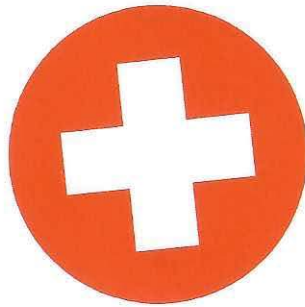Helping Children and Adolescents
Cope With Predictable Life Crises

THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO
PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID

REVISED + EXPANDED

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Fostering Racial/Ethnic Identity

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Samuel is a Black child adopted as a baby by a White couple. His parents notice troubling behavior from family, friends, and even strangers from the moment they bring Samuel into their home. Through early conversations with Samuel, they start to teach him the meaning of racism and why he is sometimes treated differently than his White peers. One day in his third-grade classroom, his teacher scolds Samuel when another child starts talking to him while she is giving instructions to the class. He asks the teacher why he is being singled out when it was the White peer who was misbehaving by talking to him. Samuel is sent to the principal's office, where the parents use the opportunity to educate the principal and the teacher about racial bias. They also feel responsible for talking to Samuel about how he feels about being reprimanded by his teacher when his White peer was not.

How do children learn about race? What can parents do to help make sure their kids are learning the right things about what it means to be considered part of groups, such as Black, White, Asian, or Latino? This chapter is written for parents who want a starting point on how to support the healthy ethnic and racial identity development of their children and adolescents. We provide some definitions, map out the unfolding process, discuss how to offer guidance and support to children, and give some practical examples.

What Is Ethnic Identity?

Ethnic identity entails how people develop and experience connection and belonging to their culture. Traditions, customs, and feelings about a person's heritage are all aspects of ethnic identity. Children and adolescents progress through different stages as they learn to identify with their culture. Over time, they come to understand their group's customs and values, a process that helps them feel a sense of belonging to their ethnic group. Ethnic identity can exist independent of race. For example, a person can be Jewish and Black, Arab and White, or Swiss and Asian. Where racial groups are mutually exclusive and defined by society, race and ethnicity can overlap.

To achieve a strong sense of ethnic identity, young people must navigate a meaningful process of exploration of their culture. Think of this process as having three stages: an Unexamined stage, a Searching stage, and an Achieved or Integrated stage. The strength of an individual's ethnic identity increases as they progress through the stages.

Those who have not explored or examined their culture remain in the Unexamined stage. Individuals at this stage may have negative feelings toward having a minoritized ethnicity due to the lack of direct and positive connection to it. Parents who find themselves at the Unexamined stage may avoid having proactive and positive conversations with children about ethnic identity. Such avoidance may flow from their own discomfort, or they hope that all will go well and that their children will somehow find their way through whatever issues they may encounter.

The Searching stage occurs when people become more interested in what it means to be a part of their ethnic group and begin to develop their own ethnic identity. Parents may notice their children wanting to participate in activities related to their culture, to dress in ways that represent their culture, and to seek out friendships with others who share their culture. These efforts all lead to expressing their exploration of and commitment to their ethnic identity. When children and adolescents feel a sense of belonging and security within their own ethnic group, they generally become more open to developing positive and inclusive relationships with those who do not share their ethnic identity. They can also begin to appreciate and acknowledge the existence of others' ethnic identities, and to learn about what others have to contribute and share. When this occurs, they have reached an Achieved or Integrated stage.

Ethnic Identity Development: Points to Keep in Mind

Considerable ethnic identity research across cultures has focused primarily on youth. A positive ethnic identity correlates with better psychological well-being and higher self-esteem. Because ethnic identity development spans across childhood through young adulthood, you should expect this process to flow progressively from childhood through

late adolescence. As parents, you will want to think in terms of what is appropriate for your child's age and stage of development, always offering explanations and support that your child can understand. And, when in doubt, don't hesitate to ask questions and to look for sources of accurate and helpful information to support your own learning and that of your child. You should also anticipate that bumps in the road will happen along the way and that you'll have questions as all of this unfolds for your child in the real world.

Keep in mind that ethnic identity development can also vary according to demographic factors. For example, among African Americans in the South, some aspects of ethnic identity may develop earlier given the arguably higher saturation of cultural experiences and cultural institutions related to Black culture present in this part of the country. Compared to other regions, the American Southern states have larger populations of African Americans and long-standing traditionally ethnic institutions, such as a greater concentration of Black churches and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) than Northern states.

What Is Racial Identity?

Racial identity must be understood in the context of racialization. Race is a social caste system that is used to categorize people based on appearance and presumed ancestry. Race is a made-up idea, a social construct with no biological basis. Later in this chapter, there is a more detailed and thorough discussion around the notion of race. First, let's consider the notion of whiteness. Whiteness refers to the way that the customs, beliefs, and cultures of White people form the standard to which all other groups are compared in the United States and in most Western countries. It also involves the positive associations that are made to "white" (pure, clean, beautiful) as compared to the negative associations that are made to "black" (dirty, unclean, scary, not attractive). White supremacy, an ideology that assumes the superiority of White people over People of Color, is the realization of this goal through social structures that have been designed to privilege White people (i.e., White privilege), centering their experiences as "normal" and prioritizing the needs of White people over those of others. Even if parents never have an active discussion about these issues, children will notice how society is treating each group differently, and in the absence of an explanation, they will start to mimic the actions of the social groups with whom they identify.

While ethnicity evolved for the well-being of specific groups of people, race is an imposed categorization. Race and ethnicity are different concepts that can overlap; people may identify with an ethnicity, for example Persian, and a racial group, for example White. Or they may be ethnically Ethiopian and racially Black. Some societies mix up these categories or do not perceive a difference. In the United States, belonging to the African American ethnic group requires that a person is racialized as Black (having some

African heritage). Hispanic has been classified as an ethnic group, and not a race, yet many Hispanic people do not identify with any race other than "Hispanic." As such, here we will talk about *ethnoracial* identity.

Early Theories on Black Ethnoracial Identity Development

Many minoritized ethnoracial groups experience difficulties due to stereotyping and prejudice. Therefore, such groups have needed to develop a process of self-affirmation to maintain their sense of self-esteem through their culture. Several models have been developed to determine how identity development differs across groups.

Dr. William Cross developed a highly influential model called Nigrescence to explain the process of identity development in African Americans. In this model, five stages of development were described as Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion, Emersion, and Internalization. This model was later revised to arrive at the current expanded Nigrescence theory. In the revised model, the original five stages were reduced to three stages of group racial identity attitudes: Pre-encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization.

The Pre-encounter stage, a time when race can feel neutral and less salient, includes opposition or low acceptance to Black racial identity and culture. This underscores how critical it is that parents have affirming conversations with their children about the racial part of their identity, as this creates inner security and strength and can serve as an antidote to negativity that they encounter. Ideally, as the individual becomes more involved with their own ethnic group, they start to internalize positive attitudes toward Black culture and move to the next stage of the process, which is called the Immersion-Emersion stage. Importantly, moving to the Immersion-Emersion stage generally happens after either a single racial encounter or a series of racial encounters or events that disrupt a person's neutral mindset and move them to a new understanding of how race matters for them.

During the Immersion-Emersion process, individuals recognize the value of their Black roots, and as their desire to exhibit and experience their heritage increases, they may reject other cultures and be less willing to include them in their day-to-day social interactions. Adolescents and young adults in the Immersion-Emersion stage often appear to enthusiastically and perhaps singularly embrace their Black culture and role as a Black individual within a society which is racially diverse. They may even be resistant to cross-racial friendships during this time, something that might be confusing or even feel particularly hurtful to White peers or others who are outside their racial group. The final stage of racial identity development is Internalization. At this stage, the person will demonstrate a mature state of racial identity where they are able to show attitudes that are accepting and appreciative of other races and cultures. This stage may not occur until later in adolescence or even adulthood.

Ethnoracial Identity Development Model across all People of Color

The Cross model was later expanded by other scholars to include all People of Color. Minority development models usually are defined by stages referred to as Conformity, Dissonance, Resistance, Introspection, and Integrative Awareness, as shown in Table 12.1. Knowing these stages can help parents understand their children's struggles and inform useful conversations around these topics.

White Identity Development

It is also important for White children to develop a positive ethnoracial identity. As you read through the stages, allow yourself to try all of this on, realizing that there may be information here that is new and perhaps uncomfortable to consider. Because many White people have fairly segregated social networks, White children may not experience race in a meaningful way until later in life. For some, the process may not begin in earnest until they go to college, where they may have exposure and experiences that include more diverse racial groups. Prominent Black psychologist, Dr. Janet Helms, defined a model of White racial identity development which includes six intertwining parts, as shown in Table 12.2. This model can be helpful to parents and caregivers of White children and adolescents as you seek to understand, guide, and support their healthy White ethnoracial

TABLE 12.1 Minority Identity Development Model

Stage	Description	Example
Conformity	Accepts values of White culture without critical analysis; may value White role models, White standards of beauty and success, and believe it is better to be White; underlying negative emotions toward the self as a person of color	Rejects a same-race peer and views White peers as more desirable
Dissonance	Begins to acknowledge racism when a triggering event causes re-examination of own assumptions and beliefs; becomes more aware of racism; confusion and conflict toward the dominant cultural system arise	Shock and disbelief after being dumped by a White boyfriend when his friends mocked him for dating a Latina
Resistance	Actively rejects dominant culture and immerses self in own culture; may feel hostility and reject White people in this stage	Throws away all music by artists outside of her own ethnic group
Introspection	Starts to question the values of own ethnic group and dominant group; more open to connecting with White people to better learn and understand differences	Joins a mostly White German club to learn about the culture
Integrative Awareness	Develops cultural identity based on both minoritized and dominant cultural values; feels comfortable with self and identity as a person of color in a multicultural society	Has confidence to advocate for a gender-neutral bathroom or present to a racially diverse class about casual racism

TABLE 12.2 White Identity Development

Stage	Description	Example
Contact	Denies racism, cultural differences, and dominant group membership; may be "colorblind" or insensitive to racial differences	Says "I don't see race" to persons who are not White
Disintegration	Experiences conflict over moral dilemmas between choosing own group versus greater humanity goals	Notices he is served first in a cafeteria although he came after a student of color, and does not speak up
Reintegration	Finds some resolution of dilemma by becoming intolerant of other groups and taking a racial superiority bias	Justifies that she deserves to be accepted into an exclusive club because other applicants of different races are dirty, poor, and don't work hard enough
Pseudo-independence	Begins limited acceptance and understanding of racism and makes efforts to connect with people of color that share similarities	Recognizes that his church is not diverse and not living up to their values, invites a Black family
Immersion/Emersion	Develops increased understanding and acceptance of White privilege but may still act based on guilt	Feels bad that Asian neighbors are moving out because they were racially harassed—brings them cookies
Autonomy	Gained acceptance of own Whiteness; understands personal role in perpetuating racism; values diversity; feels less fearful and guilty about the reality of racism	Advocates in county science fair to reanalyze rejected student applications because they were all applications from students of color

identity development. This process can take longer than for People of Color because of the taboo in White cultures around talking about race, so reaching the Autonomy phase can take well into young adulthood.

Practical Strategies: How Parents Can Help

All children can develop a healthy ethnoracial identity when you help them:

- Gain an appreciation of their group through cultural knowledge and practicing cultural traditions (e.g., as Americans we celebrate the 4th of July with a picnic; as Black people, we also celebrate Juneteenth)
- Learn about their culture and celebrate cultural strengths
- Engage in critical thinking about racial differences (e.g., healthy suspicion and questioning of stereotypes and systems that reinforce White supremacy)
- Understand the nature of racism (e.g., pointing out the historic reason for segregated neighborhoods and schools and how ongoing racism from both institutions and individuals continues to be harmful)
- Determine what their ethnic group and race means to your child personally (e.g., as Americans, we helped liberate Europe in World War II; as Black people we showed the world how to fight nonviolently for civil rights).

Learning and Unlearning about Race: Step by Step

Keep reading for the deeper dive into race mentioned earlier in this chapter. If this information is new for you, you may find that some of what you read makes you feel uncomfortable. Try to keep reading, pondering, and learning so that you will feel more prepared and equipped for conversations with your child when they are developmentally ready to learn and to understand.

A first step is to help children understand that there is no biological basis for race. Again, it is an invented idea. It may be helpful to consider why there is often confusion about this. Many people are taught that races of humans represent real biologically based and genetic group differences. But belief in genetic relatedness based on skin color is no more sensible than assuming individuals must be related because they are the same height or that skunks and pandas are related because both have a mix of black and white fur. Two individuals can both have very dark skin but not be genetically related to each other at all. A White mother can have a dark-skinned child and be highly genetically related to that child, but they will be treated as racially different.

You may find it helpful to read more about all of this and to share this source with your adolescent when this is developmentally appropriate. Sources such as Kolbert's *National Geographic* special issue, *There's No Such Thing as Race—It's a Made-up Category* (2018), can be helpful. It is important to explain how the concept of "race" is at odds with population genetics and that humans cannot be categorized neatly into biologically distinct subcategories based on appearance. It may be hard to understand that this is a myth and an example of being taught misinformation, as it is so firmly embedded in people at all educational levels and even university professors. However, a common-sense example may be helpful. You can explain that all people with brown hair do not share personality traits or genetic predispositions compared to people with black hair or blonde hair—and the same goes for skin color.

The information included in this section is important for *all* parents to know and to teach their children. If you are a White parent, it is important to teach your White children these facts as an antidote to the development of notions of superiority and to support their learning what it means to be White. Aspects that they consider negative parts of their identity (e.g., racist history, unearned privileges) can become positives when thoughtfully used in the service of racial justice. For example, White youth can learn that although White allyship can sometimes be difficult, having a White identity gives them special power to bring attention, intervention, and justice to situations in which a peer of Color would not be able to take action. They can also look for opportunities to relinquish White privilege, such as listing "prefer not to answer" on forms in cases where being White might be advantageous. White allyship is not easy, and subsequent backlash may emerge around conflict with other White people when they choose anti-racist actions.

Ethnoracial Identity: More Challenging for Some Groups

Therapists who work with diverse youth see many young people who struggle with their ethnoracial identities, and overrepresented among these are children of immigrants and biracial/multiethnic youth. Some immigrant parents may not realize the identity conflict experienced by their children as they become socialized into a system that may be at complete odds with the values of their country of origin. White parents raising children of color (e.g., through adoption or interracial marriage) may struggle to provide the racial socialization necessary to help their children thrive due to lack of awareness. Biracial young people often have lower levels of ethnoracial identity, which could put them at risk for more serious emotional issues and make it more difficult for them to feel good about themselves. As such, parents will need to put extra effort into educating and preparing their children for racial challenges, as we saw with Samuel.

Parental Intervention: An Example

Due to colonization, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and other oppressive social practices, challenges around ethnoracial identity development exist as a global issue. One of the authors experienced a school issue that impacted her biracial/bicultural child growing up in Germany. Her daughter has thick, curly hair due to an African American heritage and recounted an episode she experienced:

> People would routinely touch, grab, and pull my hair. When I would turn around in shock, they would smile at me and say, "I just love your hair." I always felt too embarrassed to stand up for myself and thought it would be wrong to do so since it would happen in front of many others and even teachers who felt this was okay.

We need to teach our children that unwanted touching is never acceptable, even if it only seems to happen out of curiosity. Often, teachers and school administrators dismiss such behavior as harmless, but it is not. Failure to address such behavior may teach the White child that their curiosity (and maybe even to give a compliment as they reach out to touch, saying, "I love your hair") is more important than the Black child's right to say "no" to an unwanted touching. It may also inadvertently teach children that if they are touched by someone else, no one will do anything to help, setting them up for confusion and, most seriously, later abuse. In such instances, your understanding about why this behavior is inappropriate will help you to explain to your child why such behaviors are not okay. Doing so in a way that is clear, non-shaming, and that encourages growth and learning will be important. It is also important for parents to teach children what they can say in the moment when these events occur, as this will make them feel more confident

and competent when this happens again. All children need to understand that they are allowed to set boundaries around their bodies and personal space. It may be helpful to offer your child an example of something they can say such as, "I don't like it when you touch my hair. Please don't do that." Sometimes parents may also need to educate teachers; in this case, the author had a meeting with the teacher and principal to explain the problem.

Conclusion

In a multiracial, diverse society, building a strong, positive ethnoracial identity in a child is essential for their mental health and well-being. A healthy ethnoracial identity is an important part of building overall healthy self-esteem because it provides a positive sense of identification and belonging with group cultural values, kinship, and beliefs. As parents, you want your children to recognize that *everyone* deserves to have a positive and affirming sense of identity. You also want them to recognize when others displace negative stereotypes and behaviors onto them and not to allow these negative and destructive incidents to define them. You want your child to recognize racism when they see, hear, and feel it, so they can apply all that you have taught and poured into them. Dr. Chester Pierce, a Black psychiatrist at Harvard, first wrote about this over 50 years ago, emphasizing that children must feel empowered to detect and deflect the bombardment of false messages that can make young People of Color "feel unsure, unwanted, useless, disunited, disaffected, and helpless." Whether your children identify as White or as children of Color, you want your children to draw on inner faith in themselves and pride in their ethnoracial group to feel like "a respectable, dignified, worthwhile human being." In so doing, you help them become better able to detect the social messages that conspire to make youth of Color feel inferior and alone, and White youth feeling separate and disconnected from their peers of Color. As parents, you have a highly impactful and critical role to play. You are indeed shaping the world in which your children now live and preparing them for the future that awaits.

Additional Resources

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