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

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

FOREWORD BY **TIM WISE**

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

RAISING WHITE KIDS

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

JENNIFER HARVEY

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Takeaways

- ✓ We live in a society that is racially unjust, that is deeply segregated, and that privileges our (white) racial group. But we *can* teach our kids a commitment to equity and social justice.
- ✓ We know that teaching children to be color-blind or to value diversity is an inadequate strategy.
- ✓ Racial development is no different than physical, intellectual, or emotional development.
- ✓ Race-conscious parenting means talking about race—and racism—early and often in our children's lives.
- ✓ Developing antiracism in our kids, and living it ourselves, is a central commitment in what it means to raise healthy white children in a racially unjust America.

CHAPTER 1

From Color-Blindness to Race-Conscious Parenting

"I've always taught my children to treat everyone with kindness and fairness no matter who they are or what their circumstances and my kids do have friends of a lot of different races and from different cultures. They never seemed to notice or care what race someone was, until they came home from school after Martin Luther King Jr. Day last year. Then, all of a sudden, they were talking about people's race all the time, saying things like 'Our friend Joe... he's Black, right?' And I felt like they actually might have been better off without that celebration. Because I really don't think it's good for them to focus on people's race and put them in boxes! Isn't that the opposite of what we should be trying to do?"

The concern this mother is expressing is not an uncommon one among white parents. Her suspicion about the move in school to emphasize difference comes from her sense that a color-blind approach might better support harmonious relationships

among racially diverse children than an approach that emphasizes their differences and seems to put them in boxes—or even makes them start to put one another in boxes. This mother is not expressing resistance to difference, itself. Quite the contrary, she seems to value it. But she's afraid that teaching children to notice and name racial difference is backfiring. She wants her children to recognize human dignity, value equality, and embrace everyone. Rightly so!

Color-blindness became one of the most prominent ways to approach race and difference in the United States after the civil rights movement. The basic principles of color-blindness include the idea that we shouldn't notice race, should look past race, and/or, especially, should never use race as the basis for making decisions, policies, or judgments about people.

Such principles can obviously be used in a cynical way. Color-blindness can be used, for example, to shut down racial discussions before they even get started—that is, "We're all just human after all, so why don't we just get over it?"

Color-blindness can also be used to short-circuit attempts to respond to the long-term effects of racism. Namely, decade upon decade of racist policies and practices have created uneven playing fields. If we want to address such unevenness in the interest of creating equity, we have no choice but to notice race. We have to use it in some way to develop policies and practices aimed at leveling the playing field. Granted, there are legitimate discussions to be had in response to difficult questions and diverse perspectives on how we best do that. But if color-blindness is invoked at the start of such inquiry, any

serious discussion about how to even out the field is shut down before it can even begin.

The motivations behind color-blindness are often genuine and full of good intentions, however, as is true in the case of this mother. Indeed, color-blindness is an outgrowth of a central moral message of the civil rights movement: we're one human family and race should never cause a difference in treatment. Many of us have rightly learned, moreover, that assuming someone's race can tell you anything meaningful about that person is the epitome of racial stereotyping. So the conclusion that a good way to teach our children tolerance and equality is to teach them to not notice or to look past race is actually really logical. Color-blindness seems to stand on sound moral reasoning.

> Color-blindness doesn't work for the simple reason that we cannot *not* see race.

To top it all off, there is at least one more reason color-blindness can be so appealing. Many serious challenges do emerge when we start to name and notice race. This is especially the case as we teach children to do so. What does it mean to say Joe is "Black"? Does Joe identify that way? What are these children assuming they know about Joe or saying about him by debating whether or not he is Black? Obviously, it's a problem if white children run around loudly labeling other children, and especially if they do so in ways that don't feel good or accurate to those children so labeled.

Later in this book we'll return and dig in to these challenges

and explore ways race-conscious parenting helps with them. At this point it's important to simply be clear: to "not see" or "not name" race is not a solution to the challenges this mother raises. So let's begin by understanding why color-blindness fails if the goal is to teach white children to value everyone and work for equity and justice, and why, in fact, color-blindness actually causes harm to white children's understanding of race. After that we'll explore some of the reasons teaching our children to value diversity as a primary parental strategy, although better, also falls short and what race-conscious parenting looks like in contrast to these two approaches.

Color-Blindness Doesn't Work

Even when the motivations are good, there are many reasons to reject color-blind approaches in our parenting. First, and most fundamentally, color-blindness doesn't work for the simple reason that we cannot *not* see race. In a society as thoroughly racialized as the United States, unless one has a visual impairment it is literally impossible for any human, past their first few months of life, to "not see" it.

Race is a social construction. This means that differences such as skin tone, hair texture, shapes of faces, and so on don't have any significance or meaning in and of themselves. None of these have any innate bearing on character traits. There is no racial DNA. Instead, such physical attributes are *given* meaning by society through a whole array of social practices.

Before going any further, let me emphasize a very important point. Even though it has no innate meaning, because race *is*

given meaning—it has been and continues to be constructed—it *is* real. Sometimes realizing race is not biological leads people to conclude that race is only an illusion. Couldn't we get rid of some of the challenges it creates by just ignoring it?

But constructed realities are real and cannot be ignored. My house is constructed. Just because it was built at some point doesn't mean it doesn't exist. In fact, every time it rains I am especially aware that my house exists and am grateful it does. Further, my house could be remodeled, changed in some fundamental way, or differently constructed. And all of these descriptions of my house are analogous to race as well. (In fact, the understanding that a construction is something that has been built by people is a really helpful part of this analogy when thinking about raising white children. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers are part of the construction crew for children's embodiment of race.)

Because race is social and human beings are deeply social creatures, we learn to see race in and on the bodies of ourselves and others. We also observe, internalize, and eventually mimic the many social practices that abound in daily life that give the physical attributes society uses to "mark" race powerful social meanings and effects. In the United States, the attributes revolve heavily around skin color, but can also be hair, an accent, the sound of a name, and many other overt and subtle markers. This entire process gets underway very early in life—much earlier than many adults presume is possible.

There are thick socialization processes through which we learn to see and feel race. This means race's impact is much

deeper and more encompassing than something having only to do with how we think about difference, each other, or with what we believe about people. In other words, race goes beyond just our minds. The ways people of different racial groups speak to one another, hold our bodies as we do so, are or are not present or represented in various physical spaces (especially in a deeply segregated nation)—all of these are dimensions of our social, racial experiences. Imagine how different the space of a predominantly white church, a historically Black church, or a church made of up Latino/a citizens or recent immigrants from Mexico feels when one enters each of these respective spaces, for example. Even as one can imagine the different feels of such distinct spaces, parents need to understand that young children pick up on and experience these differences no less than do adults.

Within a few months of being born, babies begin to observe and absorb, and even respond to the racial dimensions of our society. Children continue to do so throughout their development, day in and day out. This is true whether they are raised in very multicultural contexts or in the whitest of spaces.

Many studies help us understand how early these observations begin. Some studies have provided evidence that by the age of six months babies begin to notice the physical differences that mark race. A chapter in the book *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children* reports on a number of these studies. It shares one in which, when shown pictures of different faces, babies pause. Their eyes linger longer on pictures in which the face has a different skin tone than that of their

parents.[1] Other studies suggest this phenomenon starts as early as three months.[2] Researchers interpret the pause as indicating that babies are noticing skin tone difference—because they don't similarly pause on faces of those who are not their parents but who share the same skin tone as their parents.

Such studies don't mean we are all innately predisposed to racial prejudice. Noticing differences and developing prejudice are two distinct processes. Prejudice is learned. Prejudice is the step taken after one notices physical differences in which differences are assigned meanings—negative ones. One does not inevitably have to take such a step. Rather, the *NurtureShock* studies show that "children's brains are noticing skin color differences and trying to understand their meaning."[3] It's safe to say prejudice is a likely developmental outcome, however. Children neurologically predisposed to notice the physical attributes marking race are immersed in a myriad of social experiences in which people who have such attributes are constantly treated or portrayed in particular ways.

> As early as age five, children recognize that different groups are treated differently.

The point here is to make clear that noticing racial differences is simply part of neurological development. For our purposes, studies like these offer insight into a concrete biological reason color-blind approaches are a nonstarter if we want to raise white children able to engage race, navigate racially diverse environments, and grow deep antiracist sensibilities and

abilities. Color-blindness cannot teach children equity because it does not line up with how their brains actually function. They notice racial differences, and if we don't interpret the meaning of these differences with and for them, society will.

Because color-blindness is out of alignment with neural development, it would fail even if the United States had no history of being racially hierarchical or white-dominated and was not replete with legacies of hostility and tensions among racial groups. But we *do* live in a society with such histories, hierarchy, hostilities, and tensions. Encounters among and between people of different racial groups are almost always marked with these tensions, even in amiable contexts. So beside the fact that their brains notice differences, in this act of "neurological noticing" children also take in many nuanced dimensions of tension and racial embodiment that constantly impact interracial exchanges in our society, however subtle these may seem to adults.

Many other studies have demonstrated that the youngest of children internalize racist perceptions of themselves and of others.[4] As early as age five, children recognize that different groups are treated differently. They understand something about the social status of different racial groups—their own group and others'.[5]

It's pretty remarkable how astute children are and the precision with which they interpret the social meanings of race. Other types of studies have shown that the youngest of children begin to "play" with race as they engage one another.

Sociologists Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin con-

ducted a yearlong, in-depth study of a multicultural preschool. Van Ausdale spent countless hours observing children's interactions with one another. In *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*, Van Ausdale transcribes story after story in which children as young as three or four, themselves of many different racial and ethnic identities, make both subtle and overt references to race and difference as they play with one another.

The children Van Ausdale observed enacted larger social messages in sophisticated ways. Many of these messages adults might assume would go right over their heads. To share just one account, Van Ausdale transcribes an exchange among two white girls (both aged four) and one Asian girl (age three) who are playing with a wagon. One of the white girls is pulling the other two children. When the wagon gets stuck the Asian girl jumps out to help pull. The white girl responds,

> "No, no. You can't pull this wagon. Only white Americans can pull this wagon." Renee has her hands on her hips and frowns at Lingmai. The Asian girl tries again to lift the handle of the wagon, and Renee again insists that only "white Americans" are permitted to do this task.[6]

Here, a four-year-old is using a construction that joins race and perceptions of citizenship to exclude in her play. This is complex understanding on display. She already knows something about the white racial assumptions of who counts as American.

I frequently hear adults who see or hear of children acting

in ways that look like bigotry simply conclude: "Well, obviously, they must've been taught this at home!" This is a tempting explanation. Shocked to hear an exchange like the one between Renee and Lingmai, it seems clear an adult must have said something direct for such a young child to invoke such a blatantly racist trope. Children, we believe, are so innocent.

But there are many reasons to reject this one-dimensional explanation. Most important, it leads us to conclude that if we aren't actively teaching racial bigotry at home, then our own kids won't fall prey to mimicking such messaging. This conclusion couldn't be further from the truth. If we believe overtly bigoted parenting is the only or even main cause of the kind of behavior seen in the wagon incident, we don't appreciate how pervasive racial messages are and how deeply observant our children are. These messages are everywhere and our children take it all in.

Let me share an example from the world of gender. When my oldest daughter was four, she told me one day that she knew "God must be a boy." Now, I'm not only a feminist, but I have training in theology. I have many great arguments about why giving God a gender—especially a male gender—is not only *not sound theology*, but actually reinforces sexism. My feminist Christian self was beyond alarmed.

But the declaration got worse. When I began to probe and ask how she knew God was a boy, first she said something about "God" being obviously a boy's name. But then she said, "God has to be a boy, because boys are better than girls!"

An outsider listening in, someone who knew nothing about

my children or me, might understandably assume that such a confident declaration must have been taught in our home. What four-year-old would otherwise spout such sexist nonsense? But such a conclusion wouldn't be more off base. My kids are being raised by two moms. Both of us buck many of the common stereotypes about gender. Neither of us has consciously given either of our children anything but intentionally positive messages about both gender equity and fluidity. We are overtly pro-girl and antisexist in our modeling and teaching.

But gender and gender messages are everywhere. So are race and racial messages. "Generally speaking, whites and people of color do not occupy the same social space or social status, and this very visible fact of American life does not go unnoticed by children," for example.[7] This and so many other realities of racial life in the United States are absorbed by our children who go on to make conclusions about them—conclusions such as this: *If white Americans are at the top of our racial hierarchy, pointing out Lingmai's difference from me on this front is an effective way to make sure I get to keep control of the wagon!*

The preschool where the wagon incident took place had an explicitly multicultural mission and curriculum. That doesn't mean no racist teaching was taking place in any of the homes of the children who attended the school. But one could reasonably conclude that many or most families sending their children to such a school weren't explicitly engaging in such teaching. As is true with sexism and many other "isms," the reality is the presence of racial messaging and experiences is pervasive and

powerful. These transpire and impact our children well outside of specific parental language and teachings.

Children observe the world around them so carefully. They notice patterns. For example, they see how many places and spaces have only one racial group present in them (and which racial groups are present in what kinds of places). They notice who holds which jobs at supermarkets, restaurants, schools, or doctors' offices. They then generalize what they see to draw specific (false) conclusions about why it would be that doctors are white and custodians are Latino/a, or why no Black people go to church, and on and on. If children aren't taught the causes of the inequity they see, explains antiracism activist Emma Redden, their observations combined with the racist messages they pick up from various forms of media lead "them to assume then that inequality is a reflection of people's intelligence, capability, or skills." Meanwhile, Redden writes, "talking about racism is not actually 'telling them about something they didn't even know existed,' but helping them understand what they witness, experience and/or participate in every day."[8] Direct adult intervention is necessary, then, to challenge and question the conclusions children will otherwise draw, conclusions that will reflect the broader, racist messages that float freely throughout society. We can't intervene if we're teaching color-blindness.

As psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, an expert in racial identity development, puts it, racism is like smog in the air.[9] We all breathe it in, every day. Our children inhale it from the moment they are born. The examples I've just shared from

careful sociological and psychological studies could not make the truth of Tatum's claim any clearer. If it's literally the case that we cannot *not see* race because of our neurological wiring—and if children are absorbing negative messages about racial differences from the moment they draw breath—but we avoid talking explicitly about differences, then we are deluding ourselves about what the results will be. We fail to equip our children for the long-term in a fundamentally important way.

As we abdicate the responsibility of specific, clear racial teaching in our children's lives, we step away from them at the precise point we need to be intentionally stepping in. Without us, society's deeply racist messaging and the profound racial tensions that permeate life in the United States move in and take over. Our children continue to develop and interpret race's meanings, whether or not we actively cultivate this development. Even when they are rooted in good intentions, color-blind parental approaches leave our children on their own to just keep breathing in society's "smog" without benefit of a face mask. And the impact is serious: left untended, racialized behaviors and perceptions of self and others that are innocent at age three will not remain innocent by age ten, twelve, or twenty.

There's another reason to reject color-blindness. Even if we could actually choose to not see race, being unable to see race renders us unable to see and address racism. If my children's ability to challenge and resist racism when they encounter it is important, then I must utterly and actively reject color-blindness. Over the long-term, the only way to address and

challenge racism is to practice and learn effective strategies for doing so.

Generic teachings like "we're all equal" don't counteract racism.

There are two other kickers worth sharing at this point. During her year spent at the preschool, Van Ausdale discovered that the same children playing with race also already knew that adults considered such behavior inappropriate. Thus they would often hide their racialized play. When the conflict came to a head in the wagon episode, for example, what was reported to the teacher was simply that the four-year-old girl was "being mean." In numerous other scenarios kids similarly downplayed or evaded the racial nature of the meanness that had resulted in a conflict. "Children were usually encouraged to be 'friends' and to 'work out' their difficulties without name-calling and anger, but [racial] details of their conflicts were rarely offered to teachers, nor did the teachers seem to expect such particulars."[10]

This doesn't surprise me. Children pick up on taboos very easily and know when they are violating them. Just one incident managed to convey to me that something was very wrong with what J. had said to me. The power of taboos around race make it all the more urgent that parents and teachers step in and give children language, tools, and support to navigate the difficult social life in which the United States places all children.

The second kicker is more counterintuitive. Teachings such as "we're all the same inside" or "we're all equal" do not serve

our children any better than does silence. To this point, one might want to respond to everything I've said with, "But I want my children to value everyone, of all races," or "I want to be sure my children understand that we are all human." In fact, when the mother in my opening example said she was worried celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day had caused her kids to notice race in ways they shouldn't, and that she wanted her kids to treat everyone with kindness, this is precisely what she was calling for. To all of these desires, I would first respond, "Yes! I want that for my children too."

But numerous studies also make clear that generic teachings like "we're all equal" don't counteract racism. One reason is that such teachings are much too vague for young children to understand. When parents teach "we're all friends," as a way to talk about valuing everyone regardless of differences, children have no idea they're supposed to connect that teaching to skin color.[11] Researcher Po Bronson writes about a friend who "repeatedly told her five-year-old son, 'Remember, everybody's equal.' She thought she was getting the message across. Finally, after seven months of this, her boy asked, 'Mommy, what's "equal" mean?' "[12]

Equality is an important aspiration. It is a value many of us long to implement. But it is a very abstract notion. When it's used as a way to teach race it becomes an empty mantra. As I often say to my college students, "Yes, we're all human, at our core. But have you ever met another human who had no race, no gender, no sex, no class, and so on?" They always answer no. "That's right," I respond, "the only way we show that we

actually respect our shared humanity, is by taking people's specific, diverse experiences of their humanity very seriously."

We've got to do the same with our kids. If we want children who value everyone, and who deeply and authentically understand we're all part of shared humanity, if we want them to actually live in ways that help to realize equity, the only route is to consciously and explicitly teach them about difference!

Color-Blindness Causes Harm

I hope it is clear by this point why color-blindness fails as a parenting strategy. Before moving on, I want to take the case against color-blindness one step further. Color-blindness doesn't simply not work, it is actually harmful to our children. It damages their ability to embrace equity.

Color-blind teaching presents as an aspiration ("don't see it!") a charge that is fundamentally out of synch with their daily experience ("I see it everywhere!"). In doing so, it actively distorts children's engagement with and interpretation of reality. When we teach an approach to race that fundamentally clashes with children's actual experiences and emerging knowledge, we are active participants in this distortion.

Imagine the long-term impact if a parent or teacher repeatedly insisted to a child that he should call the sky green, as the child is meanwhile learning his colors, pointing at the sky, and saying blue! "No," says the caregiver, "that's green." It's not difficult to imagine the intellectual distortion and confusion that would emerge out of such a contradictory toggle between the child's experience and adult response. Neither is it difficult to

imagine the emotional distortion that would result from such disorienting messaging being repeatedly conveyed by someone the child trusts.

The cognitive dissonance of color-blindness cannot help but disable our children's attempts to put their experiences into meaningful language and develop concepts that resonate with something resembling reality. On its own, this dissonance is damaging. But the consequences to the parent-child relationship are also serious. Over time, meaningful parent-child dialogue on an aspect of social experience in which this contradictory set of teachings is being experienced is extinguished. The possibility of needed mentorship and nurture in regard to race becomes deeply eroded because the child knows his or her parent is not being truthful.

A second harm of color-blind teaching comes in regard to the impact of white children's relationships with children of color. The children in the opening example may or may not have handled their discussion of Joe's racial identity appropriately. But if these kids are friends with Joe and Joe is, indeed, Black, it's unlikely they'll be able to sustain a meaningful friendship with him for the long haul if this mother goes with her gut and insists on countering their school teaching with color-blind messaging.

Race and racism matter in the lives of children of color, and they are recognized by such children as mattering, in deep and profound ways. This recognition happens early. On top of that, we know parents of such children, at rates two to five times more often than their white counterparts, teach their children

explicitly and in age-appropriate ways about the many ways race matters in their lives.[13]

As children of color develop and learn the ways race matters while white children are left alone to internalize racism or taught to actively ignore race, the possibility of meaningful friendships and connections between children of different races becomes more remote. Many observers have noted that elementary-age children in racially diverse settings play contentedly across racial lines. By middle school these same children start to self-segregate.[14] Interracial friendships among adolescents are exceedingly rare. If you account for all other variables (for example, different demographics in a school setting), youth are almost twice as likely to form a same-race friendship than an interracial one.[15]

There are many reasons for these dynamics. For example, adolescents go through all kinds of new, personal self-identity explorations that impact interracial friendships. Many teenagers, of various racial identities, begin to explore their individual relationship with their "own" racial group.[16] And the racial dynamics that exist in many school environments (between teachers and administrators, and students) in the United States have an effect on kids' friendships, as well.[17] But aside from all of this, it also stands to reason that if white children become increasingly unable to identify with, to understand, or even begin to actively deny what becomes for children of color a deep and formative dimension of daily life experience, authentic meaningful friendships across racial lines would be very difficult.

In fact, the difficulty of cross-racial friendships—a near impossibility if the white partner in the friendship doesn't understand race—is one reason teaching children to value diversity or even making sure white children experience diverse contexts as they grow *does not solve the problem* of how to raise white kids. There are serious benefits to experiencing diversity early in life for raising antiracist white children. But if parents don't take up discussions of race and racism explicitly with children, they are unlikely to succeed in remaining good friends to children of color over time.

A third harm of color-blindness is most directly antithetical to the goal of raising healthy white children. There is an often-unspoken but fundamental message on which color-blindness rests—whether we realize it or not—that there is something wrong with color.

> Race-conscious parenting is a broad and proactive way of thinking about how we engage race with our children.

Consider the moments in which white children are taught to not notice race. These are almost always moments in which a white child hears that it's not good to notice the race of a person of color. It is rare-to-never that children are told not to notice someone is white. White is typically not marked in the same way that being Black or Latino/a is marked. Thus a message intended to communicate that "all races are as good as each other, don't notice" is actually received by kids as "it doesn't matter that that person is Black or Latino/a, we should

like that person *anyway*." The implication is that blackness or brownness is somehow undesirable or shameful. It shouldn't be held against the person. And, more subtly, we white people are somehow doing well and being kind by not noticing that difference.

Race matters everywhere one turns in our society. Thus, color-blindness can only mislead and present children with a false view of reality. Even if it is used as an aspirational message, color-blind teachings backfire badly. They convey to children that something is wrong with people of color, ask them to ignore their own observations, and fail to support them in developing language for their own experiences, thus actively impeding a crucial area of their moral and social development.

What is Race-Conscious Parenting?

Race-conscious parenting is an approach that insists on noticing and naming race early and often. Being race conscious means thinking about, talking about, acting in response to the recognition (or consciousness) of race. It means noticing race, seeing race, and admitting that we do so in direct and overt ways. This approach stands in dramatic and stark contrast to color-blindness.

Race-conscious parenting is a broad and proactive way of thinking about how we engage race with our children, and teach and live out antiracist commitments with them on a regular, day-to-day basis. This broad approach rests on particular understandings about what race is, and how it is communicated and experienced that will be taken up throughout this

entire book. But in addition to this big picture, race-conscious parenting also enables particular responses and postures in the many specific, challenging racial moments parents in the United States so often face.

To make this concrete right away, I'd like to illustrate the contrast between the behaviors to which a color-blind response versus a race-conscious response lead. Let's take two examples many parents of white children will recognize; the first is hypothetical, the second is an actual experience I had with my daughter.

> *Example 1: A parent is out grocery shopping with his three-year-old. His white child sees an African American person in the same aisle. She points and says, "Look at that woman's brown skin." The embarrassed father quickly shushes the child and whisks her away from the encounter.*

> *Example 2: One day at school my six-year-old pointed at a Black student who looked to be a couple of years older than she, who was standing at her locker putting away her backpack. "Look," she pointed, "that kid looks like A. [my daughter's cousin, who also happens to be Black]!" I froze.*

Can you imagine yourself in either of these scenarios? Just as in the case of Ms. B. and two six-year-olds outside a bathroom talking about starting a white club, few parents of white children can fail to appreciate how much anxiety either of these scenes would evoke. The anxiety here is not triggered

by the pointing alone. Children do rude things all the time and, as parents, we know it's simply part of our job to teach them otherwise. The anxiety has everything to do with the racial dimension of these encounters.

But even though they are understandable given the anxiety evoked by each situation, the shushing and whisking in the grocery store causes a huge problem. These are enacted versions of "be color-blind" or "don't notice!" It's not difficult to see how shushing and whisking this child away, especially if this parent fails to have a follow-up conversation that specifically addresses the racial dimensions of this exchange, will almost surely be understood by the child as noticing race is bad. Even telling this child generically "it's rude to point" won't cut it in terms of interrupting that conclusion.

More alarming, the child is likely to infer there's something wrong with racial difference itself and with blackness specifically. (Again, it's unlikely a white child is ever going to point like this at a white person, so she's not going to get messages that there's something wrong with white.) This learning that something is wrong with blackness may be so subtle it's indiscernible at first. And it might not happen in just this one moment of encounter. But over time, when coupled with more overt teachings of color-blindness, it will become very powerful.

Of course, the solution here is obviously not to allow this young child to continue to point at people of color! But at this point, a race-conscious parental approach offers a really different set of assumptions, asks a different set of questions, and moves toward different kinds of reactions than a color-blind approach.

First, we have already rejected the notion that children should not notice or observe race—even if they could do so. So even while we need to support them in growing their abilities to discuss race aloud, we do not assume a three-year-old should not have made this remark. Instead, the starting assumption is that *what this three-year-old did was a developmentally normal activity*. Our task as a parent, then, is both to support our child in engaging in a more appropriate manner but to do so while simultaneously affirming and encouraging the fact that she is noticing race and giving her a positive description of difference.

In short, the noticing itself needs to be affirmed, supported—even celebrated! The awkward and inappropriate—but utterly age-appropriate—parts of this scene need to be redirected.

So what could that look like in this uncomfortable moment? Well, a race-conscious parental response to the grocery store encounter is going to consider first whether the woman saw and heard the child. If she did, minimally, a response to the child within earshot of the woman is appropriate and necessary. This response might go something like this, "Honey, it's not polite to point at people. But, yes, that woman's skin is a beautiful shade of brown." Depending on the situation, a turn to directly address the adult who has been pointed at might be appropriate as well.

Right off the bat this response takes the child and her developmental state seriously. It responds without further loading the moment just because it happens to be about race. Race is loaded for both adults in this scenario but is not, yet, for this

three-year-old. This response treats this moment no differently than it would treat other moments of pointing (namely, pointing is rude).

This response also treats the woman being pointed at with the respect she deserves. That is treatment the white tendency to avert the eyes and rush away from uncomfortable situations simply does not offer. Besides giving this woman her due, such a response also models for the child a critical nonverbal teaching: direct engagement of other people if, or when, we have been disrespectful (even unintentionally) is no less appropriate in racially fraught situations than it is in any other situation. The proposed response I describe here is the equivalent of making a child who forgets to say thank you go back and do so.

There is no doubt an encounter like this remains awkward. It may or may not bother the person at whom your child has pointed. You may not ever even know. Everyone is different. The best we can do as a parent in this moment is to know and accept that and to assume that our public and visible attempt—because the pointing was public and visible—to positively characterize dark skin and teach our child about the importance of being polite to others is required. This remains the case whether or not the woman was bothered.

It's worth noting that when we as adults commit to daily living out our belief that we should notice race and teach our children to do so, we become better equipped to respond well in challenging situations. Part of the discomfort of this situation is that white adults tend to have little daily practice in talking about and responding to race; race feels loaded for us because

we don't engage it directly as often as we should. When we do so with regularity, even if they remain awkward, moments like these cause much less anxiety. Racial tensions and challenges are real because we are all impacted, and our relationships are all impacted, by the racially fraught context in which we live. But the more we engage, the more we develop emotional intelligence and resiliency for navigating the many racial tensions and challenges that exist in our worlds.

A second point is worth noting here as well. Early and consistent race-conscious parenting practice actually makes situations like this less likely to happen in the first place. For example, a three-year-old who already has lots of diversity in her life, diversity cultivated in intentional ways (despite the reality that the organization of US society leaves us so racially segregated) is much less likely to point in the grocery store in the first place. Of course, white Americans' social networks are 91 percent composed of white people. So cultivating diversity in our children's lives takes intentional and sustained effort.[18] There's nothing easy about accomplishing actual diversity in segregated America. Nonetheless, white children for whom diversity is more normal are better set up from early on.

The potential of these two gains alone—namely, a reduction in adult anxiety and children less likely to be surprised by difference—is a case for pursuing race-conscious parenting.

But there's an additional gain here, one that might be more unexpected. The more equipped we are as parents, because we ourselves talk about and engage race in our own lives, the less likely we are to impose adult anxiety onto our children. The less

we impose anxiety on our children, the greater the likelihood that our responses to them will invite and open up conversations with them, rather than closing them down. And when that happens, sometimes we're going to be happily surprised to find ourselves learning things from our kids or having conversations with them we wouldn't have anticipated. To put it differently, it's been my experience that when I've managed my own anxiety and been therefore able to respond more openly, I often discover some of my anxiety was unfounded to begin with.

Remember? First I froze as I heard my own child (example two, above) seem to enact the worst version of "white child points at and speaks about a black or brown person." Even worse in this scenario, I heard her seem to (loudly) prove the stereotype that white people think all Black people look alike. After I froze I tried consciously to relax and take a deep breath.

"Really?" I said to my daughter (not sure if the other student heard her or not). "In what way does that girl look like A.?" "Her hair!" my daughter responded. "Her hair is just like A.'s hair." And, indeed, it was similar. The girl had dreadlocks; dreadlocks that looked much like cousin A.'s dreadlocks.

"You're right!" I said. "Her hair looks a lot like A.'s. But remember honey, it's not nice to point."

Was my response a perfect response? No. Could it have backfired? Yes—in so many ways. My daughter might have doubled down and said, "Her skin is dark like A.'s." The child to whom she was responding might have heard her. And if these things had happened, I would have addressed my daughter directly and also made sure the other child overheard me

as I did. I likely would also have said something directly to the other child, such as, "I don't know if my daughter's observation bothered you, but if it did I'm very sorry."

But even with the risks and the imperfections, this response did not leave my daughter with any residual learning that race, blackness, or difference are not to be noticed, let alone that they are somehow bad, embarrassing or shameful. The words *race* or *Black* were never used at all. But this is an example of the kinds of moves one makes if one is committed to race-conscious parenting.

A Quick Word About Diversity

Race-conscious parenting is different than simply teaching our children they should value diversity and difference. It's important I state this clearly. While color-blind teaching remains a prevalent mode for engaging race with white children (especially among parents), an increasingly common approach, especially in educational and religious contexts, is to teach children and youth to value diversity. The difference between valuing diversity and race-conscious parenting is worth laying out here because, like color-blindness, valuing diversity has proven inadequate. It also fails for reasons we can identify. Naming these reasons helps clarify the aims and approaches that, in contrast, are implied by race-conscious parenting.

The notion that we should value diversity rests on the basic premise that differences should be embraced and celebrated. Many parents are committed to this value. We demonstrate this value in different ways, depending on our families and

contexts. Some of us talk with our children about how wonderful our differences are. Others of us may seek to put our children in diverse settings early in life. I have heard many parents, including my own, for example, explain they chose public schools for their kids because they wanted their children to learn in diverse contexts.

This posture of valuing diversity is much improved over color-blindness. In fact, this was the kind of approach taken in the preschool about which I have written. Diversity as a framework avowedly "notices difference." This is highly important. But many approaches to diversity are insufficient. These insufficiencies can backfire in ways that leave white youth little more equipped in racial environments than color-blindness leaves them. When they do backfire it causes great harm to the children or youth of color with whom white youth are in relationships or shared educational contexts.

White people receive benefits, protections, and privilege in systematic ways while children of color do not.

To put it in stark terms: without a carefully cultivated race-conscious approach to being white, valuing diversity doesn't offer *white* children anything positive to claim or hold on to. The things white children might be able to positively claim as unique to *whiteness* come out of privilege and injustice—so I'm not talking about encouraging kids to hold on to these things!

The challenge of living in a white racial hierarchy, as

opposed to just a diverse society, is that we are not all just *different*. If we lived in a diverse society that was equal and fair in terms of racial treatment, valuing difference would be sufficient. Saying we're all "just different, let's celebrate" would be great. But we live in a society in which white people receive benefits, protections, and privilege in systematic ways while children of color do not. This distinction creates a number of challenges that are unique and specific to parenting white children.

For example, the racial identity white children develop is distinct from that of nonwhite children. If we know that children have internalized racist perceptions of themselves and of others by age five, this means children of color are aware of and have perhaps accepted to some degree negative assessments of their own race. It also means white children are aware of and perhaps have already started to believe there is something superior about themselves as white.[19] The messages children receive in society are different among these different children. Differently raced children thus need different parental responses in search of cultivating their abilities to live lives committed to equity and justice.

What we need to teach white children is complicated. Consider this example by thinking about the phrase "Black is beautiful!" When I ask my college students what they would think if they saw a group of African American students walking across campus carrying signs that said this, they overwhelmingly indicate they would be at least curious and probably supportive. In dramatic contrast the phrase "White is beautiful!" immediately evokes from them a radically different reaction. A

group of white students carrying such a sign evokes a fear of white supremacy.

The point of this example is not that it should be okay for white students to carry "White is beautiful" signs. My students are nervous about this for good reason! The point is that the dramatic contrast in these seemingly parallel accounts exposes the limits of teaching our kids to value diversity. Teaching kids to value diversity, on its own, doesn't capture the whole truth about our racial, social life. It doesn't include attention to the fact that white racial domination is the norm in our society. It certainly doesn't equip us to challenge that norm. When we present valuing diversity as the primary or only response to difference, then, we still set white children up for failure.

Being white and committed to equality is complicated in a racial hierarchy. Adults in significant caregiving relationships with kids must figure out how to help them understand and navigate this difficult juxtaposition.

Another way in which diversity fails to offer parents and white children what we need in order to journey toward racial health is a direct outgrowth of this dilemma. When we talk about valuing diversity we are often thinking about learning from our different histories and cultures. But if one is committed to truthfully talking about history and culture, this posture does not go very far in terms of the white racial experience. For example, children of color have freedom fighters we can point to and teach about when the agenda is diversity. If you ask children of color about their culture they usually have something to share and discuss. But the reality of *white* racial history is

that white people do not really have "white" histories we can celebrate. Ask any white US American (who is not committed to white supremacy) to talk about white culture and we stumble. White cannot be celebrated in the same way Black or Latino/a can. Our work to value diversity does not admit and wrestle with this problem. But white children experience this problem as they grow (we'll look more closely at how this plays out in older kids in chapter 6).

If we do not explicitly work with white children and youth to understand how they fit in to diversity frameworks, with specific attention to their identity as white people, they are vulnerable to becoming deeply disaffected from and disengaged with diversity. In fact, it may be counterintuitive, but the more diverse the context and the more pronounced the emphasis on diversity, the more disaffected white kids may become, as they lack support for navigating their white social position.

This specific problem, along with responses for it, will be explored in detail later in this book. Here it suffices to be clear that diversity is leaps and bounds better than color-blindness. But if it is not utilized in a manner that enables white youth to find a positive route through which they, as *whites*, can authentically connect or contribute to diversity and to building a just racial present and future, it is not enough.

Race-Conscious Parenting, Some Basic Principles

Race-conscious parenting rests on a number of principles. It goes beyond naming difference and engages with children about the ways difference impacts our experiences.

Race-conscious parenting goes deeper than a commitment to introducing different-colored dolls and toys, reading books at early developmental stages in which diversity is reflected, or participating in multicultural playgroups and schooling. Race-conscious parenting certainly affirms and includes these strategies. But such parenting involves parents (and teachers) seeking out—sometimes even creating—opportunities to address not just race and difference but also racism—proactively and on a regular basis. It also distinctly shapes the kinds of responses adults might make when race and racism are "in the room" in situations that were unanticipated. It actively models and teaches the importance of work against racism and for racial justice.

By explicitly engaging the racial dimensions of experiences, spaces and places, and relationships, and by addressing these in age-appropriate ways, race-conscious parenting conducts a deep reading of the *actual* racial environment. It is able therefore to respond to children's actual experiences, not the racial experiences we wish they were having. It also teaches children as they develop and grow to be able to do the same.

Consider this example. As noted above, many Black children are taught by their parents that they must behave in certain ways around police officers—that is a much more complex discourse than "police officers are safe." If my white daughter is only taught that police are safe, her relationship with her Black cousin, who is (necessarily) being taught that police are complicated, is directly and negatively impacted. The depth and authenticity of that relationship will erode over time. Moreover,

her actual racial experience—one in which she will pick up on the many social cues that reveal the truth that police are much more dangerous to some people than others—is ignored.

In contrast, a race-conscious approach assumes my white daughter needs to and *can* be taught about this dimension of the experience of African Americans. She must learn, just as does her cousin, about the complexities of police–civilian relationships. Such learning is critical in support of her ability to develop deep and sustaining individual interracial relationships both in her present and in her future. It also starts her early in the long, complex learning she needs to be able to locate herself in US social structures as a white person. And it builds her own capacity for acting with agency as an advocate for a just, egalitarian, and genuinely diverse society.

Assuming my white eight-year-old needs to have some version of "the talk" (tailored to her specific experience) as does a Black eight-year-old obviously takes us well beyond an approach to race that ends with "embrace and celebrate your cousin's blackness as just as beautiful as your whiteness!" I do want my children to celebrate the blackness of their loved ones. But I also want them to know that society, as a whole, does not. And I want my children to learn that their whiteness needs to make them conscious of the work required to be active anti-racist partners with their beloveds in surviving and challenging such realities.

This basic orientation I am describing here, of course, raises many difficult questions. Figuring out when and how to teach a five-year-old about police killings of Black men, for example,

is difficult. Subsequent chapters will explore the complexities we face when teaching about injustice. But the reality is that these questions are not new. Parents of children of color have always asked these questions. Nor are these questions unique. It's not easier for a parent of an African American child to have "the talk" than it is for a white parents. Parents of children of color are only better at it because they have long been doing it.

Those of us who are parents of white children are simply further behind. We have yet to directly face the challenges of talking about race and justice with our children and to develop strong parental strategies. We have yet to cultivate a basic tool kit and set of age-appropriate frameworks for addressing the specific ways these same issues play out with children who are white. But knowing that we must and, more important, that we *can* nurture our children's capacity to function in racially complex, tense, and difficult environments is an essential starting point. Committing to such nurture is critical for enabling our children to constructively address and respond to those environments both now and as they develop and grow.

Race-conscious parenting engages in honest dialogue about the inherited experience of being white, as well as the history of whiteness. It is attentive to the developmental needs of white children. This is not a "white people are bad" approach to parenting. Rather, by responding to children's actual environments, race-conscious parenting teaches advocacy and antiracism combined with the values of equality and justice. Thus, even as white children are parented to take seriously the ways their location in a white racial hierarchy privileges them, it sup-

ports their growth into a sensibility that helps them navigate this with antiracist commitment. It models for them the reality that a commitment to equality and justice as a white person is not only viable but deeply empowering.

So these are the basic assumptions. When it comes to parenting white children for racial justice, there are many unanswered questions. There are also many questions in regard to which there are few clear-cut right and wrong answers. Every child is different. Each family is different. But in much of what follows, examples and possibilities, questions and exploratory responses to these questions, will be laid out. My commitment as a guide is to be part of an emerging conversation taking place among parents of white children who are seeking to raise a generation of equity, justice-committed children far more able and equipped then were most of us—despite having been raised by well-intentioned parents—currently reading this book.

Takeaways

- ✓ Color-blindness *seems* like a good idea, but it doesn't address the unlevel playing field created by generations of racist policies and practices. And the simple fact is, we cannot *not* see race. Race matters everywhere one turns in our society.
- ✓ The celebration of diversity as a framework avowedly "notices difference." Noticing differences and developing prejudice are two distinct processes: Prejudice is learned. Seeing racial differences is natural neurological development.
- ✓ Children notice racial differences and pick up on individual and structural racism from young ages.
- ✓ We need to proactively interpret the meaning of racial differences for our children or they will simply absorb the negative messages about race and people of color that pervade our society. Telling children to not notice race or that race doesn't matter actively distorts their interpretation of reality.

- ✓ Children need concrete language about racial justice and antiracism because messages like "we're all equal" are too abstract for them.
- ✓ Race-conscious parenting is an approach that insists on noticing and naming race early and often. Talking authentically about race and racism responds to children's actual experiences and teaches children as they develop and grow to be able to do the same.

- ✓ 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 reasons 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 useful 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)—