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# Understanding the challenges and opportunities of talking to children about race and racism in child-facing institutions

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**Abstract**

Researchers from a range of disciplines emphasize that effectively socializing children about race and racism is vital to promoting positive outcomes, such as disrupting the development of racist attitudes and beliefs. While parents and guardians influence children's racial attitudes and beliefs, children also learn about race and racism from many other important adults in their lives, such as teachers, community leaders, and librarians. Yet race-related topics are largely absent or underdeveloped from child-facing programming, policies, and procedures. In this paper, we describe three major barriers to effectively socializing children about race and racism within child-facing institutions like libraries, museums, and schools: (1) adults' (often inaccurate) beliefs about children's social and cognitive race-related development, (2) adults' knowledge and comfort discussing race and racism with others, and (3) social norms that minimize explicit discussion of race and racism in institutional and interpersonal contexts. To contextualize these barriers, we address how children can process and reason about race across childhood and outline the evidence-based benefits of socializing children about race and racism inside and outside the home. Finally, we provide recommendations aimed at translating this research to child-focused spaces and provide general guidelines to consider when implementing such practices in their own spheres of influence. In sum, we argue that effective socialization about race and racism benefits all children and can (and should!) be achieved successfully outside of the home; and that adults who interact with children must interrogate their own beliefs, biases, and perspectives,

work to develop cultural competence, and invest in and con-
tinually reassess practices and policies to facilitate effective
socialization about race and racism.

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States, [1]race powerfully shapes people's daily lives, social systems, and "life chances"
(Weber, 1922; Wilson, 2007)—including the way children engage with and are treated in the world.
The concept of race was invented by White individuals to categorize people into relatively clear-cut,
unchanging, and homogeneous groups on the basis of traits commonly associated with phenotype,
such as skin tone or hair texture, and ancestry (Omi & Winant, 1994; Richeson & Sommers, 2016;
Sen & Wasow, 2016; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). This notion emerged several centuries ago and
was used as a means to justify the enslavement of Africans in colonial America (Smedley, 2018).
Over time, scientists devised and tested theories that further entrenched the construct of race into
societal structures and perceptions and, by extension, helped to uphold racialized systems of forced
labor (Stepan, 1982). However, race is socially constructed, because it has no scientific or biological
basis (Goodman, 2000; Graves, 2003; Zack, 1995; Zuckerman, 1990). Despite the fact that race is
socially constructed, everyone has a racial identity, and those identities matter (Helms, 1990; Tatum,
1997/2017). In the United States, racial groups are organized into a hierarchy that privileges certain
groups, like lighter skinned and/or White people, and oppresses others, like darker skinned and/or
Black or Indigenous people (Hochschild & Weaver, 2007; J. M. Jones, 1998, Skinner-Dorkenoo et al.,
2023). *Racism* refers to the systemic hierarchical organization of racial groups. Racism can involve
psychological factors, such as racially motivated attitudes (i.e., how you feel about a person/group;
*prejudice*), beliefs (i.e., how you think about a person/group; *stereotypes)*, or behaviors (i.e., how
you treat a person/group; *discrimination*; Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1999; Fiske, 1998; Sumner, 1906;
Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Racism is also structural and culturally embedded in the social, political,
economic, educational, and legal systems and policies in ways that maintain or produce advantage
or disadvantage on the basis of race (Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Crenshaw, 2013; Feagin, 2013; Kendi,
2019; Omi & Winant, 1994; Salter et al., 2018). And, because a person's racial identity is tied to
their other social and political identities, such as their gender or socioeconomic status, identities can
intersect to create a unique form of privilege or oppression (Crenshaw, 2013; Collins, 1990/2022;
hooks, 1982).

Because United States children live in a society, that is, racially structured, they "swim in the water"
(Salter et al., 2018) of these racial systems throughout their childhood. From infancy, children can cat-
egorize faces into racial groups (Anzures et al., 2010; Bar-Haim et al., 2006), and prior to entering
formal schooling, they begin to develop an understanding of social groups and hierarchies, potentially
developing preferences for some racial groups over others, and engaging in racially biased behaviors
(Dunham et al., 2013; Newheiser et al., 2014; Olson et al., 2012; Renno & Shutts, 2015). During
the elementary years, some children can show a rapid increase in racial stereotyping and bias. For
example, between ages 7 and 10 children's racial bias can progress from "weak" to "strong and reli-
able" (Dore et al., 2014), and between ages 4 and 12 children can show significant increases in use
of out-group racial stereotyping (Pauker et al., 2016). All together, evidence suggests that children's

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[1] Because race is socially constructed and multifaceted, the lay public, scholars, educators, and policy experts often use the terms race, ethnicity,
and culture interchangeably (Sanchez et al., 2014; Sen & Wasow, 2016). Although there are distinctions between the terms, especially relating to
the role that observable physical characteristics is considered to align with race, more generally these constructs share many overlapping theories,
questions, and issues (Albuja et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2015), and many adults and children see these terms as overlapping (Umaña-Taylor et
al., 2014). In many places in this paper, we therefore use the term race to encompass social categories that could also include ethnicity and culture,
such as in the case of Latine identity. Moreover, we use Latine use as a gender-neutral term to describe individuals who have Latin American
origins; many Latine people resist the gender neutral term Latinx because it is unpronounceable in Spanish (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020).

recognition and understanding of racial dynamics become significantly embedded in their cognition and behavior from a very young age.

While the pervasive nature of race and racism affects how people perceive and interact with all children, it has a disproportionate impact on children of color. Sadly, multiple reports corroborate that as early as age 6, between 50% and 90% of U.S. children of color experience racial/ethnic discrimination, both from adults and other children, and in a range of places, including schools, businesses, and neighborhoods (Bo et al., 2023; Brody et al., 2006; Brown & Bigler, 2005; Hirschfeld, 2008; Marcelo & Yates, 2019; Seaton et al., 2008). Experiencing discrimination has deleterious consequences for the emotional and physical health of children of color (Benner et al., 2018; Seaton et al., 2008; Szalacha et al., 2003; Trent et al., 2019), who comprise more than half of U.S. children under 15 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). It is, therefore, critical to socialize children about race in ways that will disrupt racist attitudes, beliefs, and practices (Eberhardt, 2019; Lai et al., 2014; S. O. Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Rutland & Killen, 2015), and that will help children of color cope with racial bias when it occurs. One way to achieve these, and other positive aims, is by ensuring that child-facing institutions (e.g., schools, museums, libraries, community centers) have explicit policies and practices aimed at engaging children in conversations about race and racism.

Socializing children about race and racism is vital to promoting racial justice. Racial socialization refers to the process by which adults communicate ideas, practices, behaviors, and norms about race and racism (e.g., D. Hughes et al., 2006). These messages can be transmitted to children explicitly during conversation (e.g., via the words and messages communicated) or implicitly through nonverbal indicators (e.g., by *not* talking about race or by shushing a child who mentions race; D. Hughes et al., 2006; Huguley et al., 2019). And, these discussions are sometimes proactive (e.g., a planned part of programming) or reactive (e.g., in response to a particular question or event; Bo et al., 2023; D. Hughes & Chen, 1999). Children have the potential to learn about race and racism from a number of "important adults" in their life, who may shape their racial attitudes and beliefs. This includes not only their parents and guardians but also their teachers, educational administrators (e.g., principals and superintendents), librarians, museum docents, camp counselors, childcare directors, and coaches (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; W. Byrd, 2014; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021; Pauker et al., 2015). While other influences, such as media or other children, may also act as socialization agents (Adams-Bass et al., 2014), in this paper we focus on the messages that adults within child-facing institutions impart to children via explicit conversation and discussion.

As we review in detail below, research shows that there are a number of benefits to adults socializing children about race and racism. For example, when adults socialize White children about race and racism, those children are less likely to hold racial bias and better able to detect racism when they observe it, relative to those who do not receive such socialization (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Hagerman, 2016; Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2018; Skinner & Meltzoff, 2019). For children of color, discussions about race in the home are associated with positive racial identity development and increased self-esteem (e.g., Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Simon, 2021; Wang et al., 2020; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). Yet, despite the well-documented benefits of racial socialization, some adults are hesitant to talk to children about race and racism (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008; Perry et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2022; Sullivan, Eberhardt, et al., 2021; Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021). White adults, in particular, avoid discussions about race and especially racism (Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2006; Pahlke et al., 2012), even if they generally support the idea of engaging in such conversations with children (Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2022). And, because U.S. social norms minimize explicit discussion of race and racism, these topics are often absent from both interpersonal interactions and the programming, policies, and procedures that guide child-facing institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 1999; Plaut, 2010; Pollock, 2004). In this paper, we argue that successful interventions to promote high-quality discussions of race and racism in these spaces will require not only developing effective conversational strategies and teaching materials but also addressing the psychological, interpersonal, and systemic barriers to implementing them within child-facing institutional spaces. We describe the state of the literature on understanding the barriers to and

benefits of effectively socializing children about race and racism and provide recommendations aimed at translating this foundational research to apply to child-focused spaces.

We aim our paper at individuals who interact with children inside and outside the home, including teachers, librarians, museum docents, sports coaches, and other "important adults," though parents, guardians, and other community members may find information that may support their own socialization practices at many places in the paper. In addition, we aim our paper at individuals who create the policies, priorities, and procedures for these spaces, including superintendents, school boards, directors, principals, and politicians. We focus in particular on promoting effective conversations among individuals who interact with school-aged children. After all, U.S. children may spend as much—or more—waking hours in child-facing spaces as they do in their homes. For example, U.S. children spend on average 6.64 h in school each day, and 180 days (50% of the year) in school each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). Beyond school, 18% of U.S. children participate in afterschool programs, for an average of over 7 h per week (Afterschool Alliance, 2023), and adolescents who play sports spend just over 2 h per school week doing so (Livingston, 2019). Seventy percent of parents of children under 18 report that their children visited a public library in the past year, with children between 6 and 11 the most frequent visitors (Zickuhr et al., 2013). In addition, schools and other public-facing spaces provide children and adults with opportunities for cross-racial interactions with students, teachers, and staff, which can reduce bias in both adults and children (Paluck et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Skinner & Meltzoff, 2019; Tropp et al., 2022). Thus, we hope to provide resources for the many adults who influence children's lives to (1) have effective interactions with children about race and racism and (2) inform policy and procedures about these topics in child-facing spaces.

To this end, we organized our paper into three sections. In the first section, we begin by providing important context regarding what experts know about how children can process and reason about race across developmental stages. We next outline the evidence-based benefits of socializing children about race and racism. We draw upon frameworks established by the foundational ethnic/racial socialization literature and more recent experimental psychology literature to detail the advantages of engaging children in productive race-related conversations across their developmental stages. In the second section, we highlight psychological and interpersonal barriers to (or opportunities for) talking to children about race and racism, and address preparation for such conversations. In the third section, we apply the above-described research to help readers find points of intervention for their particular needs and connect these points of intervention to specific policy-level changes.

## RACE-RELATED DEVELOPMENT ACROSS CHILDHOOD AND EVIDENCE-BASED BENEFITS OF SOCIALIZING CHILDREN ABOUT RACE AND RACISM

Children rapidly develop the capacity to reason about race and racism. Adults prioritize engaging children in conversations that are perceived to be "developmentally appropriate," and many child-facing spaces aim to teach children by providing information geared to the child's capacities, abilities, and interests. Indeed, U.S. governmental recommendations emphasize the need to "provide[s] age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate information" across a host of educational contexts (Office of Education, n.d.). And the National Association for the Education of Young Children emphasizes the importance of "developmentally appropriate practice" in interpreting the common core curriculum, which includes the mandate that "all teaching practice should be appropriate to the child's age and developmental status" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009, p. 1). While best practices for developmentally appropriate education should be "based on research and expert knowledge—not on assumptions—of how children learn and develop" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2015, p. 2), adults use their intuitions to shape their beliefs about child development. Therefore, we begin this section by reviewing some of the literature about

race-related development so that readers can become acquainted with the current scientific understanding of children's developing capacities to reason about race and racism. Then, we discuss the evidence-based benefits of socializing children about race and racism.

## Developing concepts of race and racial identity

From birth, infants display many preferences, such as those for their birth parent's primary language (Moon et al., 1993), for music heard in utero (Hepper, 1991), and even for foods and flavors that their birth parent consumed during pregnancy (Mennella et al., 2001; Schaal et al., 2000). Within hours of birth, infants show so-called "social" preferences (e.g., preferring faces to nonfaces; Valenza et al., 1996), and within the first year of life, infants' preferences are rapidly tuned to match the input found in their environment, resulting in the finding that infants tend to prefer social stimuli, like sounds and faces, that are similar to those they have been exposed to frequently (Vouloumanos et al., 2010). Young infants can even use race to categorize people (Anzures et al., 2010; Bar-Haim et al., 2006) and do so in ways that are reflective of their social context. For example, both 3-month-old Black infants living in Ethiopia (who were primarily exposed to Black faces) and 3-month-old White infants living in Israel (who were primarily exposed to White faces) looked longer at faces from their own racial group. Yet, Black Ethiopian infants living in Israel (who were exposed equally to Black and White faces) looked at Black and White faces at equal rates (Bar-Haim et al., 2006). These data suggest that infants use the social environment to begin reasoning about social categories, including about race. And children's social environments continue to shape their race-related attitudes across childhood (Rizzo et al., 2022).

As they grow, children use race in increasingly complex ways, including to form preferences, and categories (Rhodes & Baron, 2019; Waxman, 2021). Indeed, within the first years of life, children form a category of "racial in-group" and "racial out-group(s)." As children develop, these become related to in-group preferences, or more favorable evaluations of individuals who belong to their in-group (Olson et al., 2012). For example, White children in the United States have shown pro-White preferences as early as 3 and 4 years old (Dunham et al., 2013; Perszyk et al., 2019), and this in-group favoritism persists throughout the elementary school years (Newheiser & Olson, 2012). However, even children's beliefs about their racial in-group are impacted by social status: in the United States, 7- to 10-year-old Black children do not show the same implicit preference for racial-ingroup members that their White counterparts do (Dunham et al., 2013; Newheiser & Olson, 2012). Outside the United States, 6- to 14-year-olds in Brazil showed both implicit and explicit preferences for high-status racial groups (Sacco et al., 2019), as did 3- to 13-year-old Black, White, and multiracial children in South Africa (Shutts et al., 2011). Thus, prior to adolescence, children not only develop an understanding of race but also of how racial groups are positioned within their cultural context (Heck et al., 2022).

In parallel with these processes, children also develop a sense of their own racial and ethnic identities or the attitudes and beliefs about being members of their racial/ethnic groups (Cross, 1995; García Coll et al., 1996; McMahon & Watts, 2002; Phinney & Ong, 2007). As we review below, ethnic/racial identity development research has focused particularly on children of color in middle childhood, when children are particularly attentive to the social groups they belong to and how those groups fit within social hierarchies (Bennett & Sani, 2004; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2010). However, racial identity is also salient to younger children of color (Ambady et al., 2001; Iruka et al., 2021) and White children of various ages (Hazelbaker et al., 2022; Loyd & Gaither, 2018).

Ethnic-racial identity formation is a critical aspect of development for children of color, who find value in and experience benefits from acknowledging their racial and ethnic identity (Hitlin et al., 2006; Quintana, 2007; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Parents of color play a strong role in using socialization strategies to support racial/ethnic pride for children of color, and the benefits of such outcomes are described in fuller detail in the next section. Ethnic-racial identity is generally less central for White children than children of color (Fuligni et al., 2005; Hazelbaker et al., 2022; Moffit & Rogers, 2022; Tatum, 1994; Turner & Brown, 2007). For example, one sample of ~9-year-old White U.S. children reported that race was not important to them (Rogers & Meltzoff, 2017). Nevertheless, White

children may also engage with their ethnic-racial identity (Hazelbaker et al., 2022; Loyd & Gaither, 2018). White children who develop an understanding of their sense of self and their racial position in society can foster anti-racism (Hazelbaker et al., 2022; Helms, 1990); similarly, ethnic pride (e.g., pride in Irish ancestry or Jamaican ancestry) may benefit both White children or children of color. However, for White children, racial pride (e.g., "White pride") could be associated with support for racial hierarchy and oppression and does not serve the same positive function that racial pride (e.g., pride in Black identity) can for children of color. Despite these differences, children (and adults) tend to use terms related to race and ethnicity interchangeably (Byrd & Legette, 2022; Helms & Talleyrand, 1997; Sanchez et al., 2014). For example, when another sample of White ~9-year-old children did describe their race, they most often identified themselves either as "American," which they conflated with race, or as their ethnicity and not their race (e.g., as German and not as White). Moreover, these children also viewed their cultural practices as typical or normative (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021). In all, from a young age, U.S. children of all races are taught cultural norms, practices, and procedures that center on Whiteness and learn that anything, that is, not White is the "cultural other" (Moffitt & Rogers, 2022; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021). These data suggest that socialization aimed at providing children consistent exposure to and meaningful examples of cultures, perspectives, and ideas that authentically center non-White ideas, perspectives, and people, are important. More generally, as we discuss in the Policy section, it is important to ensure that the policies and procedures that guide child-facing institutions intentionally decenter Whiteness.

## Developing concepts of racism

Prior to entering formal schooling, toddlers and preschoolers have already begun the task of using racial categories to make decisions about their world, including decisions that are racially biased. For example, skill at racial categorization among 3- to 7-year-old children in Singapore predicts levels of implicit racial bias (Setoh et al., 2017). And, 3- to 5-year-olds in both China and Cameroon already show high levels of racial bias (Qian et al., 2015). Some studies show a rapid increase in racial stereotyping (Pauker et al., 2016) and racial bias (Dore et al., 2014) during the early elementary school years. These data suggest that interventions designed to prevent the formation of harmful racial stereotypes and biases are likely critical in the preschool and elementary-school years—and that interventions to curtail the reinforcement and application of those biases should also continue throughout middle childhood.

Of course, fighting racism also requires understanding the connection between race and systems of power within a child's world. "Can children connect race to power," such as political power, authority, and economic structures? Studies show that even prior to entering formal schooling, children can use race to make inferences about a person's socioeconomic or social status (e.g., Dunham et al., 2013; Mandalaywala et al., 2020; Newheiser et al., 2014; Olson et al., 2012), suggesting an early emerging belief about the connection between race and social power structures. And, as reviewed above, children's preferences for their own racial group are impacted by the positionality of that racial group within their local sociopolitical context. Of course, as children age, their understanding of the interaction of race and power becomes more sophisticated. By adolescence, 14- to 18-year-olds express complex understandings of racism in the United States, identifying that it manifests both at the interpersonal level and at the structural level (Bañales et al., 2021).

What do children do with their growing understanding of racial categories, racial stereotypes (Aboud, 2008), and racial prejudice (Killen et al., 2011; Rutland & Killen, 2015)? One positive outcome is that this understanding can support an increasing ability to combat racism. For example, older (e.g., above age 8) Asian, Latine, and White children were more likely than younger children to disapprove of—and even confront—an individual who systematically chose same-race playmates and systematically excluded Black playmates (Scott, Henkel, et al., 2023). And, in one qualitative study, Tyler and colleagues (2020) found that 95% of 14- to 18-year-olds described engaging directly with

sociopolitical inequality, including racism. Critically, this study found that adolescents were compelled to act against sociopolitical inequality to both promote positive (e.g., bonding, community pride) and combat negative (e.g., inequality, unfairness) outcomes (Tyler et al., 2020). Consistent with this, many adolescents aged 14–18 report taking antiracist actions in the form of interpersonal action (e.g., "I have challenged or checked a friend who uses a racial slur or makes a racial joke"), communal action (e.g., "I have participated in a leadership group or committee working on issues related to race"), and political change action (e.g., "I have attended a protest on an issue related to race, ethnicity, discrimination, and/or segregation"; Aldana et al., 2019). These data suggest that children and adolescents can and do get excited about combating inequality, including racial inequality, and underscore the importance of providing positive socialization to support and encourage children in this vital work.

On the other hand, many children learn something very different about their relationship to race: that it is inappropriate or impolite to talk about race, or even that talking about race might make one racist. For example, some research has suggested that between the ages of 8 and 10, White children learn to avoid mentioning race, even if doing so would provide a strategic advantage in a face-identification game (Apfelbaum, Pauker, et al., 2008). Other work has documented that children of color may also employ this strategy: Pauker et al. (2015) found that 9-12-year-old Asian, Black, Latine, and White U.S. children were equally avoidant of talking about race during a game, even when their silence hurt their performance. This race-avoidant approach may reflect U.S. children's understanding of and adherence to social norms that prohibit explicit discussion of race and racism in the United States (i.e., colorblindness[2] norms; Apfelbaum et al, 2012; Neville et al., 2013; Plaut, 2010), which we discuss more fully in the second section (Barriers to Talking to Children about Race and Racism).

To summarize, the data above demonstrate that, counter to the beliefs of many U.S. adults (e.g., Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021), before entering formal schooling children begin to connect race to power in ways that impact their interpersonal and social judgments. In middle childhood, this can lead to powerful antiracist acts, or it can lead to acquiescence to norms (like not talking about race) that, by default, center on Whiteness. Indeed, from a young age, U.S. children understand and have the potential to either reproduce or dismantle racial hierarchies in the United States (Betz & Kayser, 2017; Hagerman, 2016). This begs the question: Are there ways to support children's engagement in racial justice via effective conversations about race?

## Evidence-based benefits of socializing children about race and racism

Although there is no easy or one-shot way to effectively socialize children about race and racism, there is abundant evidence that talking to children about race and racism is important. Below, we briefly review the benefits and impacts of race socialization both within and outside the home, with a particular emphasis on parents' and educators' ethnic racial socialization practices and impacts on student race-related outcomes (Byrd & Legette, 2022; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021; J. M. Hughes et al., 2007; Saleem & Byrd, 2021). Where relevant, we also integrate empirical work that explores more formal race-related instruction in the form of educational lessons and units. While much of the research on ethnic racial socialization has focused on parents, there is evidence that similar processes can occur outside the home, in child-facing spaces (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021). For example, building on early work by Hughes and colleagues (2006), C. M. Byrd (2017) articulated how five dimensions of race socialization messaging apply within school settings: cultural socialization (learning about one's ingroup, especially for people of color), mainstream socialization (learning U.S. norms and values), promotion of cultural competence (learning about other ethnic/racial

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[2] Scholars have noted that the term "colorblind" is ableist because it conflates lack of sight with lack of understanding (Annamma et al., 2017). While we do not condone ableism, the term "colorblind" has been frequently used across disciplines to describe policies, procedures, and ideologies that intentionally do not "see color". In recognition of the legal and social origins of this term, and to enable interested readers to connect this paper to other literature on the topic, we use the term "colorblind" in places in this paper to refer to race-minimizing, race-ignorant, and race-homogenizing messaging.

groups and histories), colorblind socialization (ignoring race), and critical consciousness socialization (learning about power, privilege, and systems of oppression). Critically, these types of socialization emerge not only within particular social interactions but also via the policies and practices that govern child-facing institutions (e.g., benchmarks and standards, curriculum, language around academic performance, disciplinary norms; see Kuchirko & Nayfeld, 2021).

The parental ethnic-race socialization literature has primarily focused on the messages that families of color, and Black families specifically, provide their children about race and racism. Although conversations about race and racism can happen in White families—and they in fact may be more common in recent years (Gillen-O'Neel, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2022)—White families are more likely to avoid or deflect chances for direct conversations about race and racism or use colorblind approaches to discuss those topics (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Loyd & Gaither, 2018). Thus, the research documenting the (primarily positive) outcomes of ethnic-racial socialization is predominantly based on families of color. We argue that such socialization approaches are likely to benefit all children, to promote positive intergroup interactions, and to decenter the White experience.

## Ethnic/racial pride

Adults of color often talk about race and ethnicity with their children in order to instill ethnic-racial pride and to teach them their race and/or ethnicity (i.e., cultural socialization: e.g., D. Hughes, 2003; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009). Indeed, cultural socialization messages (about the cultural heritage, practices, and pride) are the most studied of all ethnic and racial socialization practices (Bo et al., 2023), and they are associated with the most consistently positive effects for children of color (Wang et al., 2020). For children of color, and Black children especially, such discussions are associated with positive ethnic-racial identity development (e.g., greater understanding of and positive feeling towards their racial/ethnic ingroup) and increased self-esteem and well-being (e.g., Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; D. Hughes et al., 2006; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; R. E. Roberts et al., 1999; T. B. Smith & Silva, 2011; Simon, 2021; Vittrup, 2018; Wang et al., 2020; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). For youth of color, greater racial and ethnic identification has been shown to be associated with benefits to peer and familial social relationships (Tran & Lee, 2011; Wang et al., 2020), feelings of critical agency (Bañales et al., 2021), and academic achievement (D. Hughes et al., 2006). Indeed, positive racial identification can also protect children of color, buffering them from negative consequences when they experience racial bias and discrimination (Neblett et al., 2008, 2010), including in academic settings (Eccles et al., 2006; Wong et al., 2003; Oyserman et al., 2001; Smalls et al., 2007), and more broadly in their communities (Banerjee et al., 2015; Burt et al., 2012).

At the same time, when adolescents experience greater ethnic-racial socialization at school, both Black and White students show benefits: they have more positive school experiences and also perform better academically (Wang et al., 2023; see also D. Hughes et al., 2009). Indeed, Byrd and Legette (2022) documented that, among Asian, Black, Latine, and White 6–12th graders, learning about one's cultural background was associated with a greater sense of identity and identity exploration, and learning about others' ethnic-racial cultures was associated with positive attitudes towards members of other ethnic-racial groups. This suggests that efforts to socialize children about race and racism both instill racial pride in children of color and improve cultural competence for all children by meaningfully and consistently sharing cultural practices and traditions.

## Holding and detecting racial bias

Increasingly, research has focused on the benefits of race socialization for helping children to detect racial bias (Huguley et al., 2019; Simon, 2021). This tangible benefit has been demonstrated across a host of racial and ethnic groups, including Asian, Black, and Latine children (Ayón et al., 2019;

Juang et al., 2016; Juang et al., 2018), and White children (Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Pahlke et al., 2012; Perry et al., 2019; Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018). For example, when adults discuss race and racism with White children, these children become less likely to hold racial bias and are better able to detect racism when they observe it (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Hagerman, 2016; Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2018). In other work, Hughes et al. (2007) explored how 6–11-year-old White and Black children responded to school history lessons that either included or failed to include information about anti-Black racism. White children who learned about racism showed less bias towards Black people—and they also reported more valuing of racial fairness, endorsed more counterstereotypical beliefs, and showed more positive attitudes and empathy towards Black people, compared to White children who did not learn about racism. Notably, the Black children who also learned about anti-Black racism did not report different attitudes and feelings than the Black children who did not and reported positive racial attitudes overall.

Other research has shown that teaching about the complexity of race itself (not racism explicitly) can also shift students' racial attitudes. For example, Donovan and colleagues (2019) randomly assigned middle schoolers (eighth graders) and high schoolers (9th–12th graders) to a 1-week program teaching about either genetic racial variation (i.e., that there is more genetic variation within racial groups than between racial groups) or climate variation. Learning about human variation decreased students' reported prejudice. These data converge with other evidence, showing that believing that race is defined by genetics has deeply negative consequences (Plaks et al., 2012; Richeson & Sommers, 2016; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Indeed, learning about the social construction and genetic complexity of race can lower negative racial attitudes and beliefs in college populations (Foeman, 2012; Khanna & Harris, 2009; Tawa et al., 2020; Young et al., 2022). These data suggest the efficacy of lessons and discussions that highlight the complexity of race. We argue that such lessons can (and should!) occur in many different types of contexts (e.g., not just classes specifically about race or identity) and settings (e.g., science museums, history museums). Moreover, Aboud and Fenwick (1999) found that learning about race as a social construction may be particularly effective for White students who are high in prejudice and that these effects were also realized through peer-to-peer discussions. These data highlight the importance of creating opportunities for effective peer-to-mentor and peer-to-peer conversations following lessons surrounding race and racism. This is because children have the potential to influence other children's beliefs about the kinds of behaviors that are acceptable in schools (Paluck & Shepherd, 2012; Paluck et al., 2016).

## Navigating a racist world

Because children of color—and their families, friends, and communities—are likely to become targets of racial bias or discrimination, race socialization must help children of color navigate a racialized world. For example, Black parents report working to instill awareness about Black/African Americans' social status and to protect them from racism by providing coping strategies and/or cultivating skepticism towards outgroup members (Anderson et al., 2018; Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; D. Hughes & Chen, 1997; D. Hughes et al., 2009; Huguley et al., 2019; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Saleem & Lambert, 2016; Wang et al., 2020).

However, the data on applying these strategies is more mixed. For example, researchers documented that messages about preparing for racial bias were associated with more negative self-esteem, ethnic affirmation, and academic outcomes for both Black and White early adolescents (D. Hughes et al., 2009). Notably, while—on their own—messages preparing children for bias have been associated with lower self-esteem among both White and Black youth (D. Hughes et al., 2009), it is possible that such messaging must be paired with emotional coping strategies in order to be effective. For example, when parents have both raised awareness of racism and provided coping strategies, children of color have expressed greater self-pride and greater perceived social support (for a review, see Wang et al., 2020). However, Wang and colleagues (2020) indicate that researchers have tended to focus on

increasing awareness of bias and discrimination, and fewer researchers have studied this as a multidimensional construct that also includes coping strategies. This suggests that efforts to socialize children should make sure to think about the potential for harm when discussing the likelihood of experiencing discrimination. Programs should prioritize empowering children with coping strategies, such as seeking community support or approach-oriented actions (e.g., collective action) over simply restating the relative vulnerability of children of color within a racist world. Institutions should carefully consider what coping mechanisms may work for the populations they serve (for reviews, see Brondolo et al., 2009; S. C. T. Jones et al., 2020), and pair such messages with positive cultural socialization messages in order to minimize harm.

## Special considerations for ethnic/racial socialization outside the home

Some of the literature reviewed above was primarily concerned with parent–child interactions. These interactions, by their very nature, involve a small and temporally stable group of conversants (e.g., a child and their caregiver). And, across many of the studies reviewed above, the conversations occurred between individuals who shared a racial group and sociocultural context (e.g., caregivers and children who share a racial group; relatively racially homogeneous classrooms). Critically, many child-facing spaces do not share these properties. A teacher or librarian may identify as being from a different racial or ethnic group than many of the children with whom they interact and in an increasingly multicultural United States., only 18% of US public school students are in racially homogeneous schools (i.e., schools where 75% or more of students come from the same racial group as that student; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). In addition, within child-facing institutions, adults may engage in social interactions with many different individuals each day. This not only means that individuals must be responsive to the changing social dynamics of each interaction, but it also means that the number of individuals (and relationships) impacted by each interaction is high. That is, managing multiple agents in a conversation is hard because people have different racial attitudes and knowledge that impact these conversations. Because socializing children about race and racism necessarily connects to personal experiences, it can be especially challenging to navigate the complexity of these dynamics in large groups, like those that may exist in child-facing institutions.

Saleem and Byrd (2021) recently proposed a model for understanding ethnic-racial socialization within school settings that accounts for some of the complexity of the social context within schools. We argue that these lessons likely apply to other child-facing institutions, like museums and libraries. Critically, they identify three primary transmitters of socialization messages within the school context: (1) teachers/staff, (2) peers, and (3) institutional practices and policies. According to Saleem and Byrd (2021), transmitting messages about race and racism is not unidirectional; instead, it can be reciprocal and interactive (e.g., race-related messaging may be transmitted from students to staff to teachers to practices). The number of possible transmitters creates complexity for institutions that wish to increase the transmission of race-related messaging to children. This complexity may serve as an asset. For example, there is genuine opportunity for students to impact policies and practices within the right context, for peers to educate peers, and for their diversity of experiences to improve the nature of such conversation. However, this complexity may also present a challenge. For example, a policy or practice (e.g., racially biased hair or dress codes; free speech policies that limit responsiveness to instances of racial bias) may indirectly convey harmful messages to students about race (e.g., that particular hairstyles or ways of dressing are unprofessional; that racial hate speech is protected speech), and then amplified and reproduced via peer–peer conversations. In addition, transmitters outside of the school (e.g., the community's context; race-related messaging from the media and other sources; local laws and political discourse) may further constrain and impact the transmission of race-related messaging within child-facing institutions. In the Policy section, we return to these ideas, with suggestions for how to implement structural solutions while navigating the large number of constituents involved in creating race-related messaging within schools. In the meantime, as we introduce the many barriers

to talking with children about race and racism (the next section), we encourage readers to read such barriers through this lens of social complexity.

## BARRIERS TO TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT RACE AND RACISM

As noted above, despite the evidence-based benefits of talking to children about race and racism, many adults are nevertheless hesitant to do so, and many child-facing institutions do not structurally ensure that such conversations occur. Here, we outline three specific factors that may limit—or provide opportunities for opening up—productive conversations about race and racism with children. The first barrier is adults' beliefs about children's cognitive and social capacity to discuss race. The second barrier includes adults' knowledge about race and understanding of Whiteness as a racial construct, and feelings of guilt or discomfort with these conversations. The third barrier comprises race-minimizing norms, attitudes, and policies, which includes both (a) interpersonal attitudes and individual actions and (b) structural and institutional policies and practices. These barriers independently and interactively hinder the likelihood of engaging in high-quality conversations with children about race. In the Policy section, we suggest ways educators, parents, and policymakers can address these barriers.

While many of these barriers will be relevant to many adults, some of these barriers are most relevant to particular groups. In particular, research has well documented that White U.S. residents and U.S. residents of color tend to have differing race-related attitudes and practices in general, and attitudes and practices about socializing children about race specifically. For example, White adults particularly avoid actively socializing children about race or racism, with recent work documenting that only about 30% of White parents reported talking to their 4–7 or 8–12-year-old children about race (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Pahlke et al., 2012; Vittrup, 2018; Vittrup & Holden, 2011). This race-avoidance remains true even in the wake of highly publicized race-related civil action (e.g., Black Lives Matter protests) or violence (e.g., the tragic 2020 murder of Black American George Floyd at the hands of a White police officer; Abaied et al., 2022; Sullivan, Eberhardt, et al., 2021; Underhill, 2018). We recognize that individuals of all racial groups can vary in their egalitarian attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs (Tran et al., 2017) and that systems of domination also create intraminority bias (e.g., anti-Blackness in Asian and Latine communities; Richeson & Craig, 2011; Yellow Horse et al., 2021; Yi & Todd, 2021) that should be diminished. However, in presenting the best scientific evidence on this topic, in certain places in the paper we identify where particular barriers may be most relevant to White adults. Moreover, it is critical to understand barriers that may be especially relevant to White adults because this population is overrepresented in many child-facing spaces. For example, in the 2020–2021 school year, 79% of US school teachers, 77% of public school principals, and 83% of private school principals in the United States were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023c). In 2022, 89% of superintendents were White (AASA, 2023). Similarly, 85% of librarians are White (Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023) and 75–85% of art museum educators are White (Fuentes, 2021; Kletchka, 2021).

### Barrier 1: Adults' beliefs about children

Adults' beliefs about children's race-related development shape their willingness to socialize children about race and racism (e.g., Abaied & Perry, 2021; Abaied et al., 2022; D. Hughes et al., 2006; Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2023; Vittrup, 2018). The average U.S. adult estimates that children's racial cognition capacities emerge in children on average *4 years later* than the scientific literature suggests (Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021). And, adults typically report that children do not spontaneously notice race, that they are proassimilation, and that beliefs about racial groups only develop late in life (Sullivan et al., 2022). Recent research has documented that adults estimate that Black children can begin to process race on average 5–9 months earlier than other groups of children (Wilton et al., 2023), suggesting adults may (erroneously) assume that other groups of children

"aren't yet ready" to talk about race. Consistent with this, White parents have expressed fear that talking to their children about race and racism before they are fully able to understand these concepts will make their children *develop* racial bias (Vittrup, 2018). Similarly, White parents of 8-12-year-olds who avoided talking to their children about a racist incident explained they did so out of a desire to shield their children from content that they believe was beyond their developmental capacities (e.g., "my child is too young to fully understand the situation"; Abaied & Perry, 2021). Yet, when adults have a greater understanding of children's race-related capacities, either through their own knowledge or after learning about what children can do, adults express more willingness to talk to young children about race (Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021).

Adults' beliefs about children's cognitive capacities can not only shape the timing and frequency of conversations but also what kinds of conversations are perceived to be appropriate (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Gillen-O'Neel et al., 2022; D. Hughes et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 2022; Vittrup, 2018). That is, as children age and develop, adults may talk to them about race and racism in more complex ways (e.g., D. Hughes et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 2022)—though other factors beyond a child's age can also affect such decisions, such as the race of either the child or the adult. For example, one study found that while both Black and White adults rated conversations that minimized racial difference as equally appropriate for 5- and 13-year-old children, they rated conversations that connected race to systems of power as more appropriate for 13-year-olds than for 5-year-olds (Sullivan et al., 2023). And, compared to Black participants, White participants identified a narrower range of topics as appropriate for discussing with children about race (Sullivan et al., 2023). More recent polls also indicate extreme partisan divides about what U.S. residents' adults think children should learn about at school; Republicans favor less race content (and do not think children should learn about contemporary racism) compared to Democrats (Horowitz, 2022). These data suggest a direct connection between children's perceived capacities to reason about race and adults' willingness to socialize children about race and racism.

White parents also may fear that talking about race and racism may exhaust children's emotional capacities, worsen their self-esteem (Wu et al., 2022), or make them feel bad about being White. Yet, past work has found ethnic pride socialization messages to be associated with greater self-esteem and identity affirmation among *both* Black and White youth (D. Hughes et al., 2009). Of course, the feeling that a child might be "protected from" or "able to ignore" race or racism is a privilege that is not extended to all families. In fact, for families of color, and Black U.S. families in particular, messages preparing youth for bias and instilling ethnic-racial pride can mitigate the negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem (Harris-Britt et al., 2007).

Together, these data suggest that one barrier to conversations about race with children—and perhaps young children in particular—is a lack of understanding of the ways that young children use race to reason about their world. They also suggest that educating adults about children's race-related development is one intervention that can support initiating conversations about race (e.g., Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021), and discussing race in more complex ways that connect race to structural power.

## Barrier 2: Adults' knowledge, beliefs, and feelings about race

Next, we discuss how adults' (lack of) knowledge about race and feelings of (dis)comfort may pose barriers to discussing race and racism with children. These barriers may relate particularly to White adults, and especially to those who strongly identify with dominant groups and ideologies, as past work has documented these individuals tend to have limited knowledge of racial bias (Nelson et al., 2013) and high discomfort discussing race (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008). Thus, White adults may need to put in additional effort to understand how race operates in society, to understand their own connections to race and racism in society, and to challenge their own discomfort with and reticence to engage in anti-racist actions where they can. The purpose of these efforts is not to incite guilt or other negative emotions, but rather to raise awareness of, and capacity for addressing, the entrenching aspects of race in society. Moreover, we also note that adults of color do not have the privilege of avoiding talking

or thinking about race and racism and often take on the disproportionate responsibility for doing this work. Next, we address the concerns that individuals of color may have about socializing children about race and racism, particularly in public-facing spheres.

## Knowledge of the United States' racial bias and inequality

One barrier to talking to children about race is adults' awareness of racial bias and discrimination in U.S. society. Indeed, research shows that White individuals often have little awareness of their own individual bias (Perry et al., 2015; Mueller, 2017, 2020) or of structural forms of contemporary racial bias and inequality (Nelson et al., 2013; Onyeador, Daumeyer, et al., 2021). For example, compared to Black U.S. residents, White U.S. residents have less historical knowledge of racism, which in turn renders them less able to identify systemic and interpersonal racism (Nelson et al., 2013). Encouragingly, White adults who have a more developed understanding of racial bias in U.S. society are also more likely to acknowledge racism (Perry et al., 2019). Although White adults can resist and react against such information (Knowles et al., 2014; Onyeador, Daumeyer, et al., 2021; Paluck, 2006), teaching White adults about historic, systemic, and subtle forms of racism can improve their willingness and ability to understand and detect racism in current society (Bonam et al., 2019; Mukherjee et al., 2015; Salter & Adams, 2016; Salter et al., 2018). For example, White adults who learned about systematic racism in U.S. housing policies by listening to an 11-min *National Public Radio* podcast with a housing historian showed greater knowledge of systemic racism, compared to White adults who listened to an 11-min podcast that was not about race (Bonam et al., 2019). And, teaching White adults about the prevalence of racial bias in White children can increase White adults' awareness of and eagerness to address children's racial bias (Scott, Ash, et al., 2023).

### Beliefs about White identity

One consequence of misperceiving the extent to which race and racism affects U.S. residents' lives is that many White adults do not believe that race and racism are relevant to their own lives (Helms, 2003) or to the lives of White children (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Helms, 2003; Vittrup, 2018; Sullivan, Eberhardt, et al., 2021). This is another barrier that we argue particularly prevents White adults from talking to White children about race and racism. Even within institutions where adults wish to talk about race and racism, this section may be relevant for educators or staff in White-majority schools and neighborhoods, due to the possibility of parental and community pushback. After all, White parents tend not to expect their White children to experience racial bias, even during periods of acute racial violence and disharmony, and they also do not expect their children to perpetrate racial bias (Scott, Ash, et al., 2023; Sullivan, Eberhardt, et al., 2021; see also Vittrup, 2018). White adults also underestimate the extent to which 5-7-year-old White children (both their own children and other children) will express anti-Black bias (Scott, Ash, et al., 2023). In contrast, Black mothers reported being attuned to the racial demographics of their children's schools, and concerned about the likelihood of their children (especially boys) experiencing discrimination at school (Williams et al., 2017).

White adults tend to think about other groups as "having" a racial or ethnic identity but generally do not see race as a central dimension of their own identity (Helms, 2003). Because White adults' cultural norms and views are often in harmony with dominant U.S. cultural values, many White people also assume that other people will shift to uphold White-dominant cultural frames and norms and characterize non-White cultural frames as "different" or the cultural "other" (Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021). For example, White adults associate "American" with "White" racial identity (Devos & Banaji, 2005) and even see White people as more human than other racial groups (Morehouse et al., 2023). As a result, White adults may deprioritize talking to children about race.

At the same time, when White people grapple with the benefits White people receive in a racist society—and with their membership in a larger group that upholds this structure—they can react by denying their privileges or distancing themselves from Whiteness (Knowles et al., 2014). Both of these approaches likely undercut White U.S. residents' willingness to support effective racial socialization for children. However, some White adults respond to this awareness by seeking to dismantle the policies and procedures that uphold racist systems; messages that frame inequality as an ingroup privilege may best trigger such reactions (Knowles et al., 2014).

## Guilt, worry, and discomfort

Many adults, and particularly White adults, also report that their own negative feelings and worries about discussing race and racism can present significant barriers to their doing so. Specifically, White parents, educators, and other "important adults" have reported feelings of guilt about their racial privilege, discomfort with race-related content, concern for being seen as a "good person," worry about their own level of knowledge about the topic, and unease that it may not be their "place" to discuss race (L. Smith et al., 2017). Even White educators who undergo preparation to teach about race and racism often report feelings of discomfort, fear, defensiveness, uncertainty, and guilt when they teach about race and racism (Johnston, 2011; L. Smith et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2009; Tatum, 1994). Although these feelings may be uncomfortable, they are not necessarily bad. On the contrary, research indicates that some negative feelings, such as guilt, may coexist with—and in some cases even *facilitate*— egalitarian attitudes and behaviors (Amodio et al., 2007; Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Devine et al., 1991; Monteith, 1993; Monteith et al., 2002). That is, people who feel guilty about exhibiting bias may spend more time thinking about the situation, engage in more self-regulation, and seek out strategies to reduce racist behaviors in the future. White adults may also worry that they will communicate their discomfort through nonverbal signals, ultimately harming their interactions with children about race and racism (Lesane-Brown, 2006; Perry et al., 2023). However, research does not support these fears, either. In one study, 8–12-year-old White children showed *less* racial bias after talking to their parents about race and racism, even if their parents were uncomfortable (tense, anxious, aroused) during the discussion (Perry et al., 2023). Thus, while discomfort may *seem* like a barrier to conversations about race with children, such feelings need not always limit such conversations.

Critically, concerns about the emotional impact of talking with children about race and racism are not limited to White adults. Adults of color may anticipate experiencing backlash or pushback for providing such education, especially in public-facing spaces. As we described earlier, an individual who provides direct socialization about race and racism in an institutional context is embedded in a complex net of social actors, including their peers, administrators, and local and national norms. Each of these factors has the potential to improve the quality of race socialization that children receive—or to provide pushback and even penalties for individuals who engage in such work. And, many of the concerns that adults of color may harbor about teaching about race and racism are rooted in racist realities: although people of color are expected to speak out about racial bias (Crosby et al., 2008), they are disproportionately penalized for doing so. For example, Black adults are disliked and labeled "complainers" when they call out racism (Kaiser et al., 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). In an educational context, equally qualified Black professionals are penalized for endorsing systemic issues as problematic in the U.S. education system (Rivera et al., 2022).

## Barrier 3: Colorblind norms, ideologies, and policies

One final barrier to talking to children about race is colorblindness beliefs and norms, which curtail open discussion about—or even mention of—race and racism. Colorblindness refers to the false egalitarian belief that minimizing race and focusing on individual characteristics or commonalities will

improve racial equality (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Colorblindness has been used to describe both power evasion, such as rejecting the notion of White privilege, and color evasion, such as claiming to not notice race (Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022). As such, colorblindness can be both an institutional approach to race and racism as well as an individually held ideological belief. In both cases, it serves as a barrier to productive conversations about race and racism with children.

People may espouse colorblind beliefs for various reasons (Babbitt et al., 2016), including wanting to avoid seeming racist (Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008), wanting to preserve the racial status quo (Saguy et al., 2008), and believing this approach will improve racial equity (Goff et al., 2013). However, endorsing and providing colorblind messaging to children is problematic. There is substantial evidence—spread across disciplines including psychology, sociology, education, and legal studies—documenting that colorblind approaches have negative consequences for interracial interactions, for people of color, and for society (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Gibson et al., 2018; Mueller, 2013; Neville et al., 2000; Rattan & Ambady, 2013; Wilton et al., 2015). For example, people who endorse racial colorblindness are less aware of pervasive racial bias (Neville et al., 2000) and are more likely to hold anti-Black racial biases and are less culturally competent themselves (Yi et al., 2023). Colorblindness also harms White children's (and White adults') ability to detect and report racism (Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008; Apfelbaum et al., 2010). Sociological studies have documented that White 10–13-year-old children can also become agents of colorblind practices, reworking, and reproducing colorblindness in interactions with other children and adults (Hagerman, 2016). Below, we outline the consequences of two types of colorblindness (interpersonal and institutional) on efforts to socialize children about race.

## Interpersonal colorblindness

Adults, and particularly White adults, often employ colorblindness norms in interpersonal interactions. For example, many White people believe that talking about race is taboo (Plaut, 2010), and so they avoid mentioning a person's race even when it would be useful in the situation (Norton et al., 2006) and worry that mentioning race will make them sound racist (Apfelbaum, Sommers, et al., 2008). Families of color may also sometimes downplay or ignore race or ethnicity (D. Hughes et al., 2006; Sullivan et al., 2022), focusing instead on common humanity or "fitting in" (i.e., *egalitarian* messages; D. Hughes et al., 2006), though the relatively sparse empirical work on this particular topic suggests that it can have negative effects on children of color (D. Hughes et al., 2006; Bo et al., 2023). And, adults may sometimes claim that they "don't see race."

Even when White adults do attempt to provide ethnic-racial socialization with children, they often employ colorblind strategies such as downplaying the extent to which race is noticeable or relevant (Perry et al., 2023; Underhill, 2018) or minimizing its connection to power and social structures (Abaied et al., 2022; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021). For example, Zucker and Patterson (2018) found that the majority of White parents of 8–12-year-olds avoided explicitly talking about race and racism, even when responding to clear situations of racial bias, and this was particularly the case for parents who held more racially biased attitudes. In other work, Sullivan, Eberhardt, and Roberts (2021) documented that, after George Floyd's death, White parents were *less* likely to talk about White racial identity and *more* likely to socialize their children towards colorblindness; in contrast, Black parents increased the extent to which they talked to their children about race and racism.

## Institutional colorblindness

Colorblind ideologies are also embedded in institutional policies, systems, and norms (Apfelbaum et al., 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Pollock, 2004). In institutions that serve children, colorblindness can be reflected in the omission of race from policies, procedures, and curricula. Some of this may be unavoidable, as when adopting race-neutral policies that have been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court.

For example, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District* (2007), the Supreme Court prohibited school districts from assigning students to specific schools to maintain district-level racial and ethnic diversity across schools. This colorblind ideology is also reflected in the recent U.S. Supreme Court Case, *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard (2023)*, which effectively barred use of race in college admissions. Chief Justice John Roberts, in a majority opinion, wrote that college applicants "must be treated based on [their] experiences as an individual—not on the basis of race." In a dissenting opinion, Justice Sonia Sotomayor stated that the decision "cement[ed] a superficial rule of colorblindness as a constitutional principle in an endemically segregated society" (Howe, 2023).

More recently, state legislatures throughout the United States have proposed and implemented restrictions on how teachers, librarians, and other important adults can discuss race with children (Schwartz, 2023). By erroneously using "critical race theory" as a broad and poorly defined term, legislatures have successfully limited discussions of race, racism, and racial privilege, as well as the distinction or classification of students by race (Schwartz, 2023). For example, the Tennessee state legislature passed a law in 2021 banning the education of so-called prohibited topics, including that "An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously"; "A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist"; or "the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist" "among others" (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.). These laws not only make educational policies increasingly colorblind but can also be used to justify ending programs meant to serve racial minority students (Morgan, 2022). Thus, despite any potential intention of minimizing racial disparities by ignoring race, such policies have the potential to exacerbate racial inequalities in the long term. In addition to being present in educational law, colorblind ideologies are also reflected in the lack of race-related content in many professional training programs, such as teacher education or library education (Gibson et al., 2018) programs, as well as in prevailing beliefs that treat race-related content as "lying outside the realm of objective … inquiry" (Honma, 2005).

In U.S. schools and other child-facing institutions, many adults exhibit colorblindness by adopting practices that stem from the belief that "race does not matter" or that they "do not see a student's race" (Gershenson et al., 2021; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021; Pollock, 2004). For example, Husband (2016) notes that educators may teach all students in the same way in an attempt to be fair; however, this approach minimizes adults' ability to identify and redress any of their race-based biases and assumptions, which could contribute to the adult holding lower academic standards and higher misbehavior expectations for students of color. "One-size-fits-all" approaches to instruction also minimize opportunities to identify and support students who bring different perspectives and ideas, or who engage with content differently (e.g., bilingual learners; Husband, ss2016). Because targeting particular students because of their known or perceived race is also harmful, we want to be clear that there are not just two options (ignoring race completely *or* reducing each child only to their race). Indeed, neither of these two options is desirable and both have the same pitfall: ignoring the complexity of the child's experiences. In navigating this nuance, we encourage readers to explore nonreductionist approaches to race socialization, including multicultural approaches (e.g., valuing cultural diversity in ways that enable majority and minority groups to equitably share, maintain, and accommodate diversity; Mlinar & Krammer, 2021), polycultural approaches (e.g., those that focus on the dynamic, interconnected, and nonhierarchical interactions between different cultures and groups; Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Rosenthal & Levy, 2012), and antiracist approaches (e.g., those that develop awareness of, and social advocacy concerning sociopolitical forces related to race and racism; Burgess et al., 2021; Freire, 1970).

One of the manifestations of structural colorblindness is that race and racism-related content are often absent from state or locally mandated school, library, and museum curricula and policies (e.g., disciplinary practices; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021; Husband, 2016). And, as is discussed above, in some cases such removals are mandated by law. This means that adults within those institutions who want to provide children with effective socialization about race and racism may be constrained from doing so. Or, when race *is* integrated into curricula, the content, nevertheless, often takes colorblind approaches to doing so. This might happen by failing to meaningfully or consistently address current,

structural, or contemporary racism. Or, it might happen by promoting White cultural frames or ideologies that maintain racial hierarchy and systems of White dominance, such as those that prioritize narratives of individual merit and overlook structural barriers that inhibit success (e.g., Rivera et al., 2022; Schofield, 2007; see also Jupp & Lensmire, 2016). Of course, colorblind policies and procedures only serve to perpetuate racial inequalities and further disenfranchise students of color (Gershenson et al., 2023; Schofield, 2007). Thus, we advocate not only working to remove this barrier from institutional policy and practice but also from local and state laws that may limit free teaching about race and racism.

In sum, both structural and psychological barriers may hinder adults' likelihood of engaging in high-quality conversations with children about race. Yet, each limitation also provides an opportunity for intervention and education. Next, we identify some structural solutions to promoting productive socialization about race and racism more generally in child-facing spaces.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we aim to equip readers with major points of intervention to address the common psychological and interpersonal barriers to effectively socializing children about race and racism. First, we provide concrete recommendations for policy-level changes to address each of the three barriers identified in the previous section (beliefs about child development, knowledge and feelings, and colorblindness). While any motivated individual within an institution can potentially make substantive change (and can benefit from reading our recommendations), long-term change requires establishing structures and policies that govern the institution as a whole, and so we, therefore, focus recommendations on policy and curriculum (and not only on interpersonal interactions). In other words, the onus of implementing these recommendations should not fall solely on individuals but rather on all child-facing institutions.

We recognize that effectively socializing children about race and racism is hard work and that there are no simple solutions. Providing effective socialization about race and racism—and more broadly, working towards greater racial justice within institutions—requires consistent and concerted effort. One need not adopt all of these recommendations to make meaningful change. Yet, we strongly caution against doing only the minimum (or nothing at all), against focusing only on surface-level changes or efforts that only signal equality and progress (Dover et al., 2019; Wilton et al., 2020), and against overly focusing on interpersonal forms of bias (Onyeador, Hudson, et al., 2021). Instead, as we outline below, institutions should rely on evidence-based best practices that support effective change, develop accountability mechanisms to assess progress and redirect resources where necessary, and address interpersonal, psychological, and structural barriers to progress. At the same time, we acknowledge that the local, regional, and national political context may shape many institutions' ability to implement many of these recommendations. When we wrote this article, many states placed restrictions on the discussion of race, sexuality, and systemic inequality in classrooms (e.g., Tennessee, Florida, Mississippi; Schwartz, 2023). It is too early to fully understand the full scope of the restrictions—or the consequences of those restrictions—that such policies may have on supporting effective socialization practices. Institutions operating in affected states may need to especially consider the social-political context when developing their plans to socialize children about race and racism.

We end the Policy section by providing general recommendations that promote effective approaches for socializing children about race and racism within institutional contexts. Because we believe institutions are best positioned to make choices that will work for their particular local contexts, we avoid making specific "content" recommendations and instead provide general principles that we hope will make it easier for interested individuals to use as a quick guide in taking action. More generally, we acknowledge some of the challenges in implementing some of these recommendations, in light of the ever-changing legal landscape surrounding race-related education. To this end, we provide recommendations for both small- and larger-scale change.

## Addressing adults' barriers to socializing children about race and racism

### Barrier 1: (Mis)perceptions of children's social and cognitive capacities

As reviewed above, adults who have a more scientifically based understanding of children's race-related cognitive and social development are generally more inclined to socialize children about race and racism (Sullivan, Wilton, et al., 2021). And, given that many child-facing institutions emphasize the need for individuals to provide developmentally appropriate programming (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009, 2015; Office of Education, n.d.), it is important that institutions work to ensure that such notions of appropriateness are informed by scientific knowledge and best practices, not by perceptions or intuitions. *Thus, our first set of policy recommendations is that institutional policies and procedures should aim to increase adults' knowledge about (1) children's race-related cognitive and social development and (2) the ways children of all racial backgrounds can benefit from discussing race and racism effectively.* As we detail below, these interventions could occur in professional spheres, such as professional development programs that train and support individuals who interact with children. And, while parents, community members, and other leaders can also benefit from such information, we argue that institutions should strategize about how to provide such education to individuals in ways that lower the barrier to entry to engaging in such education.

How might we ensure that the adults who interact with children have a current and scientifically valid understanding of children's social and cognitive capacities? The first step is to ensure that professional training curricula include content about children's development as it relates to race. When we say "professional training curricula," we mean this term expansively to include any credentialing requirements (e.g., in order to qualify for a child-facing job), training requirements for a position (e.g., during onboarding), certification requirements (e.g., certification for a job or specialization), or professional development programming (e.g., ongoing education). We also include institution-level requirements, such as accreditation standards for teacher education programs, as well as mental health professional training programs, and licensure standards for professionals. By creating structured opportunities for education, institutions can guarantee that individuals who interact with children should have an understanding of race-related development and how racial realities affect children. Institutions should ensure that those who interact with children have the basic skills to communicate this knowledge in a clear and appropriate way with diverse constituents, including their colleagues and other stakeholders (e.g., parents and community members). As a starting point, we suggest determining *who* sets such professional training curricula for their particular field and work to collaboratively adopt, evaluate, and reassess educational content aimed at teaching adults about children's developing capacities to reason about race and racism.

We acknowledge that many readers may not be able to influence or change the content of credentialing curricula. What can such readers do within their sphere of influence? *One option is to form alliances across local child-facing institutions (e.g., museums, libraries, schools, and community centers) to allow for information and resource sharing on the latest knowledge about the relation between child development and race and racism.* Such knowledge may be field-specific (e.g., librarians may be uniquely positioned to offer literature recommendations that will be relevant to the demographics of children in the region). However, such knowledge may also be informed by experiences interacting with children in the community. Creating brown-bag lunches, retreats, and other information-sharing opportunities creates both formal and informal structures in which individuals can share information about how children reason about race.

For institutions with funding, *we suggest inviting researchers on children's understanding of race to give talks or offer in-service training as part of planned professional development days*. These programs should look to identify and compensate relevant experts, such as scholars, educators, and individuals who work with children, to provide evidence-based information on these topics. For example, all of the authors in this paper have provided workshops, lectures, and other activities to

community members in places such as town libraries, community centers (e.g., the YMCA), museums, and theaters. For institutions with more limited funding, consider using professional development time for discussing recent scientific articles on children's race-related development, race and racism in society, and related topics. Many relevant papers can be found in the reference section to the present paper and can be acquired either through Internet searches or by emailing or mailing the authors of the papers directly.

Finally, education about children's capacities must not be confined only to the adults who work directly with children in institutional spaces. Saleem and Byrd (2021) note that community norms play a major role in shaping socialization within child-facing institutions. *This means that a critical step for increasing buy-in for racial socialization is increasing parents', community members', and politicians' understanding about both children's race-related development, and how learning about race and racism benefits children and society.* Learning about these topics is of intrinsic value, and it may motivate these individuals to engage in effective socialization about race and racism with the children who are a big part of their lives. Moreover, increased knowledge about these issues may change the default conversations that occur within the community. Parents, community members, and local leaders can advocate for community-based programming that aims to increase awareness of these topics, and partner with local (e.g., museums, school districts, parent-teacher associations) or even regional (e.g., YMCA, universities, libraries) organizations to provide financial, logistical, and other forms of support (e.g., access to networks) for such programming. They may also help increase broader support for child-based socialization about race and racism in schools or other institutions, by shifting other adults' perception that more adults support such causes. Indeed, people intuit the attitudes of other people and groups based on their behaviors (Cialdini, 2003), and often shift their behavior in line with such attitudes (especially when they feel a shared sense of connection with the group; Abrams et al., 1990; Hogg & Turner, 1987). To this end, we suggest hosting public programming aimed at increasing the community's general literacy on children's race development.

## Barrier 2: Knowledge and comfort in discussing race and racism

Becoming a culturally and racially competent adult is challenging and vital work. Above, we argued that individuals who interact with children should learn about how children develop beliefs and knowledge about race and racism. In this subsection, we argue that in order for such socialization to be effective, *adults should learn about current and historical racial injustice, and reflect upon their own identities and positionalities. Given their racial positionality and lived experiences, White adults particularly (but not exclusively) may especially need to address their own knowledge and identities, feelings and beliefs about racial privilege, and oppression.* What sorts of policies might promote effective interventions to address knowledge and comfort in discussing race and racism as barriers to racial socialization?

*Knowledge barriers.* Research has shown that awareness of interpersonal racial bias can shift adults' attitudes and behaviors to be more egalitarian (Monteith et al., 2010; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013; Rokeach & Cochkane, 1972). These data demonstrate the importance of increasing adults' awareness and understanding of race-related issues, even when they may not—at first blush—appear to be related to children. At the same time, although interventions about racial injustice can be effective (Bonam et al., 2019; Kraus et al., 2017), they can also sometimes be ineffective or even elicit backlash (Knowles et al., 2014; Lai et al., 2014; Onyeador, Daumeyer, et al., 2021; Paluck, 2006). Dominant group members, and particularly those who identify strongly with their groups, may especially resist such knowledge (Nelson et al., 2013). *To prevent negative outcomes, attempts to educate (White) individuals about racial bias and inequality should use evidence-based approaches for framing this information.* For example, research has documented that messages that frame inequality as an ingroup privilege (as opposed to an outgroup disadvantage; Knowles et al., 2014), that attempt to mitigate White victimization (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014), that use resource-expanding (as opposed to zero-sum)

frames (Knowles et al., 2014; Wilkins et al., 2017), and that employ self-affirmation exercises that help people process threatening information (Adams et al., 2006; Badea & Sherman, 2019; Cohen & Sherman, 2014) can lead to egalitarian outcomes.

*Once again, institutions can work to ensure that education about race and racism is part of the credentialing process for individuals who work with children.* This might include revising courses to address race-related content (e.g., incorporating work from scholars of color; identifying and problematizing field-specific methods or practices that have been identified as racist or exclusionary). It might also include requiring courses about contemporary race and racism as part of the path towards earning credentials (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2021; Sleeter, 2012). Many teachers must take college-level courses in biology, chemistry, and linear algebra in order to teach Kindergarten; one important next step is to assert that possessing an understanding of contemporary challenges related to race and racism in the United States is also an important part of developing the academic and cultural competence required to educate children. To this end, individuals could lobby for college credits for courses about race, racism, or related topics (e.g., identity) to count towards educators' continuing education requirements or professional development requirements. Institutions with funding might also look to community members and other professionals for individuals who are already providing high-quality programming about race and racism, and compensate them to provide in-service training. Institutions without funding, and without access to high-quality college-level courses, may look for college syllabi that are available online. Institutions could consider creating reading groups to compensate individuals within the institution for engaging in self-directed or social learning about contemporary race and racism. Critically, engaging in this sort of advocacy, learning, and programmatic revision requires time and resources—we advocate that institutions provide the resources (e.g., time, space, compensation) that are required in order to engage in this work well.

One instinct might be to—as part of increasing institutional literacy surrounding race and racism—ask individuals of color within the institution to take on the burden of such education (such as by spearheading the effort or by sharing personal anecdotes and stories). While diversity and inclusion efforts should rightfully center support for colleagues of color (and should compensate individuals who lead these efforts), individuals of color often take on the lion's share of ethnic-racial socialization (and other "diversity" work) in institutions by being asked to serve on diversity committees, addressing diversity issues, and responding in moments of national violence (Joseph & Hirschfield, 2011; Misra et al., 2021; Padilla, 1994). Educators of color are also more likely to take on additional mentoring responsibilities to serve students of color who seek them out as valued role models. This creates additional and often underrecognized and undervalued labor for adults of color, who must engage in this work in addition to coping with racialized bias, violence, and dehumanization directed at their communities and themselves. Additionally, as reviewed above, although people of color are often tasked with addressing issues related to race and racism, they are penalized for doing so. For example, in doing this important work, teachers of color can experience bias that seeps into perceptions of their teaching effectiveness (Crittle & Maddox, 2017; Heffernan, 2021; Samuel & Wane, 2005). As a result, educators of color experience high levels of burnout and leave the profession in high numbers (Dixon et al., 2019). Educational leaders should be aware of these challenges and work to ensure they do not perpetuate these experiences; we provide general considerations for supporting colleagues of color below (particularly the Additional Considerations for Institutions section).

*Worry and concern barriers.* Adults must also reflect on their own identities, privileges, and biases before they teach children about race and racism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006; Farago et al., 2015, Garmon, 2005; Helms, 1992; Lin Lake, & Rice, 2008; Milner, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). *Many training and professional development courses minimize elements that call for self-reflection (Farago et al., 2015), and we urge training and professional development courses to add these elements to their offerings. We also encourage self-reflection among institutional leaders to support thoughtful implementation of these ideas to create a truly inclusive space.* If these structured learning opportunities are not possible, D'Angelo and Dixey (2001) provide teachers with three questions to reflect on their racialized beliefs and practices, which are easily adaptable to other domains:

> Do I believe some races are more capable of learning and have greater intelligence than other races? Do I model respectful and positive attitudes in the classroom for all races and ethnic groups? Do I integrate race and ethnic issues in the curriculum exclusively through thematic units, holidays, and celebrations? (p. 84)

Given their racial positionality and lived experiences, many White individuals often report feelings of discomfort, fear, defensiveness, uncertainty, guilt, and pressure to engage in this content perfectly, never "making a mistake" (L. Smith et al., 2017; Tatum, 1994). These emotions exist even for trained and experienced White educators who regularly teach college-level courses on race and multicultural content (L. Smith et al., 2017). These feelings may be unpleasant, but evidence suggests they can even support the reduction of racial biases in children and adults (e.g., Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Perry et al., 2023). Evidence-based counseling and therapeutic models suggest that mentors can support White adults who harbor similar concerns by addressing and engaging with their experiences of discomfort rather than avoiding them (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Additionally, a case study with White preservice teachers uncovered that a pedagogy of discomfort when discussing race led to greater critical consciousness (Ohito, 2016). Smith and colleagues (2017) write about the approaches that they take as White instructors to address some of the anxieties and emotions that may arise when teaching about race and racism in a classroom setting. Calling upon counseling psychology and counseling education research, they suggest that White educators can aspire to keep learning about their own Whiteness, model learning about race and identity and anti-racist practice in the classroom, and anticipate challenges and identify supports (L. Smith et al., 2017; see also Spanierman, & Smith, 2017). Thus, White adults can also look to examples from other White adults who have modeled their own "racialized awakenings," and who resist succumbing to the negative feelings of guilt, anxiety, and discomfort that can prevent many White individuals from socializing children about race and racism (Heinze, 2008; Summer, 2014). We also call upon mental health professional training programs and licensure standards for professionals to ensure that mental health professionals are capable of supporting individuals who are engaged in this challenging work. Of course, some of these difficult feelings (e.g., uncertainty, discomfort, fear, pressure) and concerns exist—and are even amplified—for adults of color, who should be centered and supported—but not unfairly burdened—in this work. And, many of the anxieties expressed by both White individuals and individuals of color may be quite rational—it is perfectly reasonable to be afraid of "making a mistake" if doing so might plausibly lead to harm or penalties. As such, we recommend that institutional leaders hear these concerns not only as an expression of worry but also as an invitation to review whether institutional policies and practices might be playing a role.

*Beyond this, social support in the form of affinity groups, qualified mentors, and like-minded peers are also critical factors that support the development and implementation of effective ethnic-racial socialization skills in adults (Garmon, 2005). Once again, these should be prioritized at the institutional level, so that the very individuals in need of social support are not the ones who also need to create such systems of support.* Such social support systems particularly improve the retention and success of trainees, staff, and leaders of color in organizational settings (Galán et al., 2021; Dixon et al., 2019). For example, social support systems can help facilitate structured observations of adult–child interactions and provide developmental feedback that engages the educator in providing more inclusive practices. These social support systems can also create opportunities to discuss and critique educational plans and pedagogical approaches, "debrief" after a difficult moment or exchange and prompt the adult to further reflect upon the assumptions and choices they made in a moment. *Institutional leaders can support such processes by implementing culturally sensitive mentorship programs, providing templates for structured observations, and integrating such templates for developmental feedback (as opposed to only for evaluation).* Critically, any genuine reflection on assumptions, debriefing after difficult moments, or critique of educational plans demands substantial vulnerability from the individuals involved. It will not be possible to encourage such positive practices if individuals feel that their participation, vulnerability, or honesty, may harm

them. *Thus, careful attention to the power dynamics is important in forming and maintaining such groups.*

## Barrier 3: Colorblindness

Interpersonal and institutional colorblindness are substantial barriers to promoting effective race socialization among children. How might an institution reduce the impacts of colorblindness on efforts to provide effective race socialization for children? First, individual endorsement of colorblind ideology can be shifted through training that encourages reflection on one's own racial identity and attitudes (Milner, 2012) and that teaches about the ways that colorblind policies operate in institutions and harm people of color (Prichard, 2019; Ullucci & Battey, 2011). Meaningful opportunities for intergroup contact and exposure to greater diversity can improve racial attitudes and have even been shown to reduce White adults' colorblind ideologies (Gaither et al., 2019). *Thus, we advocate for programming aimed at reducing colorblindness as part of in-service training for all adults who work with children.*

*Addressing institutional colorblindness requires more than addressing individual beliefs; it also requires alterations to institutional structures and institutional practice. Political advocacy is necessary to limit the advancement of legislation outlawing discussions about race (*Miller et al., 2023) *both at the state and national level and at the local level (e.g., in electing school boards). Auditing policies, practices, and materials for colorblindness is an important first step in creating policies that recognize race, and that tie race to power.* For example, institutional practices that promote assimilation to White U.S. culture under the guise of "professionalism,"—such as hiring people that are "well spoken" or who "come from similar backgrounds"—may seem race-neutral. However, these are actually coded phrases and practices that obscure racial biases and stereotypes (Ullucci & Battey, 2011), limit the cultural expression of faculty and children of color, and create a culture that hinders conversations about race (Sondel et al., 2022). *While hiring procedures may seem far removed from "conversations with children," we argue that child-facing institutions should audit their hiring criteria and practices in order to ensure that such processes are not White-centering.* Similarly, curricular. and educational practices that focus on concepts like "merit" and "individualism" also create a myth of race-neutral fairness and equality (e.g., by asserting that those "on top" have earned it). However, they harm children of color because they can mask the racist assumptions that some people harbor and the structural impediments that disproportionately affect certain groups. Indeed, a foundational aspect of anti-racist education is the recognition that the racial dynamics of the United States also exist within classrooms (Kalin, 2002) and other child-facing spaces. *Thus, institutions should ask whether their mission statements, disciplinary practices, practices for grouping children by ability (i.e., tracking), and protocols during programming reflect and, therefore, reinforce colorblind beliefs and norms. When such White-centering or colorblind policies are found, we recommend that child-facing institutions adopt color-conscious policies whenever possible*, because they have been shown to facilitate conversations about race and racism and signal that racial discourse is welcome (Marx & Larson, 2012).

## Additional considerations for institutions

While the above recommendations describe concrete actions that institutions should take in order to remove barriers to talking with children about race, we conclude our paper with additional considerations and best practices for child-facing institutions. *We urge that organizations meaningfully commit to continuously fostering an environment, that is, both diverse and truly inclusive for both children and adults* (Onyeador, Hudson, et al., 2021; Wilton et al., 2020). *Organizations must commit to hiring colleagues of color at all levels of the institution (not just at entry-level positions, but as organizational leaders*; Unzueta & Binning, 2012)*, as well as, to support their development through evidence-based inclusive policies and procedures.* Indeed, teachers of color often benefit all students by bringing cultural competency and engaging in less colorblind and White-centering practices (Gershenson et al., 2021)—benefits that may also be realized in other spaces like museums and libraries. And for the 53% of U.S. public school children of color who are unlikely to have teachers of color (Schaeffer,

2021), role models of color can have extraordinary impact. For example, when Black students learn from same-race teachers, they perform better on standardized math and reading tests, experience fewer suspensions and behavioral infractions, are less engaged, and find school to be more fulfilling (Gershenson et al., 2021). Additionally, hiring adults of color is important to address historical inequity in this sector and may lead to more intergroup contact among individuals within the given institution. To this end, in addition to auditing their hiring and mentoring practices for inclusive and equitable practices (Galán et al., 2021; Reynolds & Tabron, 2022; Shore et al., 2018), institutions should collect and publicly report disaggregated race/ethnicity data (Dixon et al., 2019). For institutions where children's involvement also follows a selection process (e.g., sign-ups, try-outs, application-only events), institutions should consider whether similar audits of selection processes for children might ensure that the diversity of children involved in their institution reflects the diversity of the community.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully review best practices for creating truly inclusive and equitable organizations, *we encourage organizational leaders and staff to engage in structural interventions that move beyond merely addressing interpersonal bias*. Onyeador, Hudson, and colleagues (2021) identify five structural practices that support organizational diversity, equity, and justice goals, which include fostering conditions that support: (1) organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, (2) high-quality intergroup contact, and (3) processes that bypass interpersonal bias, deploying (4) supporting affinity groups for underrepresented people, and (5) welcoming and inclusive messaging, which must be yoked to evidence of true inclusivity. Indeed, false or undersupported efforts to promote diversity can be harmful to people of color, who see them as suspicious or spurious overtures (Dover et al., 2019; Kaiser et al., 2013); for example, Black and Latine people who feel their workplaces express more disingenuous diversity claims report that they also feel like they fit in less, are less authentic and perform worse at their organizations (Wilton et al., 2020). Institutions should also avoid framing diversity goals merely for the purpose of providing educational benefits; while White U.S. residents prefer such frames, Black U.S. residents prefer framing diversity as a moral imperative, and Black students fare better in such settings (Starck et al., 2021).

In doing this work, institutions should prioritize evidence-based actions and have ongoing procedures for assessing progress and reducing barriers to action. This process is in line with Lewin (1946)'s "action research" principles, which call for (1) clear theoretical rationale for program implementation and outcomes and (2) rigorous methods to evaluate and assess the impact of the program. Many organizational diversity trainings are untethered to relevant scientific theories, and they are also often implemented without specific or measurable goals; as a consequence, such programs have shown very little impact, despite proliferation of resources being spent on initiatives and programs in schools, businesses, and other organizations (Paluck, 2006). Organizations should also aim, where possible, to engage or look at the work of a cross-disciplinary range of scholars as well as educators and teachers on the ground.

## Recommendations for effective child race socialization practices

Finally, we outline a series of general principles that should be kept in mind when working to improve children's socialization about race and racism. These principles are intended to be recommendations that may be applied generally across interventions. First, drawing on the principles described above, *institutional agents should work to meaningfully integrate race-related content throughout the year and/or the curricula*. Educational content should authentically and consistently highlight the social, scientific, political, and other contributions of people of color. Critically, this will require that adults integrate this content into their curricula (or conversations) not only at individual timepoints (e.g., Black history month; Thanksgiving) or as unintegrated (e.g., a single "diversity issues" week) or historical (e.g., 1960's Civil Rights progress narratives) phenomena. As we noted earlier, children of all racial groups have been shown to benefit from this type of learning. Making changes to content requires dedicated time and resources; institutions should acknowledge that individual educators are unlikely to be able to develop such materials in their spare time. Instead, we call for researchers and

leaders of child-facing institutions to work together to develop effective curricula that can be provided to adults who work with children.

At the same time, talking with children about race does not only involve *proactive* conversations (i.e., planned instruction as part of the curriculum). Indeed, many conversations require the ability to *react* to children's changing needs. *Institutions and adults should prepare for student questions particularly about content related to current racial inequality and bias. Institutions should consider how they support educators, and how they will prepare for and respond to parental or community questions about the value or framing of such race socialization.* As a general practice, curricular offerings consider incorporating evidence-based activities to support effective processing of "difficult" race-related messaging, such as self-affirmation exercises that facilitate the processing of threatening information (Adams et al., 2006; Badea & Sherman, 2019; Cohen & Sherman, 2014), and coping skills training.

As we have argued above, *adults should use contextually-relevant activities that consider how children's experiences and skills may differ based on several factors, such as the child's age and development, and their personal background and circumstances. At the same time, adults should be wary of making harmful assumptions about people based on their identities. Finally, institutions should also promptly address race-related issues that arise in local and national events; silence in these moments is harmful. Institutions should expeditiously acknowledge and denounce local and national race-related violence* (Galán et al., 2021). Watching racialized violence particularly harms people of color (Bor et al., 2018), so institutional agents should not re-expose individuals of color to such incidents and should consider providing additional support, such as counseling or other supportive services, to individuals of color during such times (Galán et al., 2021). More generally, adults should take care to provide educational opportunities that help students cope with challenges, such as social-emotional learning curricula, restorative justice practices (Song et al., 2020; Song & Swearer, 2016; Wenzel et al., 2008), and belonging interventions (Walton & Cohen, 2007; 2011) are options that can be explored.

## CONCLUSION

Socializing children about race and racism is vital for racial justice. While much attention has focused on the parent–child dyad as the unit of analysis for understanding how adults talk with children about race and racism, children's race-related attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are also heavily influenced by many other important adults in their lives, as well as by structural forces. We provide frameworks for (1) identifying the benefits of socializing children to learn about race and racism in both interpersonal and educational contexts; (2) identifying the complex structural, interpersonal, and psychological factors underlying such conversations both within and outside the home; and (3) providing insights from a range of disciplines to help in children's lives more effectively to socialize children about race and racism. We specifically address how these considerations can be employed to inform both interpersonal interactions and educational policies and procedures. We emphasize that effectively socializing children about race and racism is hard, but possible and necessary. We urge institutions to make a long-term investment in continually learning, reflecting, and communicating about these issues, and creating enriching learning environments that support children and adults alike.

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