Americans as dark-skinned people. As in, one day when I was relaying a conversation I'd had with someone who was Black she asked, "Mama, was he dark-skinned?" This kind of question sounds very different than a parent and child pointing at different characters in a book talking about different skin tone. It was a holdover from our early chatter about difference. But my daughter's language suggested she was starting to use categories and was using dark-skinned as a category grouping.

Her query signaled how important it was for us to move away from the language of dark- and light-skinned and toward explicitly naming race consistently: "Yes, she is Latina." "No, he's white." Or, as in this situation, "Yes, he had dark skin, he's African American. Some people with dark skin are African American." Redirection moves our kids toward talking about race—by learning to use the language and self-naming that people of color have indicated is desirable.

For a number of reasons, the move to support our children as they begin to appropriately use the language of race is more complicated than my experience with my daughter and the Hanukkah people. Identity is complicated. On the one hand, we need to see and acknowledge race and racial identity. At the same time, doing so—especially with young children—always runs the risk of reducing people to labels or implying everyone who shares that identity label *is the same* in some significant

way. On top of that, we don't always *know* how people identify.

These risks are real. But they can't be completely avoided. They aren't reduced at all by just not talking about race in order to avoid them. To mitigate the risks as much as we can, we need to intentionally talk about race in nuanced ways. We need to also be mindful, as we do, of emulating and modeling the behavior and language we want our kids to learn.

Imagine my kids and I are in the car, for example. For whatever reason, they are pointing out the window at a pedestrian and are asking or telling me something about her. In the interest of constantly seeking to build race-conscious chatter and dialogue between us, I might say something like this:

> "You mean that person with a blue coat on, who has light skin—who looks like she might be white?" *or*
> "You mean that person carrying a backpack, who looks like she might be Latina?"

The *might* here is important. Maybe the person who looks white is actually biracial or Latina. Maybe the person who has brown skin is actually Black or maybe she's Mexican American and identifies as Chicana. We can't account for every possibility in such random, anonymous situations of this sort. But I know I need to use such day-to-day opportunities to continue this ongoing discourse with my children.

More to the point here, in this situation I use the *might* and the multiple descriptors (a backpack and a skin tone) in an attempt to be specific and nuanced in my speech. And if

in a less anonymous situation I find out I am mistaken, I take responsibility and model this for my kids too.

In this example, I'm conscious of a tall order here. We want to raise white kids who definitely see race, but who simultaneously don't make assumptions about people because of their race. This is a tall order that goes back to the concern of the mother (in chapter 1) who was worried about her kids starting to put people in racial boxes. There are real contradictions that show up when we are raising kids race-consciously. They can't be completely avoided, but we can seek to mitigate them. "She *might* be Latina!" However imperfectly and with risks that remain nonetheless, this type of specificity aims in both directions—that of seeing race but also not making assumptions about people.

Getting Specific

Have you ever heard a child whose mom was a doctor say that only men can be doctors? There are dangers in race-conscious dialogues, which have to do with children's brains and how susceptible they are, as they make sense of the world, to stereotyping. As essential as early and often race-talk is for nurturing healthy, antiracist white kids, *the ways we do it matter.*

Some studies have found that as early as age three, white children are more likely to describe Black faces as "more angry."[5] Another study has revealed that by first grade, girls are less likely than boys to believe that girls are "really, really smart."[6] Yes, my mother was a physician. And yes, she still repeats the story about how someone asked me, when I was

about four years old, if I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up. I looked this adult dead in the eye and said, "I can't. Only boys can be doctors. Girls have to be nurses."

Psychologist Marjorie Rhodes explains that using labels to make generalizations about groups of people can backfire, even if the generalizations are positive. "Generalizations," she writes, "...such as 'Girls can be anything they want,' 'Hispanics live in the Bronx' or 'Muslims eat different foods,' communicate that we can tell what someone is like by knowing her gender, ethnicity or religion."[7]

When young children hear generalizations they conclude "groups mark stable and important differences between individual people."[8] In other words, they start to assume that race can tell you something determinative about a person. So we should be on notice here that the goal of reaching that challenging paradoxical balance of "*see* race" but "don't make *assumptions*" is out of balance in each of Rhodes's examples.

Speaking and modeling race-conscious postures does not mean making vague generalizations about groups.

If children conclude that generalized grouping is meaningful in this way, their "tendency to view the world through the lens of social stereotypes" is magnified.[9] Given how many negative stereotypes abound about race, gender, and other categories, then, it's no surprise that strengthening the stereotyping tendencies children already have makes it more

likely they will internalize negative stereotypes about groups. This is precisely what seems to be going on when girls are the ones by first grade concluding they can't be "really, really smart" or when a child has a mother she knows to be a physician still says that generally, as a group, girls can't be doctors.

Rhodes's findings don't contradict what I'm advocating for in terms of building a race-conscious schema and talking about race early and often. Rather they give insight into how to do it well. Speaking and modeling race-conscious postures does not mean making vague generalizations about groups. In fact, in terms of long-term impact and results, there are better and worse ways to name race early and often when it comes to these risks. Rhodes's work suggests we need to be specific in our language.

So, for example, in response to me as a young daughter denying the ability of women to be doctors, Rhodes would warn against a response of "Of course girls can be doctors! Girls can do anything." Despite this good message, such a response actually further solidifies a child's sense of the strength and meaning of gender categories. This will then continue to be filled more with negative stereotypes about girls than positive ones. Instead, she might suggest a parental response more like:

"Why do you think that is the case?" *or*
"Yes, your doctor is a man. But did you notice that doctor who was a woman at the doctor's office last time we were there? Let's look for her next time." *or*
"What does your mother do for a living?"

These and other open-ended, inquisitive responses can direct a child's attention back to individuals and away from group generalizations. And this can be done even as we still notice and name race (or, in this example, gender).

Something like this was at work in the way I redirected my daughter in response to her Hanukkah people. "The people you're talking about are called Jewish, your friend B. is Jewish, he celebrates Hanukkah." The following types of statements also implement specificity and avoid generalizing language:

"Yes, he happens to be African American."
"I think that young girl might be Latina."
"I went to the doctor today and she was a Black woman."

Or, in response to my daughter when she asked, "Did he have dark skin?" a specific nuanced response: "Yes, he did, he's African American. Although some African American people have really light brown skin and some people have skin much darker than his."

In response to that last statement, my six-year-old might just look at me and say nothing more. Or she might respond by asking me something, disagreeing with me, or making some other type of observation. Whatever she does with my observation in that moment—whether she's interested or ready to verbally engage me or not—*she hears me*. That insight and response thus go into the mix of knitting her race-conscious schema.

Each of these responses notice race in regard to particular people (or experiences) in ways that are race-conscious. But

they do so while heeding the caution against responding to our kids with generic teachings like "African American people can do anything."

Finally, I want to be clear that all of this naming of race is not, in and of itself, antiracism! I'm still describing practices that make up some of the proactive and preemptive work we must do to build a race-conscious schema for white kids. That's the "getting started" work here. But this outcome is critical because it's groundwork for developing active antiracism. Children can't learn antiracism if they don't have the practice of observing, naming, and discussing race in their tool kit.

Let's work to break the taboos that we all already live with. Let's interrupt the silence or speak into the ambivalence that is pervasive in white adult culture about naming difference. What I'm describing here are intentional, race-conscious habits we all need to develop in ourselves and build with our children early in their lives.

Doc McStuffins Is Black!

These nuances may feel overwhelming, especially for those of us for whom this is new. On top of this, we continually experience pressure as parents, teachers, and other caregivers to not name race and instead to adopt color-blind approaches to raising children. It's important to name these pressures, because if we do not recognize their presence it's easy to feel like we're alone. Bucking common wisdom is a difficult thing to do. But knowing we're bucking it can help us persist in doing it!

In spring of 2017 a moving story spread about two young

boys—one white, one Black.[10] These good friends decided to get matching haircuts so their teachers couldn't tell them apart. The story was sweet, as was their friendship. The rapid pace with which the story spread suggested something in our culture having to do with a yearning for interracial relationships. But the story also seemed to function as a large-scale endorsement of the false notions that kids don't see color and that this should be the goal. In fact, the white child's mom told media that his "inability to see a difference" was a parental success because "I just taught him to love everyone the same."[11]

It's really easy to over- and wrongly interpret stories like this. It's simply a fact that most children *do* sense awareness of difference by the age of these two boys. Meanwhile, just like a girl child can look at her physician mother and say "girls can't be doctors," it's completely possible that a Black child and white child, both age four, might recognize their skin tones are different and simultaneously still believe a haircut could fool an adult. Four-year-old minds are that creative! And even if these two boys really don't see their differences now, there is no reason to believe that lack of seeing will last.

But my reason for presenting this story here has more to do with reiterating how important it is for those of us attempting to parent race-consciously to recognize the pressures we face. Broad consumption of a story like this speaks volumes about the strength of the cultural belief that it's a win against racism if children don't see color. Such accounts elevate a narrative that good parenting can succeed if we only teach our children similarly. This makes it easy to doubt ourselves when we start

swimming against the tide. We need to find ways to create networks of support for ourselves and to connect with other parents to build our collective ability to persist in such swimming.

Another popular example further demonstrates the power of pressures to "not notice"—and it also helps us return to the need to get specific. Doc McStuffins is an African American female character produced by Disney. Emulating her mother, who is a physician, Doc McStuffins heals her stuffed animals when they are sick or injured through the power of her magic stethoscope (and her incredible imagination). She had $500 million in sales in 2013, which makes her an unusual "crossover" hit. In other words, Doc McStuffins isn't just adored by African American girls. Girls and boys from many racial demographics adore her.

In 2014, an article in the *New York Times* explored Doc McStuffins's success. The article emphasized how important her visibility is for young African American children in a media market where positive images of blackness and black femaleness are shamefully few and far between. The article went on to celebrate the evidence that both boys and white kids (girls and boys) embrace her in remarkable numbers. I couldn't agree more with the desire to laud this success.

The same article repeatedly suggested that Doc McStuffins is a crossover hit because white kids *don't see her as Black.* Even her creator, Chris Nee, sees it this way. She was quoted in the piece, "The kids who are of color see her as an African American girl, and that's really big for them. And I think a lot of other kids don't see her color and that's wonderful as well."[12]

This interpretation was so disappointing. First, Nee's comment implies that Black children are somehow more predisposed to naturally notice color when "other kids" (by which Nee means white kids) don't. This is a racially charged description of Black children! And it's unlikely those white kids don't see Doc McStuffins's color. It's much more likely those white kids just don't live in environments where difference and race are part of the flow of conversation with adults; so those adults don't really know what their kids do or do not notice.

Meanwhile, even if those kids don't see her as an African American girl, that wouldn't be "wonderful." Adults celebrating McStuffins in this way should give us pause. If this is the perception among adults, how are we possibly going to enable kids' healthy racial identity development? Stories like these reveal that, as parents, we have some work to do besides building a race-conscious schema with our children. There are some adult-to-adult conversations we need to have urging other parents to reconsider the impulse to celebrate the (false) belief that white kids don't see color. We also need to find support from other people in our own journeys to continually parent against the color-blind tide. That same tide impacts our persistence and also pulls our kids along in it.

Margaret Beale Spencer, a professor of comparative human development, writes of McStuffins's success, "Children's play is serious business. They are getting ideas about who they are from these objects."[13] I know Spencer's right and I suspect you do too. I watch what characters, books, and shows do to the

psyche, self-image, and worlds-they-imagine-to-be-possible of my daughters every day.

And that's precisely why it's wonderful if white kids of both genders not only love Doc McStuffins but also see her *specifically* as a Black female and embrace her as such. It's also appropriate developmental support for those of us who have Doc McStuffins in our homes to intentionally activate that recognition with our children. It is important for African American girls to see a powerful and confident character who looks like them. In a society that denigrates blackness and femaleness, the chance for these girls to identify power and confidence with both is, indeed, a kid's toy success.

The stakes are higher for children of color. But it's a success in equal measure for young white daughters—and doubly so if they are sons—to associate power and confidence with blackness and femaleness too!

So let's be specific. When we talk about Doc McStuffins, let's talk about her brilliance, her kindness, her being a girl, her imagination, her being Black, her healing gifts with toys and stuffed animals, the fact her mom is a doctor, and on and on. Notice how different this is than saying to a two-year-old, "Black people can be doctors too"? Specifying and appreciating Doc McStuffins, blackness, brilliance, girlness, and wonderfulness all in our dialogue with our children is where we begin.

When my kids think they see black and female manifested as powerful and confident, my job is to say this: "Why yes, yes, you do. That is precisely what you are seeing here—an awesome, smart kid like you who has beautiful brown skin." Or when my

kids see Black and female manifested as brilliant and creative, but haven't thought to name the Black and female parts aloud yet, my words naming these aloud might invite them to notice that they'd noticed this too. And suddenly we're in a conversation knitting a race-conscious schema together one more time.

Fortitude As It Gets Harder

It may seem a long distance from Doc McStuffins to a protest about police brutality. But the focus on schema I'm introducing here raises an early challenge for parents. If we're speaking authentically about race in the United States we are almost always—or are quickly thereafter—also speaking about oppression and injustice. How much, how early, and in what detail do we expose our children to the realities of injustice? How do we respond when educating our children about what's actually going on in our neighborhoods, cities, and nation means discussing human suffering and violence? These are difficult questions with no one right or wrong answer.

Knitting together a race-conscious schema for the purpose of healthy white identity development (see chapter 3), however, must include attention to and teaching about racial injustice and inequity as much as it does racial difference. If it doesn't, our dialogues will only support "valuing diversity." The unique complexities white children experience and notice about being privileged, insulated, or taught that they are superior will go unaddressed by us and internalized by our kids.

Yet—as with building a schema in which difference is simply assumed to be worth embracing long before our children

can conceptually understand that's what they are learning—they also learn about injustice long before they'll have cognitive capacity or categories to discuss it abstractly. In this way, then, my decision to take my young kids to protest the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson was, among other things, an example of a proactive choice to offer healthy racial identity support.

I had deliberated over whether or not to take them. We have to make careful judgments about whether or how to engage our children in dialogues about realities so serious, heavy, and frightening that they may be simply too much for them. Even after I decided to do so, I chose not to tell them Michael Brown had been killed. I did go emotionally prepared for the possibility that they might overhear explicit statements at the protest itself and that I might end up needing to talk with them more fully about what actually happened, however.

But despite being aware of the risk my children would hear more about intense and violent truths than I might have chosen to introduce otherwise, I concluded that taking them was important. This was primarily a value-based decision for me about showing up as a family with other members of my community to protest police violence. But for my children it had additional function. It was an experiential introduction to the reality of racial injustice in a manner that words (especially at their age) simply didn't allow. It introduced them to the severity of racism in a context in which I was simultaneously modeling my commitments to acting and engaging with others for racial justice. That my children were still too young to discuss any such realities and commitments primarily with words actually made

it seem even more important for shaping their racial schema.

Meanwhile, I also knew the protest was the kind of experience that might create an opportunity for a discussion about racial justice. If that happened, my goal would be to follow their lead in terms of what they did or didn't understand, and might need or want explained after our shared experience. And in a challenging way, it did do that, as you saw in my opening story.

Experiences like the protest are an example of proactively shaping our children's schema for understanding injustice and resistance in ways that precede their ability to understand racism conceptually. A protest teaches and forms schema by providing an actual experience of an environment where difference abounds, but within which discussions of injustice and embodied resistance simply *are* the landscape. People gathering in solidarity became a part of my daughters' basic, experiential sense of reality that day.

Of course, such experiential learning must be repeated and sustained to have an impact. Still, this type of learning shapes a schema that is race- and justice-conscious rather than one that presumes sameness and equity. Subsequently, as children become able to intellectually explore issues of racism, these explorations unfold against a backdrop in which they are already deeply equipped and familiar with the reality of pervasive social, racial inequity.

When we went to the protest, I didn't insist my children listen carefully or stay quiet. But I also stayed near the edge of the crowd so they could move around and wouldn't bother others.

My older daughter found her way to some concrete steps and enjoyed swinging around on the banister.

And then, of course, the experience unfolded and raised some of the same insights and challenges of children noticing race in the grocery story. Given our fraught racial environments, white children speaking aloud in public about and pointing out race almost always creates discomfort. "Black people aren't safe! But we're white, so *we're* safe! Right [Mama]?" Ugh.

As we commit to cultivating a race- and justice-conscious schema, parents of white children breaking silence around race have to come to terms with at least two things. First, there is so much we do not control about what children say, and when or how loudly they say it. Second, as our children come to voice in ways we can't control, they will do more than just notice difference. If and as we are teaching them about actual US racial realities and supporting them in naming, analyzing, and interpreting their own actual experiences, they *are* going to voice their recognition of being white and having privilege. That's what happened with my daughter at the protest.

This second point connects directly with the specific challenge that the long-term habit of white silence on race has created. The complexity of being white in a white racial hierarchy juxtaposed with the reality that children will say anything, anywhere, truly ups the ante of how daunting race-talk with white kids can be. Young white children learning that racial injustice is a reality and, simultaneously, learning the language of race are going to make the connection that their white identity insulates them from injustice.

The example above is a case in point: my daughter essentially announced a very loud and public "*oh . . . whew!*" in regard to her/our white privilege and white protection. Worse, she did so in a public space where Black and Latino/a people were protesting and mourning precisely the lack of such protection for their families.

My daughter's public vocalization of awareness of her own safety as it related to her whiteness was easily the most anxiety-inducing part of this experience. Yet while this moment was uncomfortable, understanding the long-view significance of my daughter's vocalization as being in the interest of her own development of a healthy white racial identity enabled me to persist in a race-conscious stance.

One of the biggest impediments to healthy white identity is "white guilt," which results from the experience of moral dissonance: from being white and benefiting from injustice while believing equality *should be* the state of things. White Americans tend to treat this dimension of our experience as something like a dirty secret. This dirty secret contributes mightily to our being silent when we should speak, as well as impeding our ability to learn to engage well with race. (In fact, white guilt is so powerful that its impact on healthy white racial identity development is one of the most important things we're going to talk about in the next chapter.)

Children's aloud assessments of their own experiences of this racialized society proactively and powerfully equip them, initiating significant longitudinal learning. It takes a long time to develop the capacity to speak about race and its function in

the social environment. It takes longer to emotionally navigate the moral quagmire that being white creates. It cannot be overstated, then, what a positive move it is to have young white children begin to name this complexity ("we're white so we're safe!"), *rather than internalizing the dirty secret.*

This doesn't mean we leave them there! In the moment with my daughter, my goals included not shaming or embarrassing her while also respecting those who might have overheard her. In this case, that meant leaning down and quietly saying to her, "Yes, we are white, but let's talk about this in the car. Right now we need to listen. Okay?" My tone was even-keeled and warm. It conveyed no anxiety or sense she'd done something wrong.

In the car, I invited her back into conversation. "Remember how you noticed people saying Black people aren't safe? But we're white so we are?" "Uh-huh," she said. "Well," I said, "you're right, we're white and that does keep us more safe. And the whole reason we went to that protest was because we really want everyone to be safe. I want Black people to be just as safe as white people."

"Yes," she said. "I want it too!"

The goal is to minimize the amount of time they experience internalizing and interpreting without adult support. One way we accomplish this is by introducing the *reality* of the existence of racial inequity early. We want to be present for and explicitly journey with them, interpreting, engaging, and exploring further questions and insights. Starting early offers our children proactive support to move toward healthy racial identity, the specific contours of which will be the focus of the next chapter.

Takeaways

- ✓ It is difficult for many white adults to begin to speak about race openly and explicitly. We only learn to do it and get better at it through practice. There's no way around those awkward, challenging feelings.
- ✓ There's no special age at which point kids are ready to hear and understand the difficult truths about race and racism. They begin to work out their racial concepts and ideas long before they can articulate them.
- ✓ We start with our children's deepest assumptions about the world: a notion of race as visible and normal, an awareness of racial injustice, and a working presumption that people can and do take actions against racism.
- ✓ Young children should be engaged with lots of talk about difference: skin tone and bodies, and the ways different communities of color identify. Making a commitment to normalize talk about difference preempts the pressures kids experience to treat *difference* as a taboo.

- ✓ Be aware that using the language of race—especially with young children—always runs the risk of reducing people to labels or implying everyone who shares that identity label *is the same* in some significant way (stereotyping). Be specific and nuanced.
- ✓ Race-conscious parenting for a healthy white identity development must include teaching about racial *injustice and inequity* as much as it does racial *difference*. Consider experiential learning, such as protests, for this.

CHAPTER 3

What Does a "Healthy" White Kid Look Like?

"I was so relieved when my second grader came home excited about everything she had learned during her school's Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration. I'd worried about what she would be taught, and was ready to fill in the blanks. Like, I figured they might sugarcoat things. But when my daughter came home, she was not only excited about what she had learned but her school had done a great job. But then, after she'd eagerly shared with me all that she'd learned, my daughter said to me, 'You know what, Mom? I'm so glad we're white!' And I thought, Oh my god! Do we say that?"

Many challenges show up when we start talking about race in explicit ways with white children. Imagine if this mother's child had been Latina or Native American and had come home after celebrating a day devoted to a powerful leader within the Latino/a community or a justice movement led by Native peoples and said, "I'm so glad we're Latinas!" or "I'm so glad to