"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

Ch4

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.

"Yes, Mama."

"I don't really want you to sing that song anymore."

"Why not?"

"You didn't do anything wrong. It's just that it's not a very nice song."

"Why not?"

From a parenting perspective that second "Why not?" is the million-dollar question. What do we say to a white five-year-old about why not? How early in their lives and how often do we use the word *racist*? What are the consequences of doing so or not?

On top of these questions, this experience brings to the surface an added difficulty. Many of us would struggle to explain clearly to another adult why we should understand images of, references to, or symbolisms about people of color, such as those in song 19, as racism. We've been shaped by public conversations about racism that are so simplistic:

"Is it racist *or not*?"

"Did that person mean to be racist *or not*?"

"Should someone be offended by that *or not*?"

The options are stark and binary. The "racist" category is underdeveloped. There's little room for nuance. The intention of the person doing something perceived as racist often takes center stage rather than center stage being given to questions about the impact an incident, event, or symbol may have on others.

Flat or convoluted public dialogues make it hard to have

effective and meaningful conversations about what is at stake in various racial moments. We don't get much practice. This larger context contributes to many white parents being as yet unequipped in dealing well with racialized incidents. Then, throw a five-year-old's conceptual sense of anything into this mix and we have an entirely new level of challenge. If we're not sure how to talk about and explain racism to other adults, how do we do it with kids?

Meanwhile, song 19 doesn't really say anything "bad" about Native peoples. So is it racist? Or not?

Parents of white children often look away or keep silent in the face of racism because it can be challenging to figure out how to respond. There are other reasons for our silence too. Some of us may fear we might give our child an overly negative sense of the world if we use the word *racist* too much. The word does pack quite a punch after all. Some of us might wonder if or when our children can understand what the word means. Here's an entirely different concern: I've heard parents worry that talking about racism with their child might play out in harmful ways if or when their child says something about it in front of their friends who are Black or Latino/a. These parents don't want their white kid to hurt kids of color.

> It is imperative that adults stop underestimating what children and youth perceive about race and racism.

Like so much about race-conscious parenting, there are few clear-cut right or wrong answers in response to these real

challenges. There are certainly none that apply to every child in every place. But like those that emerge when we openly talk about difference with kids, to avoid directly engaging with racism doesn't reduce these risks. It merely exchanges one set of risks for others that are, frankly, far more serious in terms of long-term consequences. We can't raise children equipped to be active agents for justice, able to sustain meaningful relationships with people different from themselves, and facile, informed members of diverse, multiracial communities if we don't teach them directly and honestly about racism. So despite the reality that there's no one-size-fits-all answer, it's helpful to explore some of the possibilities and principles that can inform authentic engagements of racism by those of us seeking to raise healthy white kids.

Using the *R* Word

Many of the day-to-day direct encounters young children have with racism take place in exchanges with other kids. We might believe, then, that we can teach them to avoid racism or challenge it when they see it by simply telling them we should be nice to everyone and not be mean to anyone. We might think that teaching them to stand up for others if someone is being mean is enough. After all it's true that being nice or intervening when others are being mean are behaviors many of us teach our children. These do reflect a broader category of behaviors within which racism falls. Such an approach might avoid the sticky situations that can result once they begin to hear and then use a word like *racism*.

But there are many good reasons to use explicit and accurate language about racism. Some of these are counterintuitive. For example, we may fear our kids will use a word like *racism* in front of children of color in ways that hurt those children. But the truth is their ability to see and challenge racism is more likely to enable them to sustain meaningful friendships with those children. We might understandably fear making them overly sensitive by giving them words that seem big and scary. In fact, offering them language for the experiences they are *already having* is much more likely to cultivate their sense of agency and empowerment.

A later experience I had with H. when she was seven illustrates this latter point. That winter, my daughter was participating in a soccer camp. I sat and watched her begin to jostle with a boy while they were both in line for a drill. I overheard her say, "Hey, that's not nice! *Hey!*" She said it two or three times and was clearly upset.

In the car ride home I asked what happened. She explained he'd cut in front of her in line and told her boys should get to go first. I responded by reaffirming what she already knew: he was wrong. I told her I was pleased she'd stood up for herself. I acknowledged that it's hard to do that and said I thought it was awesome she had.

What I didn't do was use the word *sexist*. In fact, I didn't say anything about the gendered nature of his behavior. I didn't think this through carefully, but I believe my reluctance was similar to reasons some parents might avoid the word *racism*. I had a vague worry that if I emphasized the gendered nature of her

exchange I might make too much of it and give her a complex about dynamics between boys and girls. I didn't want her to make herself smaller or more careful somehow because she goes into situations expecting to be treated poorly because she's a girl.

Later I still felt uneasy, though, so at bedtime I circled back and asked her how she was feeling now about what'd happened. At first she told me she was fine, but then she went on to say, "That boy also said it would be embarrassing if a girl beat a boy out on the field." She was obviously still upset and definitely not fine.

At this point I could see better how small the encounter had *already* and *actually* made her feel. I could also see how little my earlier generic "good job, H." had done to help with how bad it felt. By not addressing the gender dynamics I had left her more vulnerable to internalizing gendered harm. In contrast, language to explicitly explain the experience might have supported her to process the encounter and the feelings it had elicited in her.

So I finally said, "You know what? That boy wasn't just being mean. There's actually a word for what he was being. He was being sexist."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

For the next few minutes, I tried hard to keep it really concrete and describe things in a way that might make sense to a seven-year-old. I explained that sexism against girls and women is a big problem; that it can happen at school, in families, in all the places we live and do our thing. I told her that sexism is what's happening when people say things that suggest boys

are better than girls, do things to treat girls as if they aren't as valuable, or make rules that make things unfair for girls while boys get treated better.

As it turned out she hadn't even understood the boy's "embarrassing" comment until now. She'd known he was insulting her. But she didn't get that the slam had to do with her being a girl. So I explained this too. I told her that saying it would be embarrassing for a boy to get beat by a girl on the soccer field only made sense if you believed a girl couldn't be just as good an athlete as a boy. This was precisely what the boy was implying. Again, he wasn't just being mean. He was being sexist.

After all of that, I told my daughter that she's likely to have experiences like this a lot. Most important, I told her that because the boy was being sexist that when she stood up for herself, she wasn't only standing up for herself. She was standing up for all girls.

Here I had withheld information from her out of a fear I would discourage her by saying too much about how hard the world can be on girls. But instead of shrinking, the opposite happened. She became more animated. Then she shocked me with a response I'd never anticipated. "That reminds me of the woman on the bus who wouldn't give up her seat when white people told her she had to move," she said.

"You mean Rosa Parks?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Remember? She didn't want white people to treat Black people badly so she stood up to that bus driver."

"Yes, actually! Just like that!" I said. "You're right. Rosa

Parks was standing up against racism and standing up for all Black people when she did that. Racism is all the beliefs, behaviors, and laws in our society that harm African American people, Latino people, and all people of color."

H. and I went on to talk about Rosa Parks's courage. She pointed out to me that Parks "must have been extra courageous" because she was Black and a woman. Then we talked about how it's everyone's job to stand up—including white people (like my daughter) against racism, and boys and men against sexism.

It's clear by this point that a deep premise of race-conscious parenting is that our children can and do understand racism much earlier than adults give them credit for. Supported by evidence from social science, educators write about how imperative it is that adults stop underestimating what children and youth perceive about race and racism.[1] It's critical so we can function as supportive participants as they develop ways of being in the world that are committed to antiracism and racial justice. But it's also urgent because by not underestimating them we create opportunities for the mutual growth that dialogues and explorations engaging racism opens.[2] It's not just about children and youth. We adults who experience such dialogue stand to grow. And we stand to deepen our parent–child relationship.

My experience with H. and soccer focused on the *s* and not the *r* word—at least initially. Nonetheless, this example is an excellent illustration of educators' claims. There was such a stark contrast in the outcome between the moment I withheld truthful and specific information from H. and the moment

in which I risked sharing more accurately. I nearly missed an opportunity to support her in growing an antisexism frame for her experience of the world and her place in it. It's inarguable that my daughter was ultimately better supported because I eventually listened to my gut-level sense that something still wasn't quite right and revisited the topic. The language I wasn't sure she was ready for was exactly what she needed to transform this situation from one of harm to one of empowerment.

I also nearly missed what became an opportunity for mutual growth. Our connection deepened as we explored the relationships between H.'s resistance to sexist behavior and Rosa Parks's resistance to racism. I wasn't the expert here, offering her some empowering teaching in this exchange. It wasn't one-way. On the contrary, she articulated her knowledge—and created new knowledge—through our shared dialogue. I was inspired by her. This was a mutual, two-way exchange.

This example is also excellent because even though it began about the *s* word, the *r* word did enter the room unexpectedly. In this way, my experience with H. shows the outcomes that potentially result when we've worked to cultivate a race- and justice-conscious schema with our kids. Many previous conversations about both race and gender, and stories about freedom fighters like Rosa Parks and others were already part of H.'s consciousness by the time this conversation took place. No doubt this prior context enabled her to make the connection between her own antisexist behaviors and Parks's resistance to racism, and then—even more powerfully—to the astute observation that Parks's gender and race meant she was particularly

courageous. Meanwhile, this aforementioned work to create a race- and justice-conscious schema and the dialogue we pursued in this moment all cohered to support her in envisioning and recognizing herself as an agent who has the power to act in situations where "-isms" are at work.

Not every engagement is going to turn out exactly like this. Still, one of the best things we can do to support the racial health of white kids is actively invite them to surface, name, acknowledge, and inquire further into their own experiences of racism. If we break down what was going on in this situation, it can help us think about others.

First, H. was having an experience of sexism whether I decided to support her in interpreting it or not. The same is true when our children experience racism. What kids take away from such experiences has everything to do with what kind of frameworks we share with them to make sense out of such.

Second, my belief that keeping it vague and general would be less discouraging to H. than telling the hard truth about sexism was faulty. Without access to the more truthful way to analyze her experience, she was more vulnerable to a negative impact. The same is true for racism. Generic instructions to "be nice" or "interrupt it when others are being mean" don't give our kids the analysis they need in order to make them less vulnerable to internalizing racialized messages when they have day-to-day kids' encounters with racism. Generic instructions make them more likely to turn their back, be passive, or just walk away because they don't see it. Or, if they do see it,

they are more likely to be overwhelmed because they have little sense of how one might realistically respond.

Finally, an unexpected but incredible outcome was that my daughter, supported with analysis, came to differently understand her abilities, role, and agency against sexism and to see herself as equipped to stand up for justice. We have every reason to anticipate similar results when we offer our children consistent support combined with language they can understand to interpret their experiences of bias and racism in the world.

This final point about agency is absolutely the most important. The central moral urgency of race-conscious parenting revolves around enabling white kids to find ways to explicitly stand up for justice and against racism. To that end, I want to come back to the concern noted above, which was articulated to me by a mother once like this:

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

It is, indeed, frightening to give young children such powerful words for fear they might end up causing hurt to their friends. This concern is legitimate. The many reasons to give our kids such language—good reasons to use the *r* word—don't eliminate the risk such hurt could happen. Yet racism is so per-

vasive and children use and play with race and racial images so much that it's far more likely our children will hurt their Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and other friends of color if we *don't* give them such words and analysis.

While I was writing this book, my sister shared a story about my seven-year-old nephew, T., who is Black. A few days earlier, T. had been playing with a group of kids, most of whom were white. At some point one of the kids pointed at him and said, "Your skin's the same color as poop!"

Later, my nephew told my sister what happened. "Was that girl being racist?" he asked. "Yes," my sister said. "She was trying to make you feel bad about the color of your skin. That's racism."

"I thought so," T. said. Then he continued, "And after she said that, G. [another white child on the scene] started yelling, saying to her, 'Hey, that's racist! Hey, that's racist!' "

My sister was very glad G. had intervened. More important, she could tell by the way T. reported the incident that he also saw G. as having stood up for him. Even though the experience still hurt him, T. felt good about G.'s behavior.

We need to realize that kids talk like this outside of adult earshot *all the time*. It's also worth knowing that when my sister called G.'s parents to tell them how important G.'s behavior had been, G.'s parents were a little uncomfortable. They were glad G. had done what he did. But they said they weren't exactly sure what they had done to equip him and certainly didn't feel like they somehow deserved thanks. Nonetheless, when my sister suggested they must be having some type of

conversations about racism in their home, they admitted, "Yes, well, at least we're trying to. We believe it's really important."

Dialogues about kids and racism often focus on what might have been going on with the girl who used the word *poop*. But as important as it may be to understand her behavior and as much as race-conscious parenting decreases the likelihood a white child would speak in such a way, I think the far more important question is how we equip more white children to respond the way G. did. To that end it's important we recognize behavior likes G.'s is possible only if we don't shy away from big, scary words.

It may be reassuring to those of us who find ourselves daunted about how well we are going to do when we attempt to explain racism to note that G.'s parents didn't quite know what they'd done. Their uncertainty means they definitely haven't mastered a perfect set of ideas about what to do or how to do it. There's no such thing! Yet it's no surprise that behind G.'s behavior are parents who admit they are trying. Even with admitted uncertainty about how to do it, talking explicitly about racism works.

Both G. and T. came away from that painful experience with a stronger sense of possibility about white people's ability to live out antiracist behaviors. Their friendship was left intact. It became more likely to be sustained than it would have been if G. had remained a passive observer to this situation or even if he had shut down the encounter by telling the girl to stop being mean. I suspect T. left the situation less isolated and alienated than he would have had he been left to only receive

comfort from his parents. I suspect G. left the situation more empowered to act against racism again next time. I know the bonds among the parents were strengthened: G.'s parents heard that their parenting choices had positively impacted T., and T.'s moms experienced parents in their community taking seriously their responsibility to equip their white children to live out solidarity with their Black son.

Partnering with Our Kids

The same educators who urge us to not underestimate children offer postures we need to take as we talk about racism with our kids. The challenge is to find the right balance between bringing our own adult values and observations into dialogue about racism with our children, without inserting ourselves as authorities as we do so. "It is important for adults to bring their own agendas and uncertainties alongside children's in these conversations," write Kimberly Chang and Rachel Conrad "but it is equally important that they do so in a way that does not override children's language and experience."[3]

One of the ways to find balance is to listen carefully and follow our children's lead. As we engage them in the work of recognizing and developing an understanding of racism and ways to act against it, our postures should be exploratory. We should stand next to them as partners. We should ask questions and offer insights about racism "as ideas to discuss rather than as right answers."[4]

We also need to anticipate that talking about racism can

raise difficult feelings. So we have to commit consciously ahead of time to stay engaged—even when it feels hard. Teachers explain that creating classrooms as spaces where antiracist learning can flourish requires giving their students explicit "permission to engage in dialogue about race and holding a lofty expectation that they will stay engaged in these conversations." When these postures are taken day after day, one moment at a time, good race talk becomes "part of the culture of dialogue" in the classroom.[5]

The same is true in our relationships with children. Teaching our children about racism doesn't mean we need to have all the explanations figured out ahead of time. We might not quite know what the right, age-appropriate lesson is in any given moment. We will often not arrive at a point of completion in any particular dialogue. We need simply commit to stay engaged with kids day after day and moment after moment. If we do, good race-talk will become part of the culture of our families.

It would have been easy for me (and I've certainly succumbed other times) to simply act in response to my panic at hearing my daughter sing song 19. I was angry at myself (and Disney) for putting her in such a position. It would have been easy to respond out of my lack of certainty about how to explain why song 19 wasn't okay, and my fear that our conversation couldn't possibly go well. But a quick response to tell my daughter to please stop singing would have ended engagement.

I didn't stay engaged at first after soccer. My own discomfort with knowing a strong "-ism" was in the room and my fear

of jading my daughter caused me to artificially simplify and smooth things out. I effectively ended engagement in response to an experience that was genuinely more complex and needed open dialogue. Engagement only resulted because I eventually paid attention to a nagging doubt that I'd slowed down enough to follow her lead and a sense that I needed to create more space to talk further about what happened. Even then, I still felt nervous about how it would go.

Nerves are normal. So many of the examples I've shared in *Raising White Kids* include moments of profound discomfort. Urging parents to face head-on and proactively create more opportunities to teach our kids about racism means inviting them to accept the inevitability of discomfort. Discomfort may come from worrying about what other adults think, as we swim against a color-blind tide. It may come from worrying our attempts risk getting it so wrong we may screw up our kids in the process! It may come when our children ask questions we can't quite answer or say things that push us out of our comfort zone. But a bird's-eye, big-picture view of the positive effects and powerfully healthy outcomes of supporting our kids and being truthful can help us persist.

Here's another important outcome of staying engaged day after day and returning to dialogue about racism over and over. When we stay engaged, we teach our children to do the same. We're not trying to hand them all the right answers to racism. (What a relief!) We're modeling for them what persistence through difficult ideas and challenging encounters looks like. We're modeling a posture of being constantly interested in

learning more, asking and engaging hard questions, and taking responsibility for expanding our antiracist tool kit.

When we follow our children's lead, we also have to try to respect children's language and understanding. We have to find a way to meet our kids where they are so we don't shame or embarrass them but instead support them in developing and growing. This can be tricky. Using their language and their understanding doesn't mean saying "Yes, you are right" when they say things like "I'm so glad we're white," or "Was he dark-skinned?" or sing a disparaging song about Native peoples. It does mean bringing our values and the ones we want them to embrace into our dialogues. But we need to do so while listening closely to what they say and how they say it. We need to honor and respect their processes as we walk with them as fellow travelers who stand to learn as much as they do along the way.

Finally, we need to anticipate that we will regularly experience a lack of closure.[6] Repeatedly inviting our children into dialogue and responding to them where they are while nourishing their growth is a long-term practice. If we follow our children's lead, conversations are sometimes going to end more abruptly than we had planned or wanted them to. Children's interests ebb and attentions shift suddenly.

This journey is one of supporting their development by engaging them with questions that invite more dialogue and discovery about race and racism—both in the moment and as groundwork laid for further discovery. Again, following our children's lead isn't the same thing as leaving them on their own or where they are. Sadly, we have too much white par-

enting in regard to race that does that already. It means giving them permission to be in process and incomplete. It also means giving ourselves permission to be incomplete and in process. We can be simultaneously deeply unsure and yet decide to engage and act anyway!

As we practice these various dispositions and postures, we will find ourselves becoming increasingly capable and facile "in the moment." But assuredly much more important, these practices also build trust, connection, and create a backdrop for future and ongoing dialogue and exchange with our children.

Back to Song 19

Following our children's lead might mean we don't use the *r* word in some moments with some kids. In fact, I ended up making a very a different decision in the conversation about song 19 than I did after soccer.

Before we go there, let's first go back to the observation that we can easily get stuck in terms of how to engage a child in a racialized moment, because we might not even know how we would explain something to another adult. One of the commitments of race-conscious parenting is to constantly develop our own analysis and abilities. In the silence that pervades white culture about race, this is practice we don't get without intentional effort. So there's something to be said for practicing breaking it down for ourselves and to others.

Perhaps you're still wondering what's wrong with song 19. Why is this childish, singsong ditty like "one little, two little" so haunting? Should we really worry about it? The reasons

song 19 is racist might be less on the tip of our tongue than one might expect, given that we live in a society raging with debates over sports teams' mascots. In the gap between hearing my daughter sing this song and talking to her about it, I took some time to break this all down in my own mind.

Here's how I did that: I began to imagine that instead of "indian" we let our kids run around singing: "One little, two little, three little gay people . . ." or "One little, two little, three little Black people . . ." Can you see how much more obviously wrong this song suddenly feels?

The same reasons we can more easily access how wrong such a song would be with these substitutions than we can when the words involve Native people are the same reason this song is so wrong. Oppression against Native Americans takes many forms. Major ones are dispossession from lands and assimilation (attempts at coercively absorbing them into non-Native cultures). These specific forms of oppression have made Native peoples literally less visible in our social words than are gay or Black people. Added to this, the way we tell the story of Native peoples as a nation describes them as having existed only in the far-off past. Whether the images are romantic ones or more explicitly disparaging, they consistently imply Native peoples are a vanished and primitive people.

Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum reports that three- and four-year-olds asked to draw a picture of Native peoples consistently draw feathers, often include a tomahawk, and regularly include violence in the picture.[7] Surely no one sat down and said to each of these children, "Indians wear feathers and

are violent." But this example indicates just how pervasive are dominant, stereotyped depictions of Native peoples in this society. Native peoples are caricatured, depicted in cartoon-like imagery. They are very rarely described as or perceived by non-Native US Americans as real and representative of an actual, contemporary, and diverse set of communities who are nothing like what the community "singing" about them sees.

The exercise of substituting *gay* or *Black* exposes what's wrong with a song that so many non-Native children are still singing. The song persists in part because we, non-Native adults, also don't think of Native peoples as real, present (as in right now, today), actual living human beings and communities. And our own ability to mentally erase Native peoples rests on the actual, concrete, and persistent structural attempts to physically erase them. This question, then, is much more complicated than "Is that song racist? Or not?" This song participates in, and thus supports and perpetuates, a larger trajectory of erasure and genocide.

"But, Mama," she responded, "why would someone make a song they know is disrespectful?"

It was important for me to work through this in my mind before I talked to H. I needed to break down and understand more concretely for myself what was wrong with song 19.

And I ultimately said none of it to my five-year-old.

When she asked me her second "Why not?" (as in, why the song wasn't nice), I simply said, "Well, I can't exactly explain

it all. But the people who that song is about—Native American people—don't like that song. They've said it's disrespectful to them. And since they've said that, and since we care about respect and kindness, I think we shouldn't sing it."

I didn't use the *r* word. I didn't talk about genocide.

I did speak specifically. I named and spoke about Native people in a way that made clear they are actual living, breathing, and real communities. In this way, my answer directly addressed some of the specific harm the song does as it perpetuates the dominant culture's vision of this group of diverse peoples as more imaginary than real. It thus countered some the specific racist perceptions of Native peoples I know my white daughter has already internalized.

I made sure Native people's agency and resistance as people was invoked: namely, Native people have said, "Don't sing this; it hurts us." Though slight, this is different in an important way than my just telling her the song was not nice to Native peoples. It was important, given the ongoing erasure, that Native peoples be named as actors. Of course, I also went on to connect what Native people have said about disrespect and harm to our family's values about showing people respect and kindness. These behaviors were already part of my daughter's sense of what is right and good. Now we made them race-specific.

Even while this particular antiracist intervention did not use the word *racism* it embodied race-conscious postures. It did not succumb to a generic or vague language ("That song just isn't nice"). It was authentic in sharing with my daughter

my adult uncertainty ("I can't exactly explain it all"). It did follow my daughter's lead as I gave space for her "Why not" to take the dialogue as far as we could go. And it ended without closure being forced.

If H. had pressed me to explain what was complicated, I would have tried. But she didn't. This suggested she had enough understanding *for now* relative to her conceptual and cognitive development. But I knew (and know) we had many more conversations to have about Native peoples.

When I'm working with white people who are seeking to grow their antiracist abilities and expand their strategies I often hear them express fear (typically as a way to explain their retreat into silence) that they're not going to explain it just right and not going to be convincing. Against this backdrop of white anxiety, I love this song 19 story. It provides yet another actual experience in which the observations of social scientists and claims of teachers bear out.

Direct talk with our kids will often surprise us in ways that are so welcome and potentially wonderful. In this case, if the second "Why not?" was the million-dollar parental question, the full-blown million-dollar question came at the *end* of the exchange with my daughter. After I explained that Native people find the song disrespectful, my daughter didn't ask me why the song was disrespectful. She didn't say, "But are you sure they care? I don't mean any harm." She didn't argue, "But I want to sing that song, why shouldn't I get to when there are no Native people here?" Instead she asked me a question that revealed deeper moral and ethical insights than we often

get when we try to break things down with other adults. "But, Mama," she responded, "why would someone make a song they know is disrespectful?"

In response to the many racialized messages our kids receive, a fundamental teaching we're seeking to convey is the deep respect of human beings. We choose to not participate and we seek to interrupt racism because we want to respect what actual people tell us hurts or harms them. A deep lesson exists here about simply listening to what actual people say about their own lives—and believing them.

My daughter is learning now to listen in ways that are critical to her racial development. She can't yet fully understand all the whys. But this learning is growing her ability to be able to hear her peers of color when they share the impact of racism on their lives and humanity. Modeling the posture of actually listening to Native people who have described their experience didn't require me to convince my daughter of a thing. If she doesn't see that listening posture modeled, she'll be harder to convince down the road. But at this point in her life all I had to do was give her a concrete context for what she already knew. She already knew we want to respect people. I merely drew on that knowledge to point out what she couldn't have yet known about a song 19, but which I wanted her to know.

> It's important to teach white kids not just about racism but explicitly about white people's participation in racism.

This experience was also a step along the way to further support and grow in and with my daughter a race- and justice-conscious schema that laid further groundwork even as it was incomplete. I experienced another moment that day that led me to believe that if and as we stay engaged together, H. would be able to increasingly connect the dots on her own. And, sure enough, with consistent and race-conscious dialogues along the way, two years after that discussion about the song she would do just that. Dialogue about song 19 (and many others like it) when H. was five became part of the groundwork needed for a successful dialogue when she was seven about sexism and racism and the unsurpassed courage of Rosa Parks.

Seeking Out Sheroes and Heroes

Not long ago, I was talking to another mother whose daughter is white. We were lamenting the nation's racially volatile climate. She nodded toward her four-year-old daughter and said, "I'm just really grateful she doesn't have to worry about any of this yet."

I totally get it. We parents yearn to protect our children. We want to frame things for them in positive ways. We are living in such violent, difficult times, and I want my kids to have a hopeful sense about the world and all of its possibilities. As I journey with my kids and teach them to see racism (and sexism and injustice of many kinds), I continually bump into my own fears that I'll make them cynical or cause them to see the world too negatively.

But it's worth saying explicitly that I want the parental

option to emphasize the positive to exist in equal measure for *all* children, not just mine. I understand my fellow mother's relief at imagining her daughter not having to worry about "any of this." But in the context of racism, I recognize such a disposition as possible for parents of white children in ways it is not for parents of children of color. That some kids can "stay innocent," while others cannot is part and parcel of the injustice we have to address head-on if we are going to raise healthy white kids. In a world full of racism, there is nothing innocent about innocence.

All kids—Black kids, white kids, Asian American kids, Latino/a kids—deserve parenting that takes seriously their need to develop awareness about racism while being mindful about approaches to doing so that support healthy identity. Psychologist April Harris-Britt has studied families of color and concluded, for example, that it is important that parents of children of color prepare them for racial discrimination because studies prove their kids experience it—often. But, she says, it's important to talk about discrimination "occasionally" rather than "often." "If you overfocus on [racist treatment], you give the children the message that the world is going to be hostile—you're just not valued and that's just the way the world is."[8]

Harris-Britt goes on to point out, however, that these same families teaching about discrimination are also teaching their kids to have pride in their racial identity. Such positive identity messages mitigate the risks that messages about discrimination can pose in terms of causing kids to feel unvalued or to expect hostility. For example, her research found

that being "coached to be proud of their ethnic history . . . was exceedingly good for children's confidence; in one study, black children who'd heard messages of ethnic pride were more likely to engage in school and more likely to attribute their success to their effort and ability."[9] The many diverse gifts and characteristics communities of color associate with their racial identity—uniqueness, resilience, creativity, ability, community, and so many other attributes—are important for nurturing hope- and agency-filled sensibilities even while preparation for facing racial injustice is being taught.

There is a corollary discussion to be had here, then, about what these findings suggest about messages to white children about discrimination. They are being raised in a society that already locates whiteness on top and communicates many messages about white as normal or even superior. So teaching them pride in being white as a way to mitigate the risks of an overly pessimistic approach to the world would be inappropriate. White children's vulnerability is not in assuming they won't be valued in society—it's the opposite.

To precisely this end we have evidence that it's important to teach white kids not just about racism but explicitly about white people's participation in racism. To suggest that it's a good idea to be explicit about white people's participation in racism might be more surprising than my suggestion to embrace the *r* word with young children. But this actually makes a lot of sense if we take seriously the unique position of white children in a white-dominated hierarchy and the specific impact that hierarchy has on their sense of self.

One study found that stories about historical racial discrimination measurably decreased white bias. They compared white kids who learned about Jackie Robinson and who were just taught that he was the first Black player in the major leagues to white kids who were taught this but were also explicitly taught that Robinson had "been previously relegated to Negro leagues, and how he suffered taunts from white fans." The second group of white kids came away from this class with "significantly better attitudes toward blacks than those who got the neutered version." Additionally, "it also made them feel some guilt," this researcher noted. "It knocked down their glorified view of white people." Explicit teachings about racism and white perpetuation of racism decreased bias against Black people and reduced white kids' vulnerability to internalizing a sense of white superiority.[10]

At one level, the insights revealed by this study further demonstrate why we shouldn't even be tempted to take refuge in a sense of relief that my white child doesn't have to worry. It turns out an appropriate reality check about injustice and white participation in it is necessary for white kids to develop a healthy sense of racial selfhood. It's the corollary to the positive messages kids of color need about being Black or Latino/a or Native American in support of their developmentally healthy sense of racial selfhood. It's the counterpoint to the overinflated valuing of whiteness that white kids get from culture. Such research suggests we don't need to worry too much about creating in white children an overly cynical sense of the world.

At the same time, if the goal is to raise kids who are empow-

ered to tackle racism, it stands to reason they, too, need to see themselves as having capacity to do so. We need to be authentic and teach our white kids about racism, but be mindful of doing so in ways that enable agency and not despair. We need to feed their sense of purpose and capacity in this regard. It seems to me they need to have a sense of hope and possibility; a vision of the kind of world they want to live in and a sense that their behavior and actions can help create that world.

Given the specific risks posed to white children because of how our society racializes them (for internalized superiority), we need to be especially conscious about engaging them in ways that don't reduce people of color to being seen as victims or to seeing them only in terms of discrimination. We need to be intentional to not feed into a sense of pity, charity, or "white savior-syndrome" in our kids. They must not conclude, as part of their experience of socially overvalued whiteness, they have or are the answer for people of color. Such dispositions are all developmental risks white children face, because all white US Americans face them.

Beyond the individual responses to encounters that require us to engage racist incidents and use the *r* word (or not) then, it's worth giving attention to proactive strategies that need to accompany our teaching in the bigger picture.

First, alongside our direct and honest teaching about the pervasive reality of racial injustice in the United States, which should focus on both the past and present, it's essential to emphasize the agency people of many different races have lived in response to injustice. Agency is important to mitigate what

risk may exist for creating an overly cynical view of the world for our kids. It's probably even more important to buttress the risk of teaching white children about racism in ways that lead them to conclude that what it mostly means to be a person of color is to be a target or victim.

We need to offer white kids endless accounts about and relentless emphasis on the resistance and agency being lived out by people of color. One concrete and effective strategy is the regular practice of teaching our kids about past and present sheroes and heroes—people who have struggled and continue today to struggle for full freedom and equality. We shouldn't wait until our kids learn history at school. Engaging many stories with children and youth—which we can do at every age—is an essential practice. This practice not only cultivates a schema so they have access to models they can draw on for when racialized incidents happen (think H. and soccer and Rosa Parks). It also works against painting people of color as victims.

Second, we need to go far and well beyond stories about Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. We need to expose our kids to diversity among those who have fought for freedom and equality. I found a great book for young readers about Malcolm X and gave it to my daughter when she was eight, for example. As we read it I realized what a different way of thinking about justice Malcolm X's life story presented to her than what she had mostly heard in school and even at home. Suddenly she was reading about power and dignity and the right to self-defense. These are very different messages than the

equality, integration, and peace teachings that typically surround civil rights teaching.

Intentionality about diverse exposure is important for a number of reasons. Like most adults are, our children are already woefully undertaught about communities of color. Dominant US culture simply doesn't lift up many accounts of people of color's massive and myriad contributions to society and the world. We have to choose to rigorously learn, and bring our kids along as we do, through seeking out and engaging the many stories that are never just handed to us in US contexts. Making this a priority is necessary; it doesn't just happen on its own.

In addition, historical leaders like King or Parks can easily become, themselves, caricatures—more cartoonlike than real. Too few images or teachings quickly devolve into stereotyping and tropes. Communities of color need to be humanized in the minds of our children. This is especially true as so much in dominant white US culture presents less-than-human images of Black people, Latino/a people, Native peoples. Constantly learning ourselves, and teaching our kids, the diverse ways people of color have resisted and continue to resist injustice, and going well beyond the handful of figures we learn about in school, enables this.

Third, we also need to expose our children (at various ages) to fiction and nonfiction stories by and about people of color that have nothing to do with racial injustice. Author Rumaan Alam has written about how important it is that the books in our kids' libraries have main characters who are Black,

Latino/a, or racially diverse in other ways when the focus of the book is *not* on racial justice. As important as racial justice stories are, he writes, kids need books like *The Snowy Day*, which are simply beautiful, fun, and magic. He writes,

> We need diverse books to be sure, but those must be part of a literature that reflects our reality, books in which little black boys push one another on the swings, in which little black girls daydream about working in the zoo, in which kids of every color do what kids of every color do every day: tromp through the woods, obsess about trucks, love their parents, refuse to eat dinner. We need more books in which our kids are simply themselves, and in which that is enough.[11]

Alam, whose children are Black, said his kids have a right to such books, too; pleasurable in their own simple way.

To this I would add that white children, young and older, need such books and stories as well. Dominant white culture constantly narrates and portrays the lives of people of color in reductive ways. White kids need fictional stories about people of color that have nothing to do with racial justice. They need nonfiction stories as well about people of color whose work, journeys, and contributions to the world had nothing explicitly to do with racial justice. They need all of this for reasons of basic human growth and wholeness. They also need this to counter the risks that teaching authentically about racism may pose to suggesting the lives of people of color are meaningful primarily relative to the struggle against racism.

One final observation here. We also need to find white sheroes and heroes for our children. Doing so is not to try to build up some type of white pride. Nor is it to overstate the role white people have played or play now in fighting for racial justice. We must never overstate this. But we do need to be models ourselves and to find white models (again, both past and present), so that our kids have visions they can look toward that explicitly bring the fight for racial justice into the image or notion of what it means to be a healthy white person. Here again—our kids are going to be presented with so many images in culture that prop up stories about "good white people" who made a difference in the world by being "nice" to people of color. We need to offer our kids accounts of white people who put their own lives and work more fully on the line and in the mix for antiracism and social change.

It takes time and effort to ensure we are resourcing our kids. But there are many resources out there and they are not difficult to find. Organizations such as We Need Diverse Books or In This Together Media, which compile lists of books, and groups like Showing Up for Racial Justice, which has created forums to connect parents so they can share resources for antiracist activist resourcing appropriate for children and youth, are just a few (I've included a list of resources like these at the back of this book). There are so many more.

The point here is this. These are proactive practices. They require us to do some new work to equip ourselves in ways we haven't been and to learn stories ourselves we didn't know before. And such practices and attention are part and parcel

of the good and life-giving journey of cultivating in our white children a sense of agency and teaching them about racism in ways that both prepares and empowers them to maintain a sense of agency and possibility.

Some Working Principles and Questions

These situations in which we encounter a need to engage the *r* word are going to be as myriad and diverse as are our children and their lives. Before closing this chapter, then, I want to offer a set of questions that might be seen as a template of steps to move through or questions to ask ourselves when we experience racialized moments and seek to engage well with our children.

- Did the incident or encounter in question happen while we were alone with our kids, or is it something they reported later?
- Regardless, let's first take a deep breath.
- Next: Let's slow down and try to break it down for ourselves. Let's get clear on what we understand about why and how something is racial or racist. Let's think about what we most want to bring to the dialogue from our values as we gently engage our child in an open way.
- Let's ask ourselves these questions. What is the child saying about their self-understanding or showing that they understand in a given situation? Once we are somewhat clear about that, we can

decide what parts of their self-understanding we want to affirm and what we need to support the child in rethinking, or present as an aspiration.

- Next: What is the child saying or showing in their behavior about their understanding of other people in what they said or in what happened? And here, again, what do I want to affirm? What does the adult want to engage, support the child in rethinking, or present as an aspiration?
- Did the incident or encounter occur when others were present?
- If so, then, let's also ask: What is the impact on others or on the relationships present in the room if, or as, others (whatever their race) overheard, were addressed by, or were otherwise part of a given exchange? Sometimes we won't know for sure, and often we do have to act on our feet! But the question as we try is: What does the parent want to do, say, and/or make manifest in respect to these persons? What needs to be said to that person as well to align with the parent's own commitments to justice? What does the parent need to model for the child in terms of acknowledging others present in a given exchange?
- In regard to any incident or encounter (whether others are present or not): What response is most likely to further the conversation, be open-ended,

and not assert too much (adult anxiety, for example) onto the exchange while also being explicit and direct?
- Does the exchange or experience lend itself to engaging the child in a conversation about advocacy and action in response to what transpired or what was being discussed?

Perhaps these questions feel difficult. Perhaps they feel abstract. And perhaps it will take us time to begin to sort through how to best engage these questions and respond to them, in ways that are personality-, and situation-, and age-appropriate with our children.

But the following truths simply cannot be said too many times. We get better at understanding, seeing, and responding the more we simply try to do it. We get clearer, more courageous, and more confident every time we do it despite feeling uncertain. And this most of all, what we give our children—and the children of other parents—when we engage and persist anyway cannot be captured or contained in words. It is nothing less than the gift of a future that could be different in desirable ways than the present so many of us are living in now. And that is everything.

Takeaways

- ✓ If there's a racial dimension to an incident among children, call it out as such; don't just say "Be nice!" or "That was mean."
- ✓ One of the best things we can do to support the racial health of white kids is actively invite them to name, acknowledge, and inquire further into their own experiences of racism.
- ✓ Basic principles: follow kids' lead, stay engaged, and assume that we stand to experience mutual growth if we practice being on a journey with them. We don't have to have all the answers—we just need to be persistent and authentic.
- ✓ Kids hear and use racist language and have racist incidents with one another all the time; often parents never even hear about this. We need to equip them to challenge it—which means we need to talk *explicitly* about racism.
- ✓ Our society already locates whiteness on top and treats white as normal, even superior. It's important to teach white kids not just about racism but explicitly about white people's participation in racism—while being mindful of doing so in ways that enable agency, not despair.

- ✓ Equipping white children to understand and be able to challenge racism is required if we are to create a world of flourishing for *all* children. In a world full of racism there's nothing innocent about letting white kids remain "innocent."