

QUARTERLY

Conversations

**Fundamental Friendships:
The Benefits of Diverse Friendship Groups for Children**

Our Panelists

Yarrow Dunham is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology as well as faculty in the Cognitive Science Program at Yale. His research explores how people make sense of the complex social worlds they inhabit. Areas of focus have been how children divide social space into humankinds, what underlies the tendency to prefer similar or ingroup others, how perceptions of social status shape our sense of our own position in the world, and how these phenomena play out across different cultural settings.

Sarah Wright is an experienced and heartfelt leader in the equity and education industry with expertise in curriculum development as well as the design and implementation of equity and inclusion strategies. She is highly skilled, talented, and passionate about working with young people. She received her Master of Arts in Education from the University of California at Berkeley she received her Bachelor of Science in Human Ecology from Ohio State University. Among her specialized training and certifications, Wright has attended the NAIS School Leadership Institute, as well as the Multicultural Leadership Institute. She is Senior Site Director at Breakthrough Miami and CEO of Goldie LLC.

Dr. Melanie Killen is Professor of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, Professor of Psychology and the Director of the Social and Moral Development Lab at the University of Maryland. She is the editor of the Handbook of Moral Development and has over 250 publications. Commissioned by Anderson Cooper at CNN AC360, Dr. Killen conducted a study on children's racial bias for a set of stories aired on CNN AC360 "Kids on Race: The Hidden Picture" in April 2012 which won an Emmy Award for Outstanding News and Analysis. Dr. Killen wrote an article entitled: "Reducing prejudice through promoting cross-group friendships for the Review of General Psychology published in 2021. Funded by the NSF and the NICHD, Dr. Killen studies children's and adolescents social cognition and moral reasoning, cross-group friendships, social exclusion and inclusion, stereotypes and bias, morality and theory of mind, intergroup attitudes and relationships, conceptions of social inequalities, and school-based programs designed to facilitate intergroup friendships and inclusive classroom environments.

Guidance from our Panelists:

What does cross group friendship mean?

Each person has a multitude of social identities. Whether based on race, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, etc. we may identify with or belong to multiple groups. **Cross group friendships are meaningful friendships between people who identify differently.** The groups that are most socially central or socially charged within the United States are gender, race, and ethnicity. Cross groups may mutually identify along one dimension but not the other.

Ex. Both children may be Jewish but have different ethnicities.

The term cross group friendships has been identified because gender, racial, and ethnic segregation is particularly an issue in the United States. Many times children gravitate towards other kids who are like them, whether by choice or adult influence. By doing so children are losing opportunities to be friends with children outside of their group who they may have a lot in common with. Researchers, educators, and parents are becoming more aware that this is problematic and starting to promote and facilitate cross group friendships.

What are the benefits of cross group friendships for children?

The Iceberg Model- Friendship groups are like an iceberg. When they are homogenous we don't feel the need to explore beneath the water because the tip of the iceberg is so similar to ourselves that we think we already know what's below. In cross group friendships children are exposed to a unique iceberg tip, which encourages exploration below the surface. When children don't explore what they can't see, they're missing out.

Empathy- Cross group friendships at an early age promotes empathy and empathetic children turn into empathetic adults. They teach children to be thoughtful about their intentions, and to think in the best interest of everyone, not just one group, or their own group.

Resiliency against racism and stereotypes- Cross group friendships give children firsthand experience to reject harmful stereotypes about different groups. Whether they're hearing or seeing stereotypes amongst friends, family, or in movies children in cross group friendships can look to their friends to say, "My friend is Latinx and he's not like that". As adults, without these firsthand experiences we tend to interpret our own discomfort with other groups as a problem with them and not with ourselves.

Guidance from our Panelists:

How do we encourage and facilitate cross group friendships in the classroom, in museums, or our homes?

Demonstrate it yourself- Model cross group relationships in your daily life and in everyday situations. Adults who don't or haven't had cross group friendships may find this uncomfortable. We tend to think that we will have more in common with those that look like us. There is no research to support this. Interact and engage with people from different backgrounds in front of your children. Children are highly observant and will notice if you self-segregate. They may interpret that as I shouldn't talk to different people either.

Diversify your bookshelf- Chose books for your children that reflect other ethnicities, genders, religions and backgrounds. Choose books that reflect children of diverse backgrounds playing together.

Back to basics- Don't assume your child knows how to make friends, especially coming out of COVID. Sometimes children have a hard time engaging other children in play. Teaching children simple ways to interact is important.

Ex. How do you let someone know you want to play with them? How do you read social cues??

Diversify the places you visit- Try visiting a library in a different neighborhood or shopping at a different grocery store. When you leave your neighborhood and diversify the places you visit regularly you diversify the people you encounter. Make changes to the structure of your life to expose your whole family to more diversity. It's important to do this for yourself as much as for your children.

How do we manage anxiety around talking to children about race?

Think ahead: Research shows that white parents, especially in the area of race and racial issues, are often uncomfortable discussing race with their own children, and in general. It could be because it is often a weighty and complex topic. But a parent's discomfort with the topic could translate to the child that this is something that we don't talk about or that this subject is taboo.

Ex. Family is in the grocery and the child points and yells "Mommy, why is their skin so dark?" If your response as a parent is to react with anxiety and stress that will translate to your child. Have a response prepared in advance. Children ask these kinds of questions all the time.

Guidance from our Panelists:

Be prepared: Think ahead about how you want to have these conversations with your child. If you don't address it they'll learn it somewhere else and they may learn it in a context that isn't positive. Be intentional about how you introduce the topic of race, and remember race isn't just teaching the historical and present context of blackness, it's also teaching about whiteness.

Ex. If their first lesson about race is in the context of MLK at school then they might view whiteness as a group who always oppress black people.

A different perspective: White parents or white children may have anxiety about addressing race in cross group friendships, but being the only person of a different race in the group can also cause anxiety. Many times, especially as children grow into adolescence, they may seek friend groups who look like them so they don't have to explain their diversity. Regardless of our identities, and whether or not we look alike, we all have different experiences.

Ex. Are they going to ask me about my hair? Am I going to have to explain my skin color?

Parking lot the question: Even if you don't know how to answer questions about race, you can always say "You know what, that's a great question, and I'm going to find out." Make sure to return with answers.

How do you build a child's self-esteem about their own diversity?

Affirmations – Making statements like "your hair is so pretty" or "your skin is beautiful" without drawing any comparisons to anyone else's hair or skin tone. You can affirm diversity through picture storybooks. Children are very curious and they're trying to categorize the world, don't add negative thoughts that they hadn't even considered.

Remember, they might need both- While it's true that research supports that cross groups friendships are good for all children, it's also true that children may want to spend time with a group that reflects their own identity. The goal is to facilitate and promote cross group friendships at a young age so that children don't feel fatigue and seek to self-segregate.

Ex. At least when I'm with them I don't have to explain myself, and I'm not treated differently because of my skin color.

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Guidance from our Panelists:

How can we include disabilities in cross group friendships?

Push for it: Teachers, parents, and educators can get involved in boards and committees to push for integration of students and children with disabilities. There are emerging studies that show it has the same positive benefits as other cross group friendships.

Find common ground: Similarly to race, gender, or ethnicity children with disabilities may look different than other children. In many communities there is less exposure to children with disabilities and the idea that they are different may be more pronounced. Finding commonalities can help build friendships. The friendships create empathy and expand their perspective.

How can we encourage diverse friendships in curriculum and public programs?

You chose the group: When children come together for an activity make a point of putting them in to diverse groups. The simple act of working on a project together and towards a common goal is a tried-and-true method of reducing intergroup tensions and negative feelings. You can also choose projects or programs that highlight intersectional identities.

Reduce barriers to entry: Having free or reduced admission days draws a more diverse crowd.

Ex. Removing a financial barrier can draw diverse socio-economic backgrounds

Reassess your own assumptions: Look at your programming. Does it assume anything about groups, or promote stereotypes? Do your materials feature diverse people? Within your administration are your policies creating barriers to cross group opportunities?

Don't give up: We can't put all the responsibility on children. Adults really need to do the work. Interactions in cross groups may not always go according to plan and they may be uncomfortable but that shouldn't mean you give up. Don't misplace your discomfort with it not going well as a problem with that group or person.

**TELL US HOW
WE DID:**

