"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

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- ✓ Despite the reality that it can be difficult, nurturing healthy white children means we need to seek out spaces in which our children can experience being a demographic minority, remembering to *determine if such participation is welcome*, and to participate with humility and openness.
- ✓ The daily habit of engaging the voices, perspectives, and productions of people of color (in media, art, literature, news, scholarship of many different kinds) impacts not just what we think. It potentially changes what we feel in the world as we move through it after being shaped and informed by such engagement.

CHAPTER 6

Diversity Is Confusing!

"P. [white, age ten] came home today and started telling me about an incident at school. I never really could figure out quite what had happened. But it had something to do with her asking someone to pass her a brown crayon for a picture she was drawing. After that some of the kids in her class told her that because she wanted a brown crayon she was 'racist.' I kept trying to understand what had happened and then she looked at me—so distressed—and said: 'Mom, am I racist?'"

It's not uncommon for white children and youth to manifest confusion, even some anxiety, as they get older and become more conceptually aware of racism, diversity, white privilege, and other notions pertaining to race. Increasingly complex feelings emerge as they develop beyond glee ("I'm so glad we're white") or relief ("I'm white, so I'm safe!"). More challenging responses result as they start to recognize racial tensions or encounter racist discourse in their friend groups. More intellectually complicated ideas begin to be explored as they hear other young people describe things or people as racist.

In the context of a widespread cultural narrative that says, "Even if we have a long way to go, things are getting better," it's easy to forget that race and racism are no less confusing or difficult for our children as they are, or have been, for us. This may be as true for kids being raised in homes where race-conscious parenting is pursued from the beginning as it is for kids whose parents step into race-conscious approaches after they're a bit older. Whatever was happening in this school experience, P.'s distress makes sense!

The confusion P. articulated has to do, in part, with not yet having developed a conceptually full understanding of racism. This is understandable. She's only ten. Meanwhile, quips like "You're so racist!" or "That's so racist!" have become quite common in youth culture. Without yet having conceptual clarity, children and teenagers in contemporary US contexts hear the word *racist* thrown around constantly among their peers. A genuine lack of conceptual clarity, compounded by the likely possibility this word is bandied about at school, are the suspects behind P.'s distress.

Are White Kids Racist?

Racism is typically used in our society to refer to biases and stereotypes. But separate from this, unjust structures and systems exist beyond individual beliefs and biases. These systems are also racist. So one could, in theory, be unbiased and antiracist in one's commitments and yet still be part of and benefit from our unjust system. (This is, of course, only in theory. Breathing in racist "smog" actually makes it impossible to

be unbiased.) Does that make him or her racist? Or is it only the system that is racist?

At the same time, even though individual perceptions are distinct from structures, these are deeply interconnected. Racist cultures build up around such structures. So being white and socialized in unjust racist systems increases the likelihood that white people internalize and act out racism—bias against people of color and false notions of white superiority.

Notice all the different uses of racist/racism in that last sentence. There are so many nuances and layers here. The frequency with which such nuanced and distinct meanings of racism are interchanged or conflated can be confusing for adults. Imagine how much more confusing for children.

Racism is so fraught and our various social contexts full of so much racial tension. As a result, when white children and youth experience confusion it's easy for them to respond by just disengaging. I regularly point out to my college students that most of us have had few to no experiences with good, productive dialogues about race—while many of us have had experience with hurtful dialogues. A fundamental practice of race-conscious parenting, then, is to aid our children to grow their understanding and clarity about these distinct dimensions of racism. We need to support them in working through concepts related to race, so they are more prepared when they encounter race and racism talk among their peers. Enabling our kids to develop clarity is one way to cultivate their resilience in

"I know I'm white so is that the same thing as being racist?"

the face of racially challenging environments and a whole lot of race-talk in the public square that, frankly, isn't very good or particularly well informed.

The story above indicates something more specific and difficult, however, that also needs attention. P. seems worried there is something negative about who she actually *is*. Her question to her mom has to do with some sort of awareness that racism is bad, has to do with white people, and perhaps even to do with her own whiteness. She doesn't seem sure what this thing is or what the connections are. But her encounter with her peers has brought real anxiety to the surface.

P. seems to really be saying something like this: "Mom, am I racist [because I know I'm white so is that the same thing as being racist]?" Subtext: ["I really, really, really hope not because I know racism's really bad and I don't even know what I'm doing wrong."]

As they age, white youth developing race-consciousness may, indeed, begin to have conflicted experiences about how their own white identity pertains to their relationship to racism. This is to be expected.

White people do face unique challenges when it comes to the meaning of our racial identity in a world of racism. These challenges can actually be exacerbated by exposure to diversity, and may become more acute as our children develop intellectual awareness of the power of race in their lives. How does a young person begin to navigate the difficult puzzle of living in a hierarchy that unjustly privileges her because she's white (but wanting to be a "good" person)? Raising healthy

white children requires us to understand the anxieties these challenges evoke so we can both anticipate and respond to them in our parenting.

When I reacted to my daughter after the protest ("Yes, we're white, but we want fairness for everyone"), for example, I did not explore with her the meaning of white privilege for who she and I are as people. In that moment and stage of her development, a focus on fairness, safety, and equity for others was the primary point. But the confusing feelings caused by an increasing awareness of white privilege will return (and has)—and has to be addressed. In moments like the one this mother experienced with her daughter P., there's a need to directly support white children in scrutinizing their own embodiment. We need to talk with them about how they feel about being white, what it does or does not have to do with "being racist," and even about how confusing diversity can be for them, given their whiteness. These more complex aspects of white racial development, which can be supported by clarifying teachings about racism, are the focus of this chapter.

"White" Is a Vexed Location

In the 1990s sociologist Mary Bucholtz spent hours and hours in conversation with students at a racially diverse high school in California. She was interested in understanding the "imaginary lines of race." Race is a construction, after all. But this construction has real consequences in the lives of youth.

Specifically, Bucholtz wanted to know how white youth experienced "being white" in the context of larger social dia-

logues about race and difference. In this case, a study conducted in a high school where a commitment to multiculturalism was central to the curriculum was a perfect way to get at this question.[1]

Bucholtz asked students to identify their age, sex/gender, grade, and race/ethnicity at the start of every interview. On their face, these seem to be pretty straightforward questions.

But something fascinating happened. In almost every case, white students couldn't or wouldn't answer this last, basic question. They had no problem with the age, grade, or sex/gender questions—on these measures they did fine. But when it came to race, their responses became evasive and dissonant. Numerous students gave responses that were ironic instead of genuine. For example, one student abruptly took on a silly and fake British accent and said, "I'm the whiteness of the white boys." Bucholtz described this response as a mock-celebration of his "affiliation with whiteness." Other students feigned ignorance or became visibly uncomfortable. For example, after saying "white," they would add a qualifying statement like "I guess" or "I don't know." Bucholtz didn't encounter any significant evasion or discomfort among students of color in response to the same question.

It's clear through the rest of each individual interview that the students giving Bucholtz such disjointed responses do, in fact, know they're white. Their responses aren't about them actually being confused about their identity. Instead, they seem to be some kind of demonstration of their awareness about how problematic it is to embody an identity marked "white"

in a white racial hierarchy. Given the racial diversity and multiculturalism commitments of the school, students' awareness of hierarchy and their own whiteness would have been particularly acute. It makes sense that it was when the specter of being associated with whiteness was explicitly raised, even through a question as seemingly innocent as "what's your race/ethnicity," that such strange reactions were the result.

What Bucholtz ultimately concludes is going on with these teenagers is relevant to the distress that seems to be going on in P.'s question to her mom. Throughout her study, Bucholtz finds among white students a largely subconscious, but very real and pervasive fear. Students are afraid that if they admit they are white *without*, in the same moment, demonstrating some reluctance about being white or without distancing themselves from white identity (that is, by mocking whiteness, or vaguely evading the question), they might be seen as endorsing racism. In other words, white identity and white dominance are so tangled up together that asking about one automatically raised the other. So they get silly, snarky, or tongue-tied when put in a position to have to say, "I'm white."

If we recognize how entangled hierarchy and identity are, these strange responses make a lot of sense. These students are attempting to create a kind of gap between themselves and racism. They're trying to generate distance between who they are as people who are white and the widespread cultural recognition that racism is a white thing. It would seem they're experiencing a context in which those two things are deeply conflated. Even if much of their experience registers mostly at

the subconscious level, this conflation and context causes them discomfort.

Bucholtz discovers something else that seems to vex these white high school students as well. She finds that whiteness in this school is associated with "cultural blandness and lack of coolness."[2] Sometimes this comes up as a kind of joke. But sometimes it's clear this is a highly painful experience for these youth. And it's here this study gets particularly useful in terms of more fully understanding the reason diversity can be so confusing for white kids.

A palpable perception of "white uncoolness" is partially related to the fear among white students that being white means one is (or is going to be perceived as) innately racist. Imagine being immersed in a context where celebrating racial diversity is the publicly endorsed norm. You know very well, though, that celebrating your own specific diversity—whiteness—is forbidden. The reality that this is forbidden is probably not openly acknowledged or explored, however.

How could whiteness be or become anything other than uncool in such a context? You can't embrace your race while everyone else gets to do so. You can't participate positively and make a contribution to racial diversity. Meanwhile, you're supposed to simultaneously love engaging your (much cooler) peers across lines of difference. It seems to me all the students in this high school have been set up for failure.

Distress about the possibility that being white makes one innately racist, unaddressed feelings that one is inescapably "uncool" (which is hard for most people, but especially for

teenagers), or some combination of both are uniquely related to the experience of being white in a society in which white identity puts one on the side of "unjust benefit" or "privilege" in regard to racism. The distress this experience brings often leads to resentment among white kids. Add the presence of collective racial tensions emerging out of larger racial scripts to this distress, and it's not hard to see how we can end up with full-blown racial tinderboxes all over the place in this society, even in high schools committed to multicultural education.

In fact, Bucholtz does find white resentment among the students she interviews. She finds that students at this diverse high school intentionally committed to teaching diversity are every bit as racially self-segregated as are students in schools where diversity is present but not given explicit attention. A focus on multiculturalism didn't change students' interracial relationships one iota. Bucholtz also finds that many of the white students she interviews are cynical about, completely disinterested in, and, in some cases, even downright hostile to the school's focus on diversity. Notably, this dynamic has nothing do with conservative politics. This school is located in a politically liberal part of northern California.

All of these findings are precisely the opposite outcomes hoped for by way of the school's multicultural focus, of course. And it's worth focusing on this phenomenon for precisely that reason. Bucholtz's discovery points to a different challenge related to diversity than the one we explored in relationship to preexisting racial scripts causing diversity alone to fail as a

strategy. The challenge here has to do with white kids' experience of diversity relative to their own specific identity. The extent to which white is a vexed location makes it difficult for whites to authentically embrace diversity, let alone embrace it deeply.

I've been convinced for a long time that one major reason behind our failures around diversity, even in educational or other contexts (faith communities, for example) where it is genuinely valued, has do with the fact that diversity provides no meaningful way for white people to plug in. White people's individual racism is often blamed for ongoing failure to realize diversity. Certainly this is a major factor. But the specific obstacles caused by whiteness run much deeper and are more complex than explicit racism. They have to do with the meaning of white identity in an unjust society, and with what that vexed location does even to folks who genuinely want to embrace difference.

Bucholtz's findings seem to support my sense of things here. She determines that white students' negative views toward diversity are a symptom of not having access to what she calls a "meaningful 'ethnoracial' identity."[3] In other words, white students don't have an embraceable, positive, meaningful racial identity in a context where everyone else gets to have one. As a result they become deeply alienated from the whole enterprise of diversity—and, I would add, by extension they become alienated from commitments to racial justice.

In many ways the problem that P.'s story and Bucholtz's study bring into focus has to do with the issue *Raising White Kids* is devoted to unpacking. Meaningful, embraceable white

identity is a problem because of the reality of a pervasive presence of white supremacy in this society. This social position creates unique conundrums for white people—including children and youth—seeking to work for racial justice. There's no simple fix here. Until white supremacy is eradicated, white identity will continue to be a complex experience—an identity that just can't, in and of itself, be embraced. White is just not a parallel identity to Black, Latino/a, Cherokee, Chinese American, Mexican American or any other social/racial/ethnic identity. It's an identity that requires white people who seek to grow our antiracism and our justice commitments a unique type of journey. And this is a journey for which we have few models.

But just because there's no simple fix doesn't mean we can leave this real problem unaddressed. In fact, we can't ignore it if we're serious about raising white children who are empowered in regard to antiracism, comfortable in their own skin, and able to function well in diverse racial contexts. Being white is a painful and vexed location in the context of awareness of justice. We have to take this seriously and practice talking about it.

Race-conscious parenting means creating opportunities for our children to reflect on the emotionally difficult truth of whiteness. Older children have experienced such difficult truths long before they have words for them. But for lots of understandable reasons, this emotionally difficult truth unique to white people is rarely discussed in environments where diversity is being valued. So our children learn silence around this experience very quickly. If race is taboo in so many ways, it is even more taboo to talk openly about what it's like to be

white. Finding ways to support white children and youth (such as those in the Bucholtz study) in so doing is, thus, urgent.

Learning to See (and to Create) a "Gap"

As parents we need to cultivate constructive strategies to directly respond to this challenge of meaningful racial identity. In the big-picture response to P., it is critical, for example, that P.'s mom finds a way to support P. in starting to disentangle her selfhood from the negative and defeating sense that being white means being unequivocally racist.

This is long-term developmental work of precisely the sort explored in our discussion of white racial identity development theory (in chapter 3). P. isn't too young to begin this work: the moment children begin to articulate distress about being white relative to their recognition of racism, however confused that recognition may be, it's time to begin.

Indeed, distress about being white can emerge at ages younger than age ten or can show up much later. When white children and youth are offered honest assessments of race and truthful histories about or analysis of contemporary racial realities in the United States, it's almost inevitable we parents and teachers will find ourselves engaging painful questions about white people at some points.

Dialogue about white complicity will at some point become the center of the discussion. This is good. It's important. But it's also very hard.

I recall a conversation with my daughter when she was about six

after a period of time in which we had been talking a lot about Native peoples and the mountain home we now live in during the summers. The specific dialogues have long since become blurry to me, but over a period of weeks I had repeatedly invoked the Ute people, whose place this was before colonization. I told her that their dispossession was directly linked to this place now being a place where mostly white people live.

Through the course of these conversations we ended up in larger discussions of the triangle of unjust relationships among indigenous, African, and European peoples that forged the United States. This dialogue proceeded in a back-and-forth fashion. I would share things as we just moved through our day-to-day lives in this location, and she would usually respond in a pretty typical six-year-old way—with question after question after question, replete with lots of whys and hows.

I recall that at some point in these conversations, my daughter asked me (and I believe she did so more than once), "Did all the Europeans do such bad things?" At another point, she explicitly asked, "Are we white?" and "Does that mean we come from Europeans?"

These questions felt painful to me. But of course, I said *yes*, in the big picture Europeans simply didn't belong on this land at all because it wasn't theirs and that, *yes*, Europeans as a group were the ones who engaged in or supported the enslavement of African peoples. And I said that *yes*, our family was, indeed, descended from Europeans. In fact, I told her, specific members of my own family participated in these specific injustices in very explicit ways.

But I also told her there were a few white people who knew that what was being done was wrong and who tried to find ways to resist. I told her, for example, I knew of at least one person in our family who had held African peoples as slaves, but that we also had at least one person who had fought to end slavery even before most other white people did that. I remember John Brown coming up in this conversation.

I also told my daughter that my connection, as a white person, to this history is one of the reasons I work so hard to learn about injustice and to constantly work *for* justice. Most important, I told her we can always make different choices than our ancestors did—that it's our job to actively make different choices and work for justice and fairness today, especially if we're white.

This was a younger-than-high-school recognition of how vexed is the position of being white. But I regularly see older-than-high-school versions of this recognition too. So many feelings and frustrations emerge in my college classrooms when I engage students in a truer version of racial history than most have ever engaged before, or in frank assessments of the racial climate at our university. Last year, I taught Dakota scholar and activist Waziyatawin's incredible book *What Does Justice Look Like?* in one of my classes. Waziyatawin's detailed history of how Minnesota became a state elicited reactions from all students that ran the gamut from horror at the history itself to outrage at having never been taught the history. White students were devastated in a particular way and none more so than the several who were from Minnesota. They all felt complicit. They all struggled with

how they would now "go home." White had come to seem to them synonymous with violence of unimaginable proportions and defined today in Minnesota by the ongoing legacies of these histories in contemporary social, economic, and land relations. Their embodiment as white people became deeply, literally, physically uncomfortable. This induced a college-age version of what was going on for my daughter when she asked me if we descended from Europeans.

The point of these examples is to emphasize that when we're engaged in a sustained practice of having honest conversations about race with our children, at whatever the age it happens, it will happen: dialogue about white complicity will at some point become the center of the discussion. This is good. It's important. But it's also very hard.

Setting aside that her mom couldn't quite understand exactly what had happened, in the case of P.—whose pain is real—support doesn't mean rushing in to assure her she's not racist. It doesn't mean downplaying or avoiding discussion of the reality that, given the nature of our society, yes, white people are all complicit with racism. Yes, we are complicit with almost unavoidable ease. So, in a sense, "Yes P., you (like me) are racist."

Whatever else may be going on, P. is showing something of an awareness of the real moral crisis that those of us who are white and who want to be healthy (that is, antiracist) live with every day. As a white person, this is something P. must contend with. Her plea here is a sign she is engaged in critical developmental work.

But in the bigger picture, support does mean dialogue and

work aimed at inviting P. to see the gap between herself, even as a white person, and *racist systems*. It means finding ways to invite her to strategize how she can actually make that gap even larger through active, antiracist behaviors.

The gap I'm describing here is the same one Bucholtz's white students unsuccessfully tried to create by rhetorically evading Bucholtz's question about racial identity. As parents, we need to support children in creating distance between "being white" and "racist" in larger contexts in which these are conflated. But creating such distance is not about allowing them to downplay their complicity with racism or evade their whiteness. It's not about saying, "P., you may be white, but you are a good person." We have to be direct and authentic with them about how complicit we are and how much we are all impacted by the racism we breathe in and benefit from as white people.

Let's Talk Strategies

Creating distance is about finding strategies that interrupt kids when they conflate "white" and "racist" in ways that can be so self-defeating they're likely to cause developmental regression—and potentially more active racism. I'm taking a lesson from Bucholtz's findings here. White students in Bucholtz's study were hostile to the whole emphasis on diversity in large part because the pain of "no gap" (combined with being "uncool") was just too great. If we want a different result in terms of our children's relationships to diversity—and by extension antiracism and justice—we have to work for it.

One strategy emerges from understanding the precise rea-

sons diversity is so confusing. For example, when we talk about something like Black history and culture, a significant dimension of what we are talking about is the resistance, creativity, and agency African American people have lived in response to the domination of white racial hierarchy. Learning about the histories and cultures of communities of color is critical for white children and youth.

But parents must also offer white children and youth a meaningful place to stand or a way to meaningfully participate in diversity. This isn't a suggestion to say to our kids, let's celebrate white culture. Rather, offering white youth a meaningful place to stand means sharing with them models of white people—those who have lived in the past and those who are alive and active today—who live agency against racism. Such a commitment doesn't mean shifting focus away from people of color or downplaying the painful history of white complicity with racism. It means recognizing that white children desperately need examples of people who have created a gap between who they were and are as selves and the systems of white supremacy in which they lived and live.

So, for example, in terms of offering meaningful participation in the context of diversity, this doesn't mean celebrating George Washington because he founded the nation and was white! It means making sure we lift up and celebrate someone like John Brown, who was white and was so horrified by slavery he acted to end it.

It doesn't mean overstating to our kids how much better things became as a result of the civil rights movement or how

many white people were involved in it. (Let's not forget that many white people still alive today opposed or were apathetic toward the civil rights movement at the time.) It does mean sharing with them stories about people like Joan Trumpauer Mulholland. She was a young white woman from Virginia so active in protesting segregation as part of Black-led organizing (notably during the freedom rides in 1961) that she was arrested. You can still find her mug shot online. Her family disowned her.[4]

It doesn't mean that when we teach our children about the reality of police violence against African American communities we make sure to tell them that most white police officers are good. It means sharing images with them of white people who are so horrified by police violence against Black people that they show up to protest with, and in support of, Black communities as they challenge this violence.

I can't say enough that the teaching here is not that there is a strong justice-commitment in white culture. There isn't. This would be a false teaching. And, frankly, there is no abstract or easy answer to the diversity problem for white kids. In fact, a core hope behind this book is that by differently raising white kids today, we contribute to creating a future in which this real problem of white identity is less difficult because models of antiracist white commitment become so much more increased (and white supremacy's power decreased).

The point is that we need to practice taking the same postures we discussed before—those that make us fellow pilgrims with our children. Then we need to find routes to invite them to see and create concrete ways, places, and activities through

which we disallow "being white" from determining our behavior or allegiances. We need to help them experience in their own bodies that being white doesn't have to only or primarily mean complicity with racist structures.

This line of thinking, too, goes deeper than teaching them antiracist behaviors or offering them antiracist models. It is those things. But it is also being explicit about whiteness as we do so:

"Look, this person is white."
"Look, that person was white."
"Look, this person knew racism was wrong and challenged it very courageously."
"How did it feel to you as a white kid to hear that thing that was said?"
"Did that situation make you feel bad about being white?"
"What actions could we take as white people in that situation; would our action change how it feels to be white?"

Calling attention to the presence of whiteness matters in antiracist-focused situations and dialogues. It matters not to falsely affirm white people for justice work. Rather, doing so generates necessary reflection on the experience of and more embodied self-awareness of being white.

The strategies we each use are going to be context specific, enough so that it's difficult to offer these in a book such as this. But in terms of broad principles, these strategies have to

do with engaging our children to better understand their experience of their own identity in their immediate social contexts and supporting them in taking action in those contexts. Action is a critical anecdote to the kind of white despair that emerges from having your identity conflated with "oppressor," despair that not only harms white children but which turns into resentment of diversity or people of color, and sometimes into appropriation of people of color's cultures when white youth try to fill the uncool void.

There's no simple or blanket way to enable white children to cultivate meaningful "ethnoracial identity." Social identities only become meaningful through collective and sustained actions over time in public and political ways. One white person cannot on her own change the collective meaning of her white identity by antiracist action.

But one person can continually change her own relationship with her white identity. We can enable our children to cultivate a meaningful sense of their identity as people who live for justice and in resistance to racism *despite* being from a people from whom such behaviors are rarely expected (and, unfortunately, too rarely come).

When we make it a priority to support our children in taking action against racism or participating with them in such action, we're not just building their antiracist skill set. This is also developmental work in terms of their sense of selfhood. We want girls to feel strong. We want children of color to feel smart. We want gender-nonconforming children to feel bold.

So we teach all of these diverse kids specific ways to cultivate a sense of themselves that runs counter to the meanings that systems of sexism, racism, and heterosexism impose on their social identity. We need to so something parallel for white kids, only in reverse. Just as we need to support boys in growing feminist-committed and antisexist ways of experiencing their own gender, and gender-conforming children in embracing more gender-fluid ways to experience their own identity and embrace the identities of others, we need to support white kids in cultivating ways to experience antiracism as a way to make more sense out of, and gain a foothold in, their relationship to their own white racial identity.

Taking action enables our children to move through the guilt-, resentment-, and anxiety-laden stages of white racial identity development. Living and experiencing agency mitigates the experience of being white as being sentenced to a permanent state of uncoolness at best, and racism at worst. Doing so gives our kids one route into meaningful participation in diversity frameworks. (As an added bonus, their action-agency makes them more likely to be able to create authentic and sustainable interracial relationships.)

This bigger picture engagement with P., then, means seeking out clearer parental understanding of what the racial climate and challenges are at P.'s school. Seeing what types of student relationships exist there, what kind of racial dynamics exist in the classrooms, and finding ways to ask P. about this and support her in imagining herself as someone who can

make a justice-committed impact, are all part of what's needed in this moment. The specifics will depend on the school. So let me brainstorm some ways this could have looked in my own middle-school context in order to offer some hypothetical examples.

For example, there were all kinds of student-initiated clubs and after-school activities at my school, where powerful relationship building happened through student investment in shared projects. What might it look like to support our kids in creating some kind of racial justice club? A middle-school model might look like a racial-justice version of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), which has become something of a fixture on the middle school and high school scene. Finding buy-in and identifying a racially diverse set of students to initiate such a venture would be a must. Capable adult guidance in such a venture would be important too. But longer-term commitment to such a project, if done well, could have a powerful impact on the racial climate at a school. This would be so much more effective than the one-shot racial dialogue panels schools often host after some sort of racialized incident happens, or the one-dimensional value of "embrace difference" that happens at many schools.

Here's another example. In my middle school, racial tracking had begun to take hold. Tracking was intense by high school. Another route to engaging children and youth would be significant parental engagement to challenge this injustice at the local level. What might have happened in my life, the lives of students of color, and the overall racial climate at my school, for

example, if my parents and the parents of other white students had worked across racial lines to raise questions about which students were being put in which classes, which programs were receiving what resources? What might have happened if they engaged the school to insist on equity?

In fact, very likely parents of color were already asking such questions and engaged in such work. More often than not, wherever people of color are present (living, working, going to school) some kind of justice organizing is already being done. Before starting something ourselves, white parents should look up and see where people of color–led efforts along these lines are already happening. So here again, finding the appropriate collaborators and stakeholders would be important groundwork, before finding ways to engage the teachers and administration directly, and then involving students in the process.

Perhaps it's not so much about what P. does at school. When I was in middle school, my peers and teachers knew all about my deep commitment to soccer and my family's highly devoted religious life. I brought these to school in any number of ways: talked about them, wrote reports on them when I got to choose a topic, and so on. A different type of support in creating a gap, and enabling white students to more ably engage diversity, is by involving them in deeply committed justice-work outside of school. The more such work is part of how our kids move through the world, the more it shows up in how they engage at school. Antiracist practices become part of how our youth understand themselves.

Perhaps in P.'s case, altogether different routes in would be necessary. But whatever these might be, we need to understand that improvements in white children's relationships to diversity aren't going to just come with time. Active interventions are required to create ways for white youth to experience antiracist agency. But with an experience of such agency a different relationship to their white identity can emerge. And a different relationship to their own racial identity is necessary for them to be able to engage diversity ably.

I'm brainstorming all of the above suggestions from a distance. But here's the major takeaway. Our children are not and should not perceive themselves to be generic Americans. Nor should they only reluctantly confess, "I'm white, I guess." They need to not be left to internalize the fears expressed in "Mom, am I racist?" What they need is to be eventually able to say, "I'm white, and I'm also an antiracist-committed person active in taking a stand against racism and injustice when I see it."

Conceptual Clarity

At this point I want to return to the confusion that's more on the surface of P.'s exchange with her mom. As much as I suspect that emerging feelings about being white are underneath P.'s distress, the confusion she explicitly names also has to do with a conceptual understanding of racism.

When a girl made a disparaging comment to my nephew, my sister told T. the girl was being racist because she was trying to make him feel bad about his skin color. When I talk about larger racial histories of system inequity or even racial

violence with my children, who are six and eight, I know what they mostly hear—even what they sometimes say back to me—gets simplified into "that person, or those people, must not like Black people or Latino/a people."

Before a certain point of intellectual development, young children are likely to hold on to such simplistic and individualistic notions of what constitutes racism. Nonetheless, Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin remind us how important it is to teach children early about racist structures anyway.

> Talk about the fact that the social world we live in is often unfair to people of color simply because they are people of color and that persisting racial-ethnic inequalities are unjust and morally wrong. Make it clear that racial-ethnic prejudice and discrimination are part of a larger society that needs reform and not just something that individuals do.[5]

Without such a larger framework, our children will observe racial disparities for themselves and explain them by presuming something must be wrong with people of color. In contrast, when we do introduce these larger frameworks early in life, our kids learn to understand the structures we live in. They become poised for conceptual clarity to kick in, much earlier than we might expect.

If offered in age-appropriate ways, a ten-year-old like P. is certainly ready to begin to develop such clarity. And supporting children to untangle different dimensions of racism is vital for building their language and analytical understanding.

Understanding will support confidence in racially difficult encounters at school or in other social settings.

One of Beverly Daniel Tatum's analogies, which speaks to different dimensions of racism, would be brilliantly accessible to a ten-year-old, for example. This is a useful conversation tool. Tatum describes racism as a moving walkway (like the kind at airports). All white people are riding the walkway whether we want to or not. We didn't choose to be placed on the walkway. But we do have choices we can make about what we do while we are riding it.

Anytime we stand still on the moving walkway and let it take us where it's already going, we are participating in racism. Tatum calls this "passive racism." It's the kind of racism that happens if you just do nothing. "Active racism" is when people choose to walk in the same direction the walkway's already going. Either standing still or walking with it are individual choices white people make about how to act and relate to the moving walkway.[6]

This part of Tatum's analogy can help us talk with children about the relationship of white people to racism. Whatever type of participation we engage in—for example, actively believing negative stereotypes about people of color, being silent when we hear others endorse stereotypes, or acting on our own biases against people of color—this part of the analogy is a great way to invite children to understand individual racism and our relationship to it.

I like to take Tatum's analogy a step further to support younger children in developing an understanding of structural

racism. Structural racism is the thing that built the walkway, put us all on it, and set it running in a particular direction in the first place: the plans that were drawn up, the money it took, the workers who were paid to build it and keep getting paid to maintain it. Structural racism is the larger system behind the walkway's existence; the things that keep it going—which sometimes we don't even see.

Using an analogy like this has many short- and long-term gains. First, it's a great way to build accessible scaffolding with our kids to which we start to help them add increasing conceptual understanding about different dimensions of racism. It offers a way to talk about how dimensions of racism, though distinct, interact with one another. This analogy, then, can help us parse out with them and make sense of things that are happening in the world (or can help us do so when they come to us later for help understanding). This kind of analogy enables our kids to begin to recognize, and eventually describe and articulate for themselves, various dimensions of racism as they encounter them in the world.

When justice is the deepest goal and value, developing an understanding of equity, in contrast to equality, is key.

Second, this analogy offers an accessible way to get at white people's own individual and collective relationship with various forms of racism. Let's talk about the moving walkway and where we are standing on it. Let's see what it is about the experiences we're having that pertain to the moving walkway, the system that built it,

and possibilities for our individual reaction to the walkway in a given moment.

The walkway analogy supports intellectual clarity. This can enable children to be more resilient and equipped when they encounter race and racism talk in their lives. Much more important, it's also an image that lends itself wonderfully to looking into our daily lives, contexts, and social experiences with our kids and setting some concrete goals. The goal is to always walk, run, and develop more stamina to keep running in precisely the opposite direction from the one the moving walkway is taking us. In any given moment, situation, or context, then, we can ask and explore with our kids, "Where is the walkway taking us right now? What could we to do to run against it?"

An analogy like this enables our children to be ready to engage in dialogues about and analysis of racism. But it also becomes a ritualized discussion that sets the stage for the ongoing life practices of creating larger and larger gaps. It helps our white children understand that *we are not the moving walkway* itself. And we didn't build the walkway. But we are on the walkway whether we want to be or not. Antiracism necessarily requires us to make choices everyday to do something about how we situate ourselves on the walkway. This analogy can help our kids envision and, through taking meaningful action, distinguish themselves as people from the system of racism—without downplaying how complicit their whiteness makes them.

A different concept that can offer our children routes out of the self-defeating conflation of *white* with *racist* might be use-

ful in the type of situation presented by P.'s distressed, "Mom, am I racist?" That is the concept of white privilege. It could be that a conversation about privilege and the ways white people experience privilege—even when we don't ask for it—would help P.'s distress.

Introducing the concept of white privilege might help to de-escalate the deeply fraught and powerful content *racist* has already come to have for her. It might be useful to temporarily direct her away from the *r* word and make clear that white privilege is not something she is guilty of—it's something white people inherit. Like the moving walkway analogy, however, introducing this notion needs to be done while keeping on the table the choices we all make about how complicit we will remain with white privilege. And, eventually, connecting the decision to passively accept white privilege to active racism, which supports the systems of racial injustice, must come back into the dialogue.

There are so many useful images and tools, appropriate and accessible for different age groups, for introducing racism and its various dimensions to children. Here's one more I find to be especially useful for children and youth. Teaching our children the distinction between the value of *equality* and *equity* is important because our kids receive a lot of messages from the broader culture about equality being the most important thing when it comes to race.

To this end, there's an outstanding drawing (the first version I encountered was created by the Interaction Institute for Social Change) that shows three people of very different

heights standing next to one another. Their backs are toward us. They're all peering over the fence trying to see a baseball game.[7]

In the image that illustrates what it looks like to value equality, each of the three people has been handed a box to stand on to help them see over the fence. The boxes are all of equal size. As a result, the tallest person is now able to see the game beautifully. The eyes of the person of medium height are now at about fence level. He can see the game but he's still straining to do so. The shortest of the three people still can't see the game at all. He was treated equally—his box was the same size as the other two people. But equality doesn't ask about how things turn out, which in this case isn't very well.

As with everything else related to raising white kids for racial justice, our own persistence matters.

In the image that illustrates equity, each of the three people is also given a box to stand on so they can see the game better. But in dramatic contrast to the first image, these boxes are of different heights. The shortest person is given the tallest box and the tallest person the shortest box. As a result, each person is able to see the game at the same level as the other two. Three different-sized boxes produce an equitable outcome. In fact, if you looked at the people from the baseball field side of things (in which case the boxes would be behind the fence and hidden from view) you would assume these three people were all exactly the same height. Unequally sized boxes created

equity. When justice is the deepest goal and value, developing an understanding of equity, in contrast to equality, is key to our children's ability to be good interlocutors engaging race and racism in the world.

These are just a few examples of ways to more deeply develop children's conceptual clarity. There are other tools that make such concepts accessible that we can avail ourselves of. In fact, some of the most important gifts we can give ourselves as parents include at least the following.

- We can make regular use of the many excellent resources that already exist, created by similarly justice-committed educators and parents (a number of which are listed in "Other Resources").
- We can remember or learn that we aren't the first to struggle to figure out how to teach race and anti-racism to white kids and we don't have to reinvent the wheel.
- And I can't stress this enough: We can reach out to connect with communities of other parents who are also actively building their own capacity for race-conscious, racial-justice parenting.

This last idea may mean participating in online forums. It might be through intentionally cultivating these dialogues in our existing friendships with other parents who share a commitment to racial justice and who are, in their specific journeys with their specific and different kids, also looking for ways to

do it well. It might even be engaging with other people who already gather to talk about these issues (such groups do exist; see "Other Resources") or creating such groups ourselves. The ability to connect, share strategies, brainstorm, and be encouraged and supported by other parents cannot be overestimated.

"Mom, Am I Racist?"

P.'s mom is one of my best friends. I know she made a valiant effort that day both to unpack what had happened at school and to support a productive, race-conscious dialogue with P. in that moment. Knowing her justice commitments and what a great communicator she is, I can imagine any number of productive exchanges that may have proceeded to take place that day.

So let's imagine what some of those routes into learning might have looked like in a conversation such as this. Because for many of us, an experience like my friend had with P. might find us, at first, a bit tongue-tied as to where to begin. Thinking through the following possibilities is a way to continue building our moral vision for how we, in our own relationships with our kids, take a posture of accompaniment, follow our children's lead, lay groundwork for ongoing dialogue, and share our values with them when such incredible opportunities present themselves.

- "So what do you think 'racist' is?"
- "What do you think your classmates were saying you had done? Namely, what do *they* think 'racist' is?"

- "You sound really upset about what happened. What are you feeling right now? What are you worried is going to happen?"
- "Why do you think your classmates thought you were being racist? Do you ever feel like racism happens in your class or at your school? Do you think your classmates are against racism? What does that mean?"
- "Were the kids who were calling you 'racist' white kids? Black kids? Latino/a kids? Why do you think white kids would say that? Were they making a joke out of racism? Why do you think Black or Latino/a kids would say that? Do they experience racism at school sometimes and so maybe thought that's what you were up to?"
- "You know, have you heard people say things like, 'race doesn't matter, we're all the same underneath our skin' or 'treat everyone the same, no matter what?' I wonder if, when you asked for a brown crayon, your friends thought you were being racist because you were drawing a picture where you decided to use brown for someone's skin color. That doesn't make you racist at all! I think they might have said that because they think 'race doesn't matter.' But we know race matters a lot, and we want to see and celebrate all different kinds of people."
- "What does your teacher say about racism at school? Does she/he ever talk about it?"

- "Do white kids and Latino/a kids and Black kids play together at your school? Do they ever call each other racist? Have you ever seen someone behave in a way that made you think *they* were racist?"
- "You know, P., I'm sorry your feelings got so hurt today. I can tell it felt bad to you to have kids in your class call you racist. This whole thing makes me realize we need to talk a little bit more often about what racism is. I want to talk more about it so we can, as a family, better understand racism. I want us to do that so we can practice being a family that works really hard to fight against racism when it happens. So how about we . . . [fill in the blank]."

Race, diversity, racism, and racial difference are all difficult in the United States. Children of color don't become immune from the impact of race and racism just because their parents engage in consistent and thoughtful efforts to teach and insulate them. No less is true for white children. The most consistent and thoughtful efforts will not prevent race from being challenging for white kids. As with everything else related to raising white kids for racial justice, our own persistence matters. Continuing to show up for and be with our kids as parents and caretakers or to courageously teach white kids as educators combined with daily self-reminders that we don't have to have all the answers but just need to continue to ask good questions and find good resources will go a long in cultivating their persistence as well.

Takeaways

- ✓ As kids become aware of the concepts of racism, diversity, white privilege, and so on, they can become confused or anxious. Quips like "That's so racist!" have become common in youth culture. Parents must help develop clarity about the dimensions of racism.
- ✓ Being white is a painful and vexed location in the context of awareness of injustice—particularly for kids. This makes it difficult for whites to authentically embrace diversity, let alone embrace it deeply.
- ✓ Despite it being taboo, we need to support white children in scrutinizing and talking about how they feel about being white, what being white does or does not have to do with "being racist," and even about how confusing diversity can be for them, given their whiteness.
- ✓ This dialogue and work help white kids find ways to create a gap between themselves and racism: white doesn't have to only mean "racist"—namely, you can be white and engage in antiracist activity, without downplaying the racism we breathe in and benefit from as white people.

✓ Because of the system we live in, white people are all complicit with racism and we must help our kids contend with this even while we equip them with lots of explanations about concepts like inherited privilege, equity in contrast to equality, and the analogy of racism as a moving sidewalk!

CHAPTER 7

What Does Resistance Look Like?

If you had asked my soon-to-be six-year-old about immigration during the presidential election cycle of 2016, E. would have told you this: "Donald Trump doesn't want people to be able to feed their babies. He thinks that the law is more important than people being able to feed their babies. I think being able to feed your baby is more important than following the law."

There's so much uncharted territory in parenting. This is true when raising kids in a nation experiencing the best of times and in regard to any number of issues. But there's nothing easy about *these* times and race is uniquely difficult. Raising white kids differently than most of us were raised, with few road maps, at a time when the failures of decades of color-blind parenting and tepid attempts to celebrate difference have been exposed is difficult enough. But with news cycles bleeding with stories of Black people killed by police, Latino/a peoples being terrorized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—