



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 8, Episode 2: *Brave Conversations: Helping Young Children Make Sense of Fear, Fairness and Belonging*, released September 23, 2026

Learning Goal: To put language and meaning to how to talk to children about racial profiling and ICE.

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

When immigration raids and stories of racial profiling make headlines, young children notice. They hear conversations, ask difficult questions and often bring their worries into play. In this episode, Host Dianne Haulcy talks with Marie Lister of the University of Minnesota Child Development Laboratory School and Debbie LeeKeenan, co-founder of Anti-Bias Leaders ECE, about how educators can respond with honesty, compassion and confidence. Lister shares how preschoolers processed fears about immigration enforcement through dramatic play and classroom conversations, while LeeKeenan explains why avoiding children's questions can leave them to make sense of injustice on their own. Together, they explore practical ways adults can acknowledge fear without creating more anxiety, talk openly about fairness and belonging and help children see themselves, and others, as valued members of their communities.

Guest Bio

Debbie LeeKeenan is the co-founder and co-director of Anti-Bias Leaders ECE and a nationally recognized educator, author and consultant with more than 50 years of experience in early childhood education. A former teacher, center director and university faculty member, she is a leading voice in anti-bias education and family engagement, and producer of two recent award-winning anti-bias films for educators and families. She is a Chinese American, born of an immigrant working-class family and is part of a mixed-race family.

Marie Lister is the director of teaching and research at the University of Minnesota's Child Development Lab School. She has been a preschool teacher for 18 years, and is passionate about inclusive, child-centered learning environments. She also works as a coach with Young Hearts, Open Minds, helping educators learn how to talk about race and racism with young children and create anti-bias learning environments grounded in belonging and equity.

Discussion Questions

- Discuss Marie Lister's story of the first time she learned about being treated differently because she was white in Brooklyn, New York, when she was four. What kind of views was the principal exhibiting about Black children? What kind of learning environment do you think those Black children faced on a daily basis, given that the principal told a white family not to send their children there?
- In Debbie LeeKeenan's story about her first experience with a racialized incident, she talks about how alone she felt and that no adult said anything. As an adult, has there ever been a moment when you wish you had said something and did not? How did that moment change the way you respond now when encountering a racialized incident?
- During or after Operation Metro Surge, did you hear any young children describing their fear of ICE or police? If so, talk about what they were feeling and how you responded.
- When you hear Marie Lister recount children in her classroom saying things like, "ICE are picking up brown people like me," how does this challenge some people's belief that children do not see color?
- Role-play how you can respond to a child asking this question: "Why does ICE not like Black and brown people?"

- Debbie LeeKeenan talks about how important it is to respond to the questions children have about race. Discuss why this is so important and how we can get more comfortable having these conversations.
- What do you think the children who were helped by their neighbors during Operation Metro Surge will remember about this time when they are 20, 30 or 40 years old? What do you hope they will remember and take into adulthood?

Closing the Discussion

As you close the discussion, invite everyone to take three deep breaths (this was a heavy conversation). Ask them to take a moment to jot down one thing they want to take away from this discussion. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, point out additional resources available to them.

Additional Resources

- [Anti-Bias Leaders ECE](#) — Professional learning and practical tools to help adults foster identity, diversity, justice and action in early childhood.
- ["All Are Welcome"](#) by Alexandra Penfold and Suzanne Kaufman — A picture book that celebrates inclusion, belonging and diverse classrooms.
- ["NAEYC Guide for Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves,"](#) Second Edition — A foundational guide to helping young children develop positive identities and recognize fairness and inclusion.
- [Learning for Justice](#) — Free classroom and family resources that help adults teach about diversity, fairness and belonging

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. 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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