


How not to raise a racist





Parents can help kids see differences without prejudice

STORY BY MATT ALDERTON ■ ILLUSTRATIONS BY MADELEINE AVIROV

Hye Cho's class of 28 third-graders from Bell Elementary School in Chicago includes an adopted girl, a little boy with green hair, a girl of mixed race and a boy who is deaf.

These kids are no strangers to the concept of difference.

During a visit to the Chicago Children's Museum, in a workshop that is part of a permanent exhibit entitled "Face to Face: Dealing With Prejudice and Discrimination," exhibit facilitators ask the kids to look at the person next to them and see how that person is different from them.

The kids would make excellent detectives—nothing escapes their glance. They raise their hands, eager to expose one another's physical differences: stature, hair, gender and, of course, skin. "He has a bigger face than me," one boy proudly observes of another.

"But we're all the same," Caren Skibell, a museum workshop facilitator, tells the class. "We all have hearts, we all have lungs, we all have skin and we all have eyes, right?"

The kids nod in agreement. Just 8 and 9 years old, the students are learning to multiply numbers, read novels and confront discrimination.

Accepting our differences and living in a diverse society is no longer just the dream of civil rights leaders. It is the American way. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2050 minorities will make up almost half the population—and parents need to respond by raising children who appreciate diversity.

"One of the things we're seeing here is that kids are learning the ideas of prejudice younger and younger," says Leah Weatherspoon, media relations manager at the Children's Museum. "And that's scary."

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Ink, yellow and brown

When the Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil's daughter was 2 years old, she started calling people by the color of their skin, literally: pink, yellow, brown.

"For her it was honestly just an observation," says Salter McNeil, mother of two and founder of Overflow Ministries, an organization dedicated to helping unite people of different races.

When a child's observations become prejudice is unclear. But what is clear is that education about diversity has to start early.

"Between [ages] 2, 3 and 4, I see kids making observations about skin color and hair types," says Lindsay Friedman, director of A World of Difference Institute, the anti-bias arm of the Anti-Defamation League in Chicago. Friedman is white and her toddler, an adopted Korean, is already noticing how he differs from his moth-



er. "Even as a 2-year-old, he's starting to see differences," she says. "He has noticed that his hair is black while mine is yellow."

At 2, kids can begin to verbalize their observations, experts say. But even babies notice differences.

Children are able to recognize physical differences as early as 6 months, according to Karen Goldman, a former kindergarten teacher and director of early childhood education at the Chicago Children's Museum. She points to a study by Phyllis Katz, director of the Institute for Research on Social Problems in Boulder, Colo. Katz performed a series of studies on children, following them from 6 months to 6 years of age, to determine the development of their racial awareness.

"Most 6-month-olds already seem to have some pre-verbal concept of race," Katz says. She found that when infants are shown a series of pictures featuring faces of the same color they become bored and inattentive. When a face of a different color appears, they become interested again.

But while babies are born seeing differences, they aren't born understanding them. Somewhere between the cradle and the classroom children begin to search for answers. They look to adults, they look to siblings and playmates, they look to television. Some find diversity, some find prejudice.

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ids aren't born biased," Friedman says. "They learn it."

They are sponges

Salter McNeil first remembers learning about race from her mother. "When I was little I remember my mother grabbing my hand tightly and someone who was different, someone with darker skin, approached me in the street," she says. "While I don't recall her saying overtly racist comments, I picked up on her cues." Her mother's cues, she says, are everywhere. "They are subtle; some are not. I remember once I was pushing my son in a stroller. We lived on the North Side in West Rogers Park, a really diverse community," says Salter McNeil, who is African-American. "I remember a woman, she yelled out, 'back where you belong!' and I remember feeling so hurt." Her son, a little boy in a stroller, heard it. "I think when kids develop negative ideas about differences is when they have these experiences and they don't know why." If kids receive such cues, she says, "The social construction of race is very apparent to kids," says William E. Darity, education professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "It's a mystery to them." He cites studies performed by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Phipps Clark in the 1930s and '40s. In the studies, the

Clarks presented more than 200 African-American children with black and white dolls and asked them to point out which doll they thought "looked nice" and which "looked bad." The children, some as young as 3, chose the white dolls because they were "pretty." The Clarks concluded that the kids were internalizing racist cues from their larger society.

Salter McNeil allowed a psychologist friend to replicate the same experiment with her own daughter some 50 years later.

"I was surprised to find that my daughter also gravitated to the blonde doll," she says. Salter McNeil has raised her children with a deliberate sense of caution, careful of her every action and word in an attempt to teach her kids to take pride in their race. Still, her daughter chose the white doll.

"When it comes to young children, all we do is teach them how to discriminate," says Evan Finamore, who helped develop the "Face to Face" exhibit at the Chicago Children's Museum. We teach kids how to sort red blocks from blue blocks and to pick out circles from squares, Finamore says, but when they apply that same principle to people we suddenly discourage it. "We need to recognize differences and teach our kids what they mean."

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Raising a non-biased child

Here are some suggestions from Brenda Salter McNeil and the Anti-Defamation League on how parents can best expose their children to diversity:

- Take your kids on day trips to diverse neighborhoods or to museums, libraries and playgrounds where there is likely to be a diverse presence.
- Expose your kids to television programs, movies, foods, dolls and books that represent a variety of races and cultures.
- Kids pick up on what you do and say. Be mindful of your language. Avoid making racial jokes and generalizations and challenge those made by other people. Be aware of body language, too, especially around people of different races.
- Share your family history with your kids so that they can learn to take pride in who they are and where they come from. Highlight your family's contributions to diversity, whether it be by emigrating to the United States or working for civil rights.
- When kids ask questions about differences, don't shy away, give straightforward answers. Using words such as prejudice and racism in your explanations is important, even if kids don't understand their meanings. Explain the words in terms your child can understand and they will learn to use them.

Katz says that kids whose parents answered their questions and discussed matters of race openly were less likely to be biased.

- Arrange multiracial play dates for your children and expand the entire family's circle of friends to be multi-ethnic. It's important, Salter McNeil says, for children to see their parents interacting with a diverse group of people if they are to grow up appreciating differences.

However, parents choose to incorporate diversity into their children's lives, Salter McNeil says, it's important that they do it early and often.

"It would be good if we as parents wanted our children to get a sense of the world and understand that it includes people from every tribe and every nation."

For more information:

Anti-Defamation League
(312) 728-5080, www.adl.org

Chicago Children's Museum
(312) 527-1000,
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Young kids may look at race literally, describing people like they might describe blocks, but "by age 4 or 5 they start to take on more judgmental opinions from adults around

them," Goldman says.

In her studies, Katz found that half of all white children had formed biases by age 6. The other half, experts say, will have plenty of opportunity to learn them at school, where peers can use name-calling and teasing to become cruel teachers.

Parents, know thyself

A little girl asked Karen Goldman during her first week as a kindergarten teacher why her hand was a different color than a classmate's.

"I thought it was an appropriate question," she says. "I'm glad it was asked." She saw the situation as an opportunity to teach. She gathered the

kids in a circle and they all put out their hands. They examined their differences and then they talked about them. When kids ask questions about race, she says, adults have to "appreciate them, not ignore them."

But while most schools have standards for diversity built into their curriculum and rule books, parents can't rely upon them to teach children about differences. Experts insist that learning has to start at home.

"Parents are the first teachers," Friedman says. "Diversity needs to become part and parcel of raising your child." And words aren't sufficient.

"It's more than talking to them," says Salter McNeil. "If parents want

their children to read, what do they have to do? Read to them. If they want their kids to drink more water, they can't be drinking coffee all the time." Parents, she says, must become models for their children. "It's one thing for parents to say, 'I want you to love everyone,' and then talk and socialize with only people who look like them."

UIC's Ayees agrees. "One thing we know about youngsters is they're concrete learners," he says. "If we oppose racism, not just in our rhetoric, but in our actions, then our kids will learn to oppose it too."

Sesame Workshop, the producers of "Sesame Street," conducted a study in the early 1990s to determine preschoolers' understanding of race relations. Researchers asked children if they would like to be friends with kids of another race and how their mothers would feel about such a friendship. They found that, overall, the kids wanted diverse friendships, but only half thought their mothers would approve.

It's clear, Salter McNeil says, that parents have to unlearn their own prejudices before they can help their children unlearn theirs.

Friedman and A World of Difference Institute feel the same way. They teamed up with Sesame Workshop in October 2001 to create a program called the Miller Early Childhood Initiative, which provides teachers and parents of kids ages 3-5 with free anti-bias training. According to Barbara Belcoe, early childhood project coordinator for A World of Difference Institute, the anti-bias workshops force parents to confront their own biases through role-playing activities and group discussions, then provide them with the necessary tools to take the training home to their kids.

But while training a parent takes only a few hours, training children is a full-time job. Television, books, geography, food and toys can all contribute to the development of prejudice in children, but careful parenting can turn instruments of prejudice into tools for diversity.

The fourth R: race

Salter McNeil didn't realize she was African-American until her first day of school. A little boy in her class said he was half German and half Irish. She went home that night and asked her mom what she was.

"Noticing difference isn't a bad thing," she says. "It doesn't become a problem until value is attached to it during kindergarten."

When they start school, at around age 5 or 6, children begin to understand, at very fundamental levels, the biology of physical differences and the meaning of ethnicity. In 2000, the Anti-Defamation League published a

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ok called *Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice*, to which Friedman contributed. Kids who are starting school, the book says, come increasingly aware of relationships with other people, which are then defined in terms of similarities and differences.

"As they enter school and some, for the first time, encounter diversity of not only physical appearance or religion or ability, but of beliefs and attitudes, they begin to compare themselves to others and express their views. They begin to see themselves in a larger world," says Friedman. "It's so when you can see pre-prejudice come into play—things like fear and discomfort."

In 8- to 12-year-olds this pre-prejudice can become more ingrained, Friedman says. Older kids are concerned with belonging to a peer group, which often means defining

who does not belong. Kids' own experiences in life are starting to shape their independent beliefs, feeding some stereotypes and challenging others. Depending on their positive or negative experiences, some children learn to appreciate differences while others learn to fear them. But the latter can still learn, Friedman urges.

According to Finamore, children at this age are able to handle more sophisticated emotions, such as empathy, and more abstract thinking, including looking at things from multiple perspectives, recognizing conflicts and understanding right and wrong.

What's more, they can begin to understand and relate to words such as stereotype, prejudice and discrimination, three words that the third-graders from Bell Elementary confront at the Chicago Children's Museum.

"It's like if a group of kids are hanging out and two black kids come up and they say, 'Can we hang out with you?' And they say, 'No, because you're black,' because they think all black people are weird," one girl, Anna Maria, says, offering her definition of

stereotype. She and her classmates spend a good half-hour exploring the museum's exhibit on differences. They destroy mean words in the Name Shredder. They sign a petition to "take a stand against prejudice." They watch testimonial videos about experiences with discrimination. They learn strategies for responding to name-calling. They Name That Stereotype in a makeshift game show and play a game

about racial apartheid in South Africa.

When the kids gather to share what they learned from the exhibit, Anna Maria raises her hand high. "I learned that if you see new people you don't have to treat them bad or spread bad news around. You have to say, 'Hello, can I introduce myself?'"

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news around. You have to say, 'Hello, can I introduce myself?'"

A boy raises his hand and adds, matter-of-factly, "We shouldn't care about skin."

The final exam

The third-graders from Bell Elementary have a problem with name-calling, their teacher says. She took them to the Children's Museum hoping that they would learn to respect one another's differences. At

the end of the day, it seems that they have, indeed, learned something—but maybe not enough.

The final activity the facilitators present to the kids is a game called Fairplay. It's a team game with no winners and no losers. The kids roll a giant die and move around a circular board on a giant mat, answering moral questions about confronting stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

"No one in this room had a choice about how they look," Timothy Rey, a facilitator, reminds the class, "but we do have a choice about how we treat others."

The kids discuss the answers to the situational dilemmas in small groups. They answer correctly every time.

The final question of the game is a doozy. It's a test to see if the kids have learned to suspend their prejudice. Rey presents the class with two objects: a box, gift-wrapped in shiny blue paper and a red bow, and an envelope, dingy, old and yellow. He asks the class to pick one of the objects to open. They take a vote and the overwhelming majority selects the pretty box. Rey opens it and inside is a laminated piece of paper that reads: "Move back five spaces."

Matt Alderton is a senior at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism and a former intern for Chicago Parent.

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