



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 8, Episode 4: *Who Am I? Why Identity and Belonging Matter in Early Childhood*,
released October 21, 2026

Learning Goal: How to support identity development in Black children.

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes



Early Risers is a podcast focused on how to talk with young children about race. 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

Children begin learning about race, identity and belonging long before adults may realize it, even when the adults around them avoid those conversations. In this episode, host Dianne Haulcy talks with Dr. Iheoma Iruka, professor and founding director of the Equity Research Action Coalition at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, about how children develop their understanding of who they are, where they belong and how they recognize fairness and injustice. Dr. Iruka shares her own experiences growing up as a Nigerian American and explains why a strong sense of identity and belonging is an important part of children's social, emotional and cognitive development. She explores how bias can show up in early childhood classrooms, from books and curriculum to assessments and expectations of children, and why educators need to recognize and build on the cultural strengths children bring with them. Together, they discuss racial socialization, the limitations of a colorblind approach and practical ways parents and educators can create environments where children see themselves and others as valued, capable and worthy of belonging.

Guest Bio

Iheoma U. Iruka, Ph.D., is an award-winning tenured professor in the Department of Maternal and Child Health at the Gillings School of Global Public Health and the founding director of the Equity Research Action Coalition at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Iruka leads projects and initiatives focused on ensuring that minoritized children and families, especially Black children and those from low-income households, thrive by attending to their sociocultural assets and racialized contexts. Dr. Iruka has authored more than 100 books and papers and has given more than 300 talks addressing systemic inequities and advancing research and action on the well-being of children and families. She has served on numerous national and local boards and committees, including the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, the American Psychological Association, the National Science Foundation and the Lancet Commission on Racism and Child Health.

Discussion Questions

- What does Dr. Iruka's personal story tell us about internalized racism in Black America? How does she describe the relationship between Black immigrants and African Americans?
- In talking about connection and belonging, Dr. Iruka states that it is important for a child to know who they are and where they belong. How can knowing these two things help to regulate a child?
- In your own words, describe Dr. Iruka's definition of why identity matters.
- How does mainstream society insert alternative narratives to define people of color?
- Do you agree or disagree that everyone would be better off if systems were targeted to improve outcomes for Black children and families?
- Think about your own interactions with young children. What do you think they are "picking up on" and seeing about race in their environment.
- Dr. Iruka and Dianne talk about Black vernacular. When you hear Black children using Black vernacular, do you find yourself judging whether it is "correct" English? What do you think that judgment tells us about how we understand language, race and children?

- In relation to white racial identity development, Dr. Iruka says, “White Folks, you got work to do.” What is this work she talks about?

Closing the Discussion

As you close the discussion, check in with everyone to see how this conversation has landed. If needed, have a quiet moment and take three deep breaths. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, point out additional resources available to them.

Additional Resources

- [Dr. Theoma Iruka’s Research and Equity Initiatives](#) – Learn more about Dr. Iruka's research and initiatives focused on improving opportunities and outcomes for Black children and families. Her work includes examining implicit bias in early childhood education, supporting culturally responsive teaching practices, strengthening school-family partnerships, and advancing equity for Black infants and toddlers.
- [Ages & Stages: A Caregiver’s Guide to Supporting Children’s Racial Learning](#) from Embrace Race – A free guide that helps parents and caregivers understand how children learn about race from infancy through early adolescence. It explains what children notice at different ages and offers practical activities and conversation strategies to help them develop a healthy sense of racial identity, belonging, and respect for others. Available in English and Spanish.
- [Understanding Anti-Bias Education: Bringing the Four Core Goals to Every Facet of Your Curriculum](#) from National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) – A resource for early childhood educators on creating classrooms where all children feel seen, respected, and valued. It explores four goals of anti-bias education — identity, diversity, justice, and activism — and offers guidance on incorporating children's cultures, languages, families and experiences into everyday learning.
- [Talking to Children About Racial Bias](#) from American Academy of Pediatrics – A practical resource for parents and caregivers on discussing race and racism with children in age-appropriate ways. It explains how children begin to notice racial differences and develop biases early in life, and offers strategies for recognizing adults' own biases, answering children's questions and helping children challenge stereotypes and discrimination.

General Facilitator Tips

- Read through all the questions first.
- Reiterate 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. Acknowledge that talking about race can be difficult.
- Be sensitive 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 is some information you can reference:

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

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