



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 2, Episode 7: *Bias and the Developing Brain*, released January 19, 2022

Learning Goal: Discuss how our brains develop and how learning biases is part of that process. This can shed some light on how we can intentionally recognize and combat implicit biases.

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

Our brains are miraculous and mysterious, and there is so much we don't know about how our brains work. But we do know this: Most brain growth happens by the time a child turns three, which is why the first one thousand days of a child's life are so crucial for their development. We also know that the human brain is good at recognizing patterns: It is how we figure out the world and it's why humans have been able to adapt and survive over millions of years. But if recognizing patterns is the brain's superpower, then we also need to recognize that it can lead to forming racial biases from a very young age. That means when we talk to children about all things—including race and racism—we have to be mindful about our words and actions, as they can develop the patterns that cause racial biases.

Guest Bio

Dr. Damien Fair is a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Minnesota where he co-directs the Masonic Institute for the Developing Brain. His research looks at patterns that develop in our brains from infancy into young adulthood. Beyond being a brain researcher, Fair is also a parent who—like so many of us—had to figure out how to talk to his own kids about race and racism. He grew up in a mixed-race family in Southeastern Minnesota.

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

- What are your hopes and fears about participating in this conversation?
- Fair describes the brain more like a sculpture, and not a house. He explains the first three years of a child's life are critical because things such as nutrition, experiences and stress all shape the sculpture. Talk about how this understanding relates to the disparities and systemic racism many children of color face from the time they are conceived. How does it challenge the widespread ideology in our society that people should be able to make the best life for themselves regardless of their circumstances or upbringing?
- Race is a social construct, meaning, it is a pattern that in the beginning is not attached to any negative connotations, but we know now changes very early.
 - When did you first identify your own race and the race of others around you?
 - If you would like to share, talk about your first negative association with race (your own or that of others). What do you think contributed to that association?
- Our brains are both "experience dependent" and "experience expectant." Discuss how this characteristic contributes to the development of our understanding of race.
- Stereotype threat is "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype." (Steele, 1999) When activated internally, stereotype threat can cause people to negatively perform in certain areas like academics. What are some ways stereotype threat can play out in the lives of young children?
- "Children are more capable than we know." How does this statement, along with the information shared about brain development, impact your understanding of children's ability to engage in conversations about race?
- Listed below are ways educators can counteract stereotype threat. What are some examples of what this would look like in an early childhood learning environment?
 - Providing directions in a way that does not create scenarios that trigger stereotype threat
 - Carefully choosing the images posted around the environment
 - Making role models prominent
 - Explicitly rejecting the stereotype
 - Encouraging self-affirmation

Closing the Discussion

As you are closing your discussion, encourage people to continue learning about how we can train our brains to recognize bias and why the first thousand days of a child’s life are so critical for brain development. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources participants can use to continue learning.

Additional Resources

- Fair was recognized as a MacArthur Fellow—also known as a “genius grant” recipient in 2020. The MacArthur Foundation [produced this video about Fair and his work](#).
- [MPR News reported on Dr. Fair and the launch of the Masonic Institute for the Developing Brain](#) at the University of Minnesota in 2021.
- In 2017, Fair gave a TEDx talk about his brain research, titled “[Does the brain rest? New advances in studies of brain development.](#)”
- Fair discusses the [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#) during this episode, which includes a variety of free online assessments where you can gain insight about your own implicit biases.
- [Reducing Stereotype Threat](#) is a site to learn more about research on stereotype threat and strategies for reducing its negative effects in schools, organizations and even one’s home.

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