Early Risers

Waking up to racial equity in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 3, Episode 4: How Babies Start to Learn About Race released July 13, 2022

Learning Goal: The goal of this discussion is to reflect on Dr. Pickron’s research on babies and to discuss implications for how we can help disrupt racial bias.

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes
Background

Babies are like little scientists. They come into the world with a natural ability to notice patterns and form connections. By the time a child is two years old, research shows that they are already noticing racial differences. Dr. Pickron’s research looks at the patterns that babies and young children notice when they look at people’s faces, including how they respond to physical differences that we as adults often associate with race. Her research illuminates some surprising and concrete ways that parents and caregivers can widen our circles of connection and disrupt what she calls a “long trajectory of bias.” This episode helps us to understand how babies start to learn about race and what parents and caregivers can do to disrupt racial bias.

Guest Bio

Dr. Charisse Pickron is a developmental psychologist and director of the Child Brain and Perception Lab at the University of Minnesota’s Institute of Child Development. She is investigating how babies and toddlers start to learn about race and gender, including why humans may have evolved to prefer the faces of people who look like them.

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 was your first reaction in listening to Dr. Charisse Pickron’s research on how babies recognize racialized facial features? Did this information align with your previous ideas about how we learn about race?

• Given the results that Dr. Pickron’s research is finding, do you think it is ever really possible for people to be colorblind in our society? Should we be?

• Dr. Pickron said that in her biracial family they talked about their rich heritage often and she did not learn until she was older that it was not like that in other families. How do you think her upbringing affects that way she approaches her research? What can we learn from her family?

• An interesting finding in Dr. Pickron’s research is that by naming a person in a story book or a video, we can decrease implicit bias by learning to pay attention to what is individual about that character, which reduces implicit bias. Why do you think this helps to reduce bias? How can we continue to help children see and appreciate each child and person for who they are?

• Have you ever noticed how often you generalize and label groups of people when you are talking? You may not notice you are doing this, even when you are around young children. What can we do to remind ourselves to not generalize and label groups of people but to speak about individuals instead?

• In Dr. Pickron’s research, by the time a child is two years old they are distinguishing people by racial features. What does that tell us about what they are learning about race in those first two years of life? If we have young babies, what ideas or things might be good for us to expose them to in their first few years of life?

• Category representation is created by building on what young babies are seeing and then categorizing. The more variation they are seeing, the more categories they may have. If a three-year-old child has only ever seen one race of person, but may have heard about Black and brown people on TV or on their parent’s phone, etc., how do you think they will categorize a Black or brown person when they come in contact with one for the first time?

• Dr. Pickron talks about something called “in-group love,” which happens to young children when they show a preference for people that look like their caregivers—it is a survival technique. What are some ways that we can expand our young children’s “in-group,” so they are familiar and comfortable with people of various ethnic groups?

• Dr. Pickron’s research suggests that children living in more racially integrated places are exhibiting less implicit bias, perhaps because from an early age they are gaining a richer skill set to engage with people from different races and cultural backgrounds and who speak different languages. Name three things you can do to ensure the children in your care are exposed to more integrated environments.

Closing the Discussion

As you close your discussion, there may be people that want to know more about Dr. Pickron’s research (and other, similar research), so be prepared to point them to her website. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources participants can use to continue learning.
Additional Resources

- **“Individual and Collective Implicit Bias in Early Childhood”** - Video of a 2019 panel moderated by Dianne Haulcy where Dr. Pickron provides an overview of her research on infants and toddlers.

- **When and How to Talk to Your Kids About Race** - Dr. Pickron provides helpful tips for parents and caregivers.

- Dr. Pickron mentioned the work of psychologist Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race.” Early Risers host Dianne Haulcy interviewed Dr. Tatum in 2021. You can listen to that episode [here](#).