



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 5, Episode 4: *Grassroots Work on Structural Racism* - released February 21, 2024

Learning Goal: To reflect on how we can change the inherent racism in the early childhood system.

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes



Early Risers is a podcast focused on how to talk with young children about race. Hosted by Dianne Haulcy, the podcast invites early childhood experts into conversations about how parents, caregivers and early childhood educators can tackle this big topic with the little ones in their lives.

Background

Structural racism is different than interpersonal racism. It is the set of policies and practices that put BIPOC communities at a disadvantage from the earliest stages of life. So how can we work in our early childhood communities to identify structural racism and make change so that young people — BIPOC and white — are no longer harmed by structural racism? Jen Neitzel shares examples from her work in communities across the United States.

Guest Bio

[Jen Neitzel](#) is the executive director of the Educational Equity Institute based in North Carolina. Neitzel works with educational communities across the United States to deconstruct whiteness, dismantle racist policies and identify opportunities to introduce equity into classrooms and other community spaces.

General Facilitator Tips

- Read through all the questions first.
- Reiterate that the purpose of the discussion is to learn from each other.
- Create an agreement with everyone in the discussion group that helps create a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere—talking about race can be difficult.
- Be sensitive as to how people identify.
- Be prepared for a response to any remarks that might be offensive. The person saying it may not be aware that it is offensive, so be gentle in pointing it out.

Group Agreements

Ground rules and group agreements are a way to respect safety. Ask members to brainstorm and collectively determine group agreements. Here are some agreements tools to use as a reference:

- [Group agreement information from Seeds for Change](#)
- [Community Agreements tool from Just Lead Washington](#)
- [Sample group agreement from GSAFE](#)

Questions for Discussion

- Jen talks about an article written by Cheryl Harris where she argues that whiteness was "like" property in that its benefits were historically protected by law. Harris posits that racial identity and property are deeply interrelated concepts, and examines how whiteness, initially constructed as a form of racial identity, evolved into a form of property, historically and presently acknowledged and protected in American law. ("[Whiteness as Property](#)" by Cheryl Harris). Do you believe in this statement? What implications might this have for an early childhood classroom?
- As Jen is describing her family history, she mentions that both of her parent's families shed their European customs and traditions to conform to America's "whiteness." Do you have a similar experience in your family? Discuss your family history and how it relates to the work you do today with young children.
- Jen talks about getting involved in work centered around suspension and expulsion of Black boys in early childhood. Have you witnessed Black boys being kicked out of programs or being asked to stay home for an extended period of time? Talk about what that looks like in your program or what you have seen in the early childhood sector.
- Jen talks about the difference between individual racism and structural racism. How do you define the differences? Where might you see each one of these in your program?
- Jen says early childhood is "grounded in whiteness and anti-blackness." Discuss what this might look like in your classroom or program. How does it look in the field of early childhood?
- Jen talks about how everyone must get comfortable with being uncomfortable to have these conversations with young children. Think about a time when you have sacrificed your comfort to have a difficult conversation about race. What was the outcome?
- Jen talks about the importance of having a shared language to do anti-bias work in your community or program. Does your program have a shared definition of diversity, of equity, of discrimination, etc.? What are those definitions? If you do not have shared definitions, how would you go about creating them?
- If you could change one thing about the entire early childhood system to make it anti-biased, what would you change?

Closing the Discussion

As you close your discussion, encourage people to explore additional resources and look into what equity efforts are happening in your early childhood community. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources participants can use to continue learning.

Additional Resources

- More information about the [Educational Equity Institute](#)
- [More from Jen Neitzel](#) on the anti-racism work at the Educational Equity Institute

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