"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. 3

- ✓ 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

be Native American." I think it's likely her mother's response would not have been "Oh my god!" Perhaps Black children in that same second-grade class did go home that day and eagerly responded to their learning with "You know what, Mom? I'm so glad we're Black!" I can imagine the parental response to these children might have been, "Indeed!" But white declaration of gratitude for being white throws into sharp relief a very different landscape. This landscape is full of awkwardness that is unique to parenting white children.

This "I'm so glad I'm white!" story allows us to engage the question of what we are aiming for in the long term by raising white children in a race-conscious manner. I want to put the question in this way: "What does a *healthy* white kid look like, anyway?"

In some ways, the answer to that question is straightforward. Healthy white children are children who have been nurtured over time to be comfortable in their own skin but who are also able to function well and appropriately in racially diverse environments. They are children who neither ignore nor pretend not to notice the racial identities of others but who also do not make assumptions about people based on their race. They are children who feel equipped and have strong moral commitments to interrupt and challenge racism when they witness it, both in interpersonal and day-to-day life moments, as well as in its larger structural and societal forms.

This is all a tall order in a nation that doesn't talk about race very well. It's also an order that seems full of contradictions. Can you simultaneously honor race as meaningful but not make assumptions about what it means when you see it?

What does that even look like? Can a child be learning antiracism if he/she isn't old enough to quite explain what racism is? It turns out that the answer to "What does a 'healthy' white kid look like?" is not straightforward after all.

Complexities attend the notion of "healthy identity" in regard to white people generally, regardless of age. The specificity of these complexities is the very reason this book is called *Raising White Kids* and not just *Raising Kids*. When it comes to teaching them to value equity and justice, white children are in a position distinct from their peers of color. That positioning brings unique difficulties. They are being raised and educated in a society in which they, because of their racial identity, are located on top. They are treated better. They are given messages about their superiority. They are treated as if they are the norm and rewarded for being white on a regular basis in ways that are both overt and subtle. It's white positioning, then, that makes the question of what healthy racial identity is for white people complex.

White racial identity development theory can help us explore this complexity. It offers a developmental model to consider what healthy racial identity is and how parents can best nurture its growth.

It would be understandable if the mother in this story responded to her second-grader, "No, actually, *we don't say* 'I'm so glad we're white!' " Such a response might reduce her anxiety about the likely possibility her daughter will go out and make such a statement again in a context in which it would raise some eyebrows. And, of course, a healthy white kid is not

a child who is still running around at the age of twenty gleefully announcing, "I'm so glad I'm white."

But responding to this young child's announcement with a declarative no would not offer her the racial nurture she needs. Moreover, from a developmental perspective this second-grade declaration might actually be understood as evidence of racial health on display. Instead, a race-conscious parenting approach, rooted in understanding of white racial identity development, can enable this mother to engage her child in ways that recognize what is developmentally positive about her daughter's declaration. Then she will be more prepared to support her to further that development.

Our ability to understand the paradoxes that are normal, predictable dimensions of raising race-conscious white kids in a racist society and to make intentional choices in response is deepened by knowledge of racial development. Such knowledge helps us recognize common landmarks in the white experience in anticipation of which we can be proactive and in regard to which we can be responsive. White children are living in a society that is racially hierarchical, divided, and unjust. It seeks to draw white people into collusion with hierarchy and injustice every step along the way. The goal is to maximize our positive impact on the growth of such children and youth given this difficult context. All of this, then, is what this chapter is about.

White Racial Identity Development

As a theory of human development, racial identity development theory comes from the world of psychology. Racial

identity development theories presume that just as human beings develop physically, emotionally, and intellectually, we also develop racially. Psychologists who work in this area of study have identified and described various stages of racial development for different racial groups.

If we understand racial development to be part of human development, it makes perfect sense that knowing something about it would be important for parents and others who want to be an influence in raising healthy white children. Physical development is, at least in part, an internal and embodied response to the effect of things like nutrition, exercise, and vitamins. Intellectual development is impacted by engagement with visual, linguistic, and written information. In the same way, racial identity develops as one moves through and in response to various racial environments, experiences, and messages. So whether it's knowing the nutritional content of Cheerios, the benefits of learning phonics, or the way moral vision is activated when we celebrate antiracist heroes and sheroes, those of us who shape those environments, experiences, and messages need to know something about development.

I want to underline the point that we're talking about a relationship between the internal and external. We're not talking about racial identity being indicative of innate differences among different racial groups. Race does not predetermine or predispose who we become or how we grow. Rather there is constant interaction between the internal selfhood and the external world; interaction produces certain tendencies in racial development. External environments and experiences, and the

interpretations and explanations we offer in response to these, show up in human self-understanding, the shape of our emotional lives, our future responses to racism, and so forth.

Moreover, we are talking only about tendencies. Like any kind of development, the way white people respond to environments and experiences varies. It's not completely predictable. We are all individuals with different stories and personalities. How I respond to an encounter may be different than the way you do. Still, interactions can create overarching similarities and patterns, in regard to which awareness of racial identity development can be of great help as we engage children.

I also want to underline the point that whether we explicitly pay attention to children's racial development or not, our children develop anyway. So for those of us who want to raise white children who are able, facile, and engaged as friends, peers, and citizens in a diverse society, paying intentional attention to racial development isn't optional. We can't just put our best foot forward, push off hard conversations about race for fear that we won't do a good enough job or generically teach them the value of equality, and then hope for the best. If we don't pay attention and nurture children explicitly, the external environments in which our children are exposed daily to racialized messages will do the shaping in our absence.

In fact, simply recognizing the existence of racial identity development as a phenomenon is helpful in and of itself. Again, consider a parallel. Because we know that children develop physically, most of us would never expect a desirable outcome if we allowed our young children to make their own choices

about food. We know if we did this, most kids—if they're anything like mine—would eat a ton of sugar! The impact on their physical development would be profound. We also know that just messaging them that they *should* like vegetables would not cause them, on their own, to choose to eat vegetables. So—armed with a basic understanding that the body changes in response to what it consumes—many parents insist on peas.

In a similar way, awareness that racial identity develops over time and is an unavoidable human process in a racialized society inclines us to pay attention to it. Understanding that racial identity unfolds and grows in our kids' lives, even if we don't quite grasp all of the ins and outs of what this looks like or always know how best to nurture it, inclines us to begin to notice things we otherwise might not.

But we can go further, of course, and learn explicitly about the developmental tendencies of white US Americans. For these purposes, Janet Helms and Beverly Daniel Tatum, both psychologists who happen to be African American, are among the most accessible of the experts who have engaged in extensive study of racial identity development.

Both Helms and Tatum have written several great books. But two of my favorites are Helms's book *A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your Life* and Tatum's book *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race.*[1] (The titles alone show what great reads these books are!)

I draw on both of these psychologists to provide an over-

view of white development, which will inform our conversation about healthy white identity. But the specific labels I'm using belong to Helms. For the purpose of being able to talk about general patterns in white development, Helms has identified six stages of white identity. These stages are:

- Contact
- Disintegration
- Reintegration
- Pseudo-Independence
- Immersion/Emersion
- Autonomy[2]

In Helm's taxonomy (and Tatum agrees, using slightly different language), we all begin in Contact stage. The hope is that over the course of our lives we will develop toward and into Autonomy stage.

Before we get any further, I want to say that talking about stages of racial identity development can be deceptive. On the one hand, the dispositions and behaviors that tend to show up in white people as we grow toward autonomy are precisely the kinds of characteristics race-conscious parenting aspires to cultivate in children. Also, having a sense of what white growth often looks like along the way is useful. It helps us have a better conversation about antiracist development; what it looks like and how we get there.

But we need to be careful. To use the language of stages is to use a tool. And a tool is just that: only a tool. Stages are

not supposed to be used as some kind of diagnosis of all white behavior (or people!). They shouldn't be stamped on ourselves, or others, the way we might use a cookie cutter to impose a predetermined shape.

Also, as we'll see in the scenarios discussed below, development can look very different from one person to the next. This can be true even among people roughly moving through the same stage of identity development. For one thing, racial growth can occur at such different ages. Racial identity is not a set of life stages that can be closely associated with chronological age. Endless variations in human life impact how and when people grow, move through, or even remain stuck in, various stages. Where one lives, who's in one's family, what messages one gets from trusted adults and how often, what is regularly on the television, who is in one's classroom—all of these variables impact when and how our environmental experiences with race and racism transpire.

For another thing, racial development is not a linear process. Nor are the various stages mutually exclusive. We can actually experience more than one at the same time. It's probably better to understand these stages as landmarks. They are points in life, learning, and experiences at which tendencies often appear. But, again, these tendencies look different in different people. The stages are not firm, fixed, or static. And any one of us can experience growth into one stage of identity, only to go back to a prior developmental stage if certain conditions present themselves.

For example, as an adult I spent almost ten years engaged

in activism and committed antiracism work in New York City. I learned there to function alongside and in support of African American and Latino/a activists challenging police brutality. I taught "whiteness" and racial justice to multiracial groups of graduate students. I became very comfortable talking about race and racial justice in racially diverse settings—even when such talk became uncomfortable. I was experiencing immersion/emersion.

But when I moved to the demographically predominantly white state of Iowa in 2004, within only a couple of years I noticed how differently I'd begun to experience my own white identity. I was less comfortable in my own skin in a room of mostly people of color than I had been when such spaces had been a very regular part of my daily life. I found myself worrying that I might say or do the wrong thing and was more tentative about taking the risk to do so. It was like I had gotten out of practice. I seemed to have moved back to somewhere in between reintegration and pseudo-independence.

That experience is indicative of just how nonlinear and fluid racial development is. Development is a constant process and unless we are continually active on the journey, we can easily move backward into earlier stages of development and understanding.

Mapping out stages of white identity development is useful as long as we don't ask it to do something it was never intended to do. It gives us a way to see behaviors many white people manifest and better understand emotional challenges many of us go through as we journey toward antiracist commitment. By

helping us better understand these, it helps us strategize how to enable development toward autonomy. Most important, it gives us a way to talk together about what it is we're aiming for when we're parenting race consciously. Namely, it gives us some answers to the question, what does a *healthy* white kid look like anyway?

From Contact to Disintegration: What Do You Mean We're Not All Equal?

Tatum and Helms suggest that at the earliest developmental stage, white people tend to believe things are racially fine in society and that our collective declaration of "Everybody is equal" actually describes the way things are. Prior to having had direct experiences or noticed evidence to the contrary, race is not perceived to be a particular meaningful category. It certainly isn't perceived as meaning anything significant relative to questions about justice or fairness. At this stage, as well, racial difference is even simply accepted as a positive and normal aspect of human experience, even if one hasn't given much thought to any of this.

It's inevitable, however, that at some point white people encounter experiences in which people are treated differently because of race. So such dispositions and beliefs begin to ebb. When we have such encounters at a frequency or intensity with which they can no longer be ignored, the prior "naive belief" that race is not meaningful starts to disintegrate. We move from what Helms calls Contact stage into Disintegration stage.

Disintegration may begin in a young child when he's out

on a playground and overhears racial teasing. He struggles to understand why white children would behave in such a way or appreciate why a child of color gets upset. My first-grade experience outside the bathroom might be understood as an example of movement into disintegration. In that case, it was not so much that I saw racially unjust treatment. But I was definitely jarred into a stark recognition that there was something meaningful, loaded, and emotionally dangerous about racial difference. I was jarred first as a new self-recognition dawned on me when J. invited me to start a white girls club. I was jarred again when my white teacher made clear J. and I had done something bad.

Disintegration can also take place when we're older. I've seen it occur in white college students when they are presented with videos of Black youth describing their encounters with police officers and the regularity, intensity, and impact of such encounters in their day-to-day lives. Having thought things were mostly fine, or at least so much better because of the civil rights movement, grappling with powerful and irrefutable first-person testimonies to the contrary can cause these prior assumptions and frameworks to unravel.

But full-grown adults can experience disintegration too. After the election of Donald Trump, for example, one of my friends sent me a string of texts over several weeks. He was so shocked that people would actually vote for someone who said such racially vitriolic things that he abruptly arrived at a radically new recognition of how pervasive racism is in the United States. He began to see racial disparities everywhere—at the local car wash in the disparity between who was washing the cars and who was driving them; at his workplace in

who had the high-paying jobs and who cleaned the bathrooms. This new vision brought him emotional distress, which led to his repeated texts. He realized he'd never seen clearly what now seemed impossible to not see, and was face-to-face with a painful recognition that our nation simply wasn't what he'd thought it was before November 2016.

However different it may look from one person to another, the stakes in white identity development are high at this point. We disintegrate because we have an encounter in which the moral dilemmas posed by racism become impossible to ignore or deny. In effect, this means our existing framework for interpreting reality—a framework predicated on a simplistic belief in equality and sameness—is shattered. It doesn't work anymore. And because humans don't function without interpretive frameworks, once that happens we have to respond.

Moreover, as can be seen in my students or my friend, disintegration often brings stress. Helms says it's a state of "high dissonance." Part of the reason is that so many unplanned racial encounters in the United States are negative ones. Another reason is that any unanticipated shattering of a prior interpretative framework (racial or otherwise) causes stress. When we experience a fundamental disruption of what we have assumed to be true and have used to explain reality, we are left with the challenge of completely reorienting our minds, hearts, and emotions. That's stressful.

Between the need for an interpretative framework and the desire to resolve the stress of dissonance, motivation to move through disintegration can be very strong. One might do a full retreat to Contact stage—something like putting one's hands

over one's ears and eyes and repeating loudly, "I didn't see it! I can't hear it!"

I am fairly sure, for example, that's precisely what I did after my encounter with Ms. B. I shrank back to Contact stage about as quickly as someone who touches a hot stove snatches back her hand. I was still young enough at the time and had not yet had many such experiences. I was thus able, at least partially, to return to a place of willful naiveté, as if the exchange had never happened. This is a perfect example that reminds us identity development isn't linear.

But the options forward and through disintegration are either to reintegrate the experience of racially differential treatment into our prior framework or to embark on the more difficult and uncertain work of creating a new framework. This is a critical moment, because the outcomes of this choice lead to radically different postures toward racism and racial justice. The way we respond to evidence of racism could not be more different depending on whether we move toward reintegration or pseudo-independence.

Reintegration Stage: Blaming People of Color

If I attempt to reintegrate the experience of differential treatment into my prior framework—the one that presumes things are basically fine in society—I have no choice but to explain the experience of people being treated differently because of race by justifying it in some way. And so, to put it bluntly, I blame people of color for differential treatment. This goes like this in the reintegrating white mind: If Black people

are shot by police at higher rates than whites, they must be more dangerous or prone to criminal behavior and deserving of such treatment. If Latino/a people are suffering economically and doing the lowest-paying work, they must be lazy and, thus, their poverty is a natural result of such laziness.

Reintegration stage is movement along a pathway that embraces or internalizes various justifications for racial disparities and inequity. Such embrace may not always be conscious—racialized, racist justifications for why people of color experience racism may run deep and can be implicit or subtle. But reintegrating means accepting at some level the false belief that white people are superior and do well or are treated well because we deserve it, and that people of color are inferior and don't.

Difficult questions about one's identity begin to surface as we recognize white participation in racism.

Reintegration is often accompanied by fear of or anger toward people of color. We might try to avoid being around African Americans or Latinos, or may actively participate in exclusion and discrimination. We can make such moves without ever resorting explicitly to the language of race and may exhibit behaviors that fall along a continuum. One person may maintain individual relationships with specific Black or Latino/a people whom they treat or see as "exceptional," as in "not really Black." In fact, this way of treating African Americans may have been one reason it was possible for President Barack Obama to be elected in a nation in which

racial bias remains rampant. In many ways, he was framed as an "exceptional" Black person.[3] But reintegration also shows up in the most obviously objectionable and explicitly racist forms, from whites who actively deny people of color access to resources (such as jobs), to those who commit acts of verbal harassment or physical violence.

Pseudo-Independent Stage: Something Is Wrong with Society

Instead of reintegration, a very different path is pursued if one moves out of disintegration and seeks out or creates a new interpretative framework after the disruption of encountering racism. In Pseudo-Independent stage white people conclude this: if racially disparate treatment exists, then the prior framework was wrong. Something must be wrong with society after all. Our systems must be unjust and inequitable. In response I become motivated to better understand what's actually going on and to learn about structural racism and how it functions.

Pseudo-independence brings many new possibilities because it involves the creation of a new framework for understanding reality. This framework takes seriously the idea that society is structured by racism. Recognizing racial injustice as structural and perpetuated by white people is an opportunity for intellectual growth. Powerful positive emotions can attend this growth because we begin to find some language and analysis for phenomena we've experienced. We begin to better understand experiences we knew indicated that something was not quite right, but in regard to which we didn't have language.

I remember, for example, reading James Cone's book *Black Theology of Liberation* for the first time when I was about nineteen years old. Cone's work can be hard for white people. It's a no-holds-barred critique of the complacency toward and participation of white people in white supremacy. But when I read it, I experienced the profound relief of waking up. I'd been troubled throughout high school that in my robustly multiracial school my advanced placement classes were almost exclusively white. I knew something was wrong. I'd noticed that the classrooms I'd been in from first through sixth grade, which had started out as mostly students of color, had gotten whiter and whiter since middle school. But I had no way to explain or even ask about this troubling observation. Cone's work unexpectedly gave me language and explained for me what I was experiencing. Such an unflinching exposure of the effects of social white supremacy was truly awful. But the ability to now see and understand what I had only before felt was a huge relief.

That said, pseudo-independence can also bring stress. To recognize society is responsible for racial injustice, that systemic injustice benefits whites, and that people like us—including people we love and admire—perpetuate it is truly distressing. It can induce in us anger at other white people. We might try to create distance from them and decide we are better than most other whites. It might invoke shame. Not yet having a developed sense of who we are or how we understand ourselves now in the midst of such recognition, we start to worry about what structural injustice means for our own moral complicity. Are

white people only bad? Always bad? Does that mean I am bad?

Pseudo-independence invites deeper reflection and journey and is a desirable outgrowth of disintegration. But it's still an early developmental stage. Difficult questions about one's identity begin to surface as we recognize white participation in racism. But few of us have yet developed the skills or found paths on which to walk through such questions. Nor do most of us have ready access to white models who might show us how to explore and respond to these questions.

The disjuncture here has to do with the gap between emotional and intellectual understanding. Intellectual understanding often comes more quickly than emotional understanding. It takes longer to process and work through the complicated emotional experiences that cognitive understanding of the impact of structural racism as a white-perpetuated and pervasive social reality generates. The common phenomenon of "white guilt" is a perfect example of what can manifest as a result of such emotional/intellectual disjuncture. If you believe in equity but intellectually recognize that inequity is the norm and that you directly benefit from inequity, injustice, and even violence, it's understandable you might begin to feel guilty! In fact, to return to our opening story, depending precisely on how the lessons were taught and what stories were told, that white second-grader could have just as

People of color often experience white guilt as a selfish and self-indulgent emotional state. It doesn't help them end racism, and it's draining to be around.

easily come home on that school day and instead of announcing "I'm so glad we're white!" she might have asked "Why are white people so bad?" Or "Are all white people bad?"

A developmental perspective helps us recognize that white guilt is a normal and predictable part of a white development. But it also helps us see how important it is for white people to work through. White guilt is normal, but it doesn't help us engage in active, agency-filled antiracist action. It's normal but it doesn't help in the fight to end racism. In fact, people of color often experience white guilt as a selfish and self-indulgent emotional state. It doesn't help them end racism and it's draining to be around. The emotional responses of whites during pseudo-independence, then, can make sustained and authentic interracial relationships really difficult.

Another challenging emotion in pseudo-independence is fear. Even as my understanding of racism is growing at a rapid rate, I may not have a lot of experience in or knowledge of how to talk about race. I haven't yet built emotional resilience for engaging with others about it. When I ask my college students why race is so hard to talk about, for example, white students always say they're terrified they'll say something racist. Ironically, increased awareness of and concern about racism can actually immobilize white people because we become more aware of the risk of saying or doing something racist and more conscious of the harm this causes people of color.

Guilt and fear are unpleasant. Living with them without a sense of how to move through them productively can be exhausting. These and other stresses rooted in the moral dilemmas of

becoming newly racially aware can cause us to revert or regress back to prior stages. Instead of staying and wrestling with the uncomfortable feelings that come with recognizing white privilege we externalize these difficult recognitions. Adopting interpretations that explain racism away or downplaying how much one person can do to challenge it are temptations. These responses seem easier than facing and moving through challenging emotions. If guilt is left unresolved, it can turn into anger and be directed outward toward people of color. We may start to get frustrated when people of color in our workplaces or other contexts bring up racism again. We get tired of it, partly because we see that we are complicit, aren't sure what to do about it, and so—sometimes—just rather it would all go away.

But all of these possibilities are precisely why developmental awareness and work is so important. We need strategies and support to push through to what Helms has called Immersion/Emersion stage. So will our children.

On the flip side, the stresses of pseudo-independence can instead be powerful motivation to continue to search and journey forward toward racial health. Some of us respond, therefore, by immersing ourselves in these challenges and do so to great benefit.

Immersion/Emersion Stage: Changing My Relationship to Whiteness

When white people start to realize we can explore, challenge, and change the meaning of race in our own lives, we manifest movement into Immersion stage. We realize we can

ask questions like "Who am I racially?" and "Who do I want to be?" We move from experiencing being white in a reductive sense—as in, I-am-innately-only-bad-and-always-racist. Instead, we still recognize racism continues to have profound power in our lives, but we also see that we can complicate our relationship to our own whiteness. We begin to realize that actively committing to antiracism changes the experience and feel of that relationship. We learn there are ways to discover and create different answers to such questions than those we've perhaps been given from white people around us.

In immersion, these questions don't signal being deluded into the false idea I can escape my whiteness. I can never ignore my positioning as a white person in society. (This is not the same thing as saying, "Race doesn't matter; I can be whatever I want it to be.") Exploring identity is a process of deepening my understanding of the significance and impact of whiteness in my life and in the world around me. I come to realize that I have the ability to *impact and challenge* the power of racism in my life and can participate in antiracist resistance to it. I may begin to submerge myself in work against racism, take increasing risks against it, speak up more often to challenge it, join with others in organized justice struggles.

Immersion may also mean emotional understanding starts to catch up with intellectual understanding. We might start to make sense out of difficult feelings we've experienced in prior racial experiences or that emerge in new ones. For example, it was work on identity that helped me better understand my experience outside the bathroom door in first grade; I recognized the shame my teacher's response had elicited in me and how this

had made me much more afraid to engage race intentionally for so long. Processing feelings from prior or ongoing experience can reduce the residual impact of such emotions in our lives.

Doing such work helps us become more emotionally resilient in present experiences. If I've worked through shame and guilt I am much more emotionally able to take in critical feedback and take it seriously. I am more eager and able to work to improve my behavior when I am challenged and told I've done something racist or behaved in a manner in which white privilege is clearly operative. In contrast, in earlier developmental stages such critical feedback—according to Tatum—feels more like "getting punched in the stomach or called a 'low-life scum.' "[4] What I hear is, "Yep, because I'm white I can only be bad," especially if a person of color challenges me. And when this is how I feel, I'm much more likely to get defensive, cry, or run away if I am critiqued. But in immersion I begin to be able to see the possibility for my own growth and change, and to recognize that while I am deeply implicated in racism as a white person, I do not have to be reduced to *only* being racist just because I am white.

A particularly important recognition in immersion/emersion is that we have our own stake in antiracism work as white people. Prior to this developmental point, white people are more likely to think we should fight racism for the sake of people of color. That view is more likely to lead us into actions that are patronizing, condescending, or otherwise fail to recognize the full humanity of people of color.

Of course, the violence and harm people of color experience because of racism is primary and the most urgent moral

reason to fight it. But white people do have our own stake. Anne Braden, a journalist and a powerful Southern white antiracist activist during the civil rights movement and beyond, put it this way: "White people need to begin to challenge racism as if our lives depended on it, because they do."[5] White supremacy malforms my humanity, constrains my life, compromises my spirit. When I recognize this I begin to see the fight against racism as also a life-giving struggle for my own liberation. This shift may also signal a move from guilt to anger—a kind of healthy moral anger at injustice and an outrage that people of color are being harmed, combined with the recognition that it's being done in my name.

Autonomy Stage: An Ongoing Journey

The final developmental stage is Autonomy. Despite Helms's choice of labeling, this doesn't mean we have no need for others. We can't successfully function individualistically and in isolation in regard to race and racism. It's more like having our feet firmly planted on the ground in a more holistic way. We don't need to either denigrate people of color based on race nor to falsely idealize or romanticize them. We remain continually open to and desirous of learning. We seek to constantly learn from people who are different from ourselves because we know we will grow if we do.

Here, we understand white racial growth and antiracist commitment must always remain a journey. It is never over. And we become increasingly aware of the complexities of racism, the ways that racism and sexism interact with each other.

We become more able to apologize and take responsibility when we make mistakes in regard to race, without feeling as though our very core self is being somehow deemed unworthy.

Autonomy is a developmental state in which we have grown enough to have some accurate sense of our own abilities, agency, facility, and language around race and antiracism. We are less likely to feel we always need to wait to challenge racism only after we see people of color do it first, or first ask them how we should do it. Instead we recognize it's our moral obligation to challenge racism and to continually develop our skills at doing so. At the same time, however, we also recognize the need to constantly stay accountable to people of color. We realize white people need to grow our antiracist resistance in response to what people of color continue to say and teach about racism and resistance to it. Being constantly aware of the powerful and ongoing ways being white shapes me in a racist society leads me to remain committed to constantly checking in, learning more, and being open to critical feedback from and to the leadership of people of color.

White racial growth and antiracist commitment must always remain a journey.

So What Is a Healthy White Racial Identity?

The section above is a big-picture overview of white racial identity development, a general description of how it often proceeds and a sense of some of its significant landmarks. Let's

return now to the question of healthy white racial identity so we can begin to explore how an understanding of "healthy" can undergird the choices and moves we make to nurture white children in their racial understanding.

The most important word to hold on to here is *paradox*. Healthy white identity does not mean teaching children to embrace their whiteness and celebrate "White is beautiful!" It does not mean lifting up whiteness as one difference amid a multicultural array of differences. In a society structured as a white racial hierarchy in which violence and injustice against people of color are the norm, such teaching is morally incoherent.

None of us, regardless of our racial identity, can be truly racially healthy as long as we live in a racist society.

Similarly, healthy does not mean pretending any of us is "just human." We can't simply disavow our whiteness nor pretend being white does not impact our humanness as part of our effort to disavow racism or challenge racial hierarchy. So on the one hand, aiming for racial health means we need to teach white children they are white. Our children need to be taught that their whiteness does position them in specific ways relative to racism and their relationships with children of color.

But on the other hand, healthy does not mean wandering around wracked with guilt and feeling uncomfortable in one's skin all the time. It doesn't mean we believe ourselves responsible for having been born into this inheritance of white supremacy. Nor do we misperceive ourselves as somehow single-handedly responsible (as the white savior!) for ending

the crisis of white supremacy for all times or able to accomplish such a thing.

We are clear we cannot downplay the power of racism in our white lives. But we are also clear that racism doesn't have to have the last word in our white lives either. We are clear that whiteness is not merely a fluke of biology and that, in contrast, it deeply impacts our experiences of race and our relationships and coalitions with people of color. But we also know it doesn't have to mean we remain unable to create, sustain, and be authentic in relationships across racial lines. White racial health means never downplaying how embedded in injustice whiteness is while knowing that we ourselves are not only and always bad—all at the same time.

It's a paradox. In fact, paradox is the best we can aim for. None of us, regardless of our racial identity, can be truly racially healthy as long as we live in a racist society. And for white people the paradox has the acute complexity of being related to the moral compromise and complicity being white in such a society involves us in. The goal, then, is to raise white children who are neither overdetermined nor underdetermined by being white.

Neither Underdetermined . . .

To not be underdetermined means to not downplay whiteness. It means learning and living with the recognition that being white impacts and determines a significant amount of my experience, my posture, my work, and my understanding relative to racism. I understand my white social location is always

signified by the body and often accompanied by certain kinds of experiences.

In a racialized society this social location both communicates to others and is accompanied by privileges that impact so much of my life experience, experience in society, and relationships with other people. I am continuously aware that this racialization affects what and how I see, what I feel, how I understand, how I am perceived, and on and on. To not be underdetermined by one's whiteness means deep self-awareness of all of this and living in ways that are informed by this awareness.

Nor Overdetermined

To not be overdetermined means not presuming that it's impossible to challenge whiteness. Whiteness isn't stable. It's built, can be unbuilt, and thus doesn't define my soul if I actively refuse to allow it to do so. I have agency. I can learn and am able to actively stand up for justice and engage in antiracist postures. I can build skills for challenging racism in increasingly effective ways, even as a white person.

I will never get to a point that I always challenge racism perfectly. My actions against racism are always shaped by my specific white racial experience and positioning. But not being overdetermined means I am aware, nonetheless, that I am not the sum total of my mistakes and can learn to do better. I experience a deep sense of agency in terms of my ability to challenge racism and to learn and grow. All of this is what it means to not be overdetermined by my whiteness.

A healthy white identity is nurtured through experiencing the growth, freedom, and power that comes from taking anti-racist stances and learning to negotiate different racial spaces. For example, one might be constantly deeply aware of one's own particular white body (not underdetermined) while also being able to connect and to navigate spaces and places that are predominantly occupied by people of color (not overdetermined). One can be comfortable in one's own skin while being positively unwilling to ever remain silent in the face of racism or accept the inevitability of white privilege.

In a society in which racial hierarchy and systemic racism are present, there is no one, fixed, healthy place. Just as one has to continually commit to good nutrition and fitness to sustain a certain level of physical health, a healthy racial identity is active, dynamic, and has to be constantly attended. What it looks like is not the same in every local context. But it is consistently marked with the clear- and wide-eyed recognition of one's own white identity and what that identity means in a racial hierarchy. This recognition is combined with a sense of agency about one's ability to meaningfully challenge and intervene in racial hierarchy and build authentic interracial relationships.

The Paradox of a Healthy White Identity

A general overview of white racial identity development theory roots our understanding of how race-conscious parenting works. At this point I want to circle back and use a story about Doritos (snack food), sharing an experience with my

daughter, to give a concrete example of healthy white racial identity development.

> I was telling my two children about a racial incident their five-year-old cousin experienced at his after-school program. A child had a bag of Doritos and was letting all the kids in the class come up and smell them (yes, that delicious Doritos smell). But when T. came up, the boy stopped him and said "Not you. You can't smell them. You're Black."
>
> I wasn't surprised when my kids expressed sadness and anger after I told them about T.'s experience. But I was surprised (pleasantly) when I asked them how they would have handled the situation if they had been present. In response to that question, my white five-year-old said: "Well, I'm thinking the kid who did that was probably a white kid. If that kid was white then I think a white person needs to tell him to stop. So I would have said to that boy, 'Don't talk like that, that's mean.' "

My five-year-old daughter's reaction to her cousin's experience indicated she could see the behavior of the Dorito owner as racial behavior. She did not use the word *racist*, which was conceptually a bit beyond her at that age. But her answer made clear nonetheless that she knew the white child was not "just being mean." She recognized that this was racial meanness. This is a developmentally important and appropriate recognition.

E.'s analysis was possible because she'd had lots of conversations already not only about race and difference, but about the ways people of color are often treated. She was caught off

guard at first that her own cousin was treated this way. Both she and her older sister first said "What?" with shock when I told them what happened. But she was not caught off guard in terms of recognizing the precise nature of what it was she was seeing.

It is very significant also that E. named the need for a white person to intervene in this situation. This specificity is relevant to our discussion of healthy white racial identity. She recognized this boy's behavior as a white behavior. And her response indicated she knew it was particularly important that someone attempting to be an ally (again, not her language) must intervene. This recognition indicated her self-awareness of her own whiteness too. Because she responded in this way only after being asked, "What would you do?" her response indicated she knows she is white and that her whiteness was relevant to her subsequent obligation (had she been there).

In short, my daughter did not hear this story in an underdetermined way. Her whiteness mattered and she knew it.

At the same time, she gave no indication that, because she's white and part of the perpetrator group, she was guilty. She felt responsible but not condemned. She knew she could act against whiteness in this moment. In short, she was also not overdetermined by being white.

My daughter's response indicated signs of having a sense of meaningful real agency and empowered advocacy. She saw her own ability and responsibility to act as a white person to interrupt a white racist moment. This was race-conscious analysis of the sort indicative of healthy white racial identity development.

This cannot be overemphasized. Intentional teaching about

where white people sit in this nation's racial hierarchy (and how we got there) necessarily involves teaching our children about so many bad things white people have done. It's important they learn to recognize the reality of white dominance in our society. We have to be honest about white complicity.

But it also means teaching them constantly about the possibility of agency as part of that teaching and through our modeling such. We can't be silent about white behavior, but we also must not only talk about white people doing bad stuff. We need to offer our kids alternatives they can recognize.

A Return to "I'm so glad!"

Now let's return to the first "I'm so glad" example. Despite how different it is from the Doritos story, the first example is also evidence of healthy white identity development! A child already caught in a color-blind framework would not have noticed her own whiteness, nor have felt allowed to verbalize the observation in response to what she learned at school. The recognition that white people benefit from injustice would have gone unnamed or only been insinuated.

Instead, this child's gleeful declaration—"I'm so glad we're white"—is an honest and astute assessment of her actual racial environment and her specific white positioning. She is recognizing the white privilege of not being targeted by racism.

This recognition is positive for so many reasons. First, it's evidence she hasn't already been shamed into silence about race or whiteness (something children experience early). I can imagine many white second-graders not being willing to risk

making this statement to their parent. I have no doubt I would not have done so as a second-grader, especially after having been through my first-grade bathroom experience.

Second, of course this mother wants her daughter to develop a more nuanced, complex, and antiracist response than glee. But the truth is that none of us can journey toward healthy white racial identity without having wrestled with the problem of being privileged by injustice. This child is thus, as a second-grader, developmentally on her way. She is moving into pseudo-independence because she recognizes something in society is wrong and demonstrates an age-appropriate analysis that the thing that is wrong puts her on the privileged side of that harm.

Third, her ability to assess the actual racial environment and her own positioning in it offers her mother a powerful starting point from which to explore further discussion. Informed by racial identity development theory and a notion of healthy racial identity, then, a number of nurturing moves are available to this mother. In this moment a race-conscious posture will seek to support this child's assessment that white privilege exists, while also supporting the explicit recognition that, indeed, she is white. It will also help her make the connection that she can join with others to fight the injustice she just learned about.

Here are some possibilities:

- "I'm so glad you're you! And, yes, you and I are white. But what makes you glad we're white?" From here, in an open dialogue, there is a strong

likelihood the specific privileges and protections her daughter had noticed or learned about will be named. This can then easily lead to a conversation about the mother's (and the child's) values about fairness. "The same things that make you feel glad you're white are actually ways of being treated that I want for everyone: Black people, Native Americans, and Latino/a people. So the fact that I sometimes get treated better because I'm white makes me kind of sad. I'm glad you are you, but I want everyone to be treated well, not just white people."
- From this point any number of conversations about actions people take or ways they show they want everyone to be treated well and fairly (from treating people fairly themselves, to standing up and taking action when people are not being so treated) can be pursued.

Or a different response:

- "What do you think the Black kids in your class felt? Do you think they went home thinking they're glad they're Black?" This conversation might help the child cultivate identification with her African American peers. It invites her to get specific about how her peers (friends?) might have felt in regard to the same things that made her conclude she was

glad to be white. And here (as above) she is likely to notice herself that she, of course, wants Black kids to also have those things too.

- This line of inquiry also might lead to a different, important dialogue. It might invite recognition of the powerful and good things her African American peers heard about themselves. A dialogue that invites reflection on the creativity and resistance that is the legacy of African Americans is also a critical race-conscious teaching that such a line of questioning makes possible. She might then intuit that very likely Black kids in her class also went home thinking, "I'm so glad we're Black!" though for very different reasons. This level of specificity is not too advanced for a second-grader. It nurtures consciousness of not just the fact of difference itself, but that diverse experiences tend to go along with our differences.

In either case, or any of the variations in between, these inquiries can be turned into a discussion not only about difference, which is where our conversations with children so often end. Instead it can be grown into a discussion about shared justice commitments across lines of racial difference, while not downplaying difference itself. It might even turn into a discussion of white people who actively participated in the civil rights movement alongside Black Americans. At least, groundwork has been laid for further conversation about this

down the road, or to a mother-daughter decision to learn more together about white people who were active in the civil rights movement.

Any of these strategies affirms this child's awareness of her whiteness, rather than sublimating it the way color-blindness would, or relativizing it the way diversity-alone would. Simultaneously these strategies open up racial conversation in the interest of the child growing a deeper connection with her own values, her own experience of race, and the way her racial location connects her with others who are not white through a shared (though painful) history.

All of these responses avoid loading this moment with adult anxiety ("Oh my god, do we say that?" doesn't get the last word!), while laying groundwork for ongoing discoveries down the road.

Enabling Deeper Vision

Whatever the responses, understanding white racial identity development—both how it manifests and what healthy looks like—enables strategies and responsiveness. Such understanding supports us in envisioning our aspirations for white children in our lives. Namely, we hope to cultivate a self who is comfortable in her own skin while also being empowered as an advocate for justice. Having a vision of where we want to go helps mightily in making decisions along the way.

There are two other things that the framework of racial identity development theory make visible to parents. One is the reality that everything a child observes and experiences in

his/her racial environment deeply forms identity and selfhood.

Consider the twelve-year-old whose parents have taught her color-blindness or diversity all her life. When grandma or uncle says something racist at a family gathering, she watches these same parents respond with silence. She gets confused. Maybe she develops anger toward her parents or internalizes a sense of shame. Maybe she concludes the silence is appropriate, in which case she accepts a kind of values/action cognitive dissonance.

Understanding the framework of white racial identity development cultivates recognition of how much these experiences of silence or complicity that are so common in white families impact our children. The impact goes deeper than just watching someone else model complicity in the face of racism. These experiences literally and actually shape our children's psychological development.

The second reality is that identity development theory reveals the stakes in all of our experiences. This may be overwhelming. But such a revelation is also empowering because it can enable bravery on the part of parents and other caregivers for whom decades of racial silence and tension can make such encounters difficult. Awareness of the formative power of modeling and dialogue become for us deep motivation to cultivate our own capacity. It can give us courage in the face of experiences that make us afraid.

Many parents today were raised either in families in which explicitly racist teachings were present, or in which teachings about equality were present but adults did not model antiracist

interventions when racism reared its head. Many of us, thus, share a racial development journey. We have further growing to do ourselves. It's not difficult to see, for example, how a different adult response to my bathroom conversation would have generated a different set of possibilities in terms of my and my friend J.'s racial identity development path. But that would have required Ms. B. to have had a different sense of her own whiteness, to have been herself actively on a journey of healthy white racial identity.

So white racial identity development also allows us adults to think about our own identity. This is critical if we are to parent and teach white children along the lines I'm advocating. It's also a significant gift to us, then, as well. For just as conversations with our kids may surprise us in terms of what we learn from them, parenting white children in a racially conscious manner may also surprise us as we discover it's about more than our kids. We are going to get to grow in the journey too.

Takeaways

- ✓ "Healthy" white children are comfortable in their own skin but function appropriately in racially diverse environments. They neither ignore nor pretend not to notice the racial identities of others but do not make assumptions about people based on their race. They have strong moral commitments to interrupt and challenge racism when they witness it.
- ✓ Race-conscious parenting aspires to developmentally encourage children toward a healthy racial identity.
- ✓ Racial identity does not predetermine who we are or become, but racial identity development results from a relationship between the internal (emotions, understandings, and so on) and the external (messages, experiences with others, environment).
- ✓ Healthy white identity is an oxymoron in a racially unjust nation; whites can only be "healthy" to the degree that antiracist commitment and practice is at the heart of how we live.
- ✓ A race-conscious posture that supports healthy identity requires we acknowledge that white privilege and injustice exist, while also supporting the recognition that white people can join with others to fight injustice—and finding ways to help our kids do that.

CHAPTER 4

Do We Have to Call It Racism?

Ever since we got Mickey Mouse's greatest hits CD we'd fought song number 19, hitting the skip button the second song 18 was over. We should have known we'd lose eventually. Still, when I heard our then five-year-old singing "One little, two little, three little indians," my heart sank.† I waited to engage her, partly because I needed time to think it through. I wasn't sure what to say that she could understand. Partly I wanted to create gap time between her singing and my response. I knew stopping her in the act risked embarrassing her, and she'd mostly just hear she'd done something wrong. What I wanted instead was to open dialogue.

Much later in the day I started gently, "Hey, H., can I talk to you about the song you were singing earlier? The one about indians?"

† I'm purposely not capitalizing "indians" because the song's not about actual, real Native peoples or Indians. I think it's important that the words on the page here reflect that.