

Supporting Healthy Identity Development

Excerpt from A Place to Begin with Parents on Issues of Diversity

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How do white children develop a sense of identity?

White parents, and those who work with them and their children, may not always realize that white children also need to develop a positive racial identity---one that does not rely on seeing white as superior to other races. Just as children of color receive negative messages about who they are based on skin color, white children receive ones that could lead them to believe that they are "normal," colorless, without race. That seemingly neutral message can mislead them into thinking that white is the standard and therefore inherently better. But a strong sense of racial identity should not be based on comparison---it grows from a feeling of confidence and self-worth, a pride in who and what you are rather than from a feeling that you are better than somebody else.

White children have a much smoother path when it comes to gaining a sense of identity and feeling good about who they are (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force). Most of them see themselves and their people reflected everywhere. Their identity can come so easily that no one even thinks about it. The message is, "white is right." Unless we help white children see differently, they can grow up to think of themselves as right, normal, regular---and everybody else as "different." They may have a sense of entitled superiority, even if never taught directly that they are better than other people.

Despite having parents who try to teach them that all people are equal, unfortunately children don't always see this message played out in the world. For example, Mommy may tell Chloe that all people are equal, but treat her African American house cleaner like a piece of furniture. When adults' words and actions conflict, children receive a confusing double message (Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force). Even when white families sincerely value equality and have friendships with people of different skin colors, their white children are still exposed to racist messages from society. All children must be helped to understand and counterbalance the sense of the superiority of "whiteness" that is being communicated in the world.

These kinds of early lessons play havoc with healthy identity formation for white children. They can grow up to be adults who are blind to reality and to their part in creating it. White adults who think of themselves as “normal” and “regular” may argue that they don’t have a culture of ethnicity, when in fact all people live in a particular context that includes both culture and ethnicity. If you don’t believe you have a culture, you can’t see the part it plays in dominating other cultures.

When the family is aware of issues of white identity, they can take the lead in helping their child develop a healthy white identity and strong anti-racist set of values central to “who we are”. The problem is that most parents haven’t gone very deeply into their own attitudes. They haven’t come to grips with the unspoken messages that they grew up with themselves. Few white people call themselves white supremacists, but unless they deliberately counteract the “white is right” view of the world that is so easy to absorb, adults give off unconscious messages of white superiority to children.