



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 5, Episode 6: *Understanding Racial Identity in Young Children* - released March 20, 2024

Learning Goal: Combating anti-Blackness in the classroom

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

“Racial identity” refers to a person’s understanding of different racial identities, one’s preferences for a particular racial identity and how identities are ranked in their family, their society and in their own mind. Toni Sturdivant has spent her career developing a library of books and a collection of teaching ideas for the early childhood classroom that will help young children establish a positive racial identity. In this episode, she talks about her work and her particular focus on boosting the confidence and resilience of young children of color.

Guest Bio

[Toni Sturdivant](#) is director of Early Learning and Head Start for the Mid-America Regional Council in Kansas City, MO. She is also a parent, coach, professor and author who focuses on young children’s racial identity.

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 agreement 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

- Dr. Toni talks about remembering experiences related to race as early as three years old. She also says that they were always allowed to talk about race in their home and have conversations with her parents, which made her comfortable talking about race. Talk about how your experiences talking about race at a young age have shaped how comfortable you are talking about race today.
- Dr. Toni mentions that her early memories of being knowledgeable about race helped her in the classroom because she was very aware that even very young children are conscious of race. How do you think this experience helped her in her classroom?
- As Dr. Toni talks about her remake of the 1940's Doll Test, she details the differences between the original test and her test. For instance, her test is much more child directed and has four different shades of dolls, whereas the original test only had a Black doll and a white doll. Were you surprised that she got pretty much the same result as the original test – that essentially no one wanted to play with the dark-skinned dolls?
- Dr. Toni stated that when the Black dolls were played with, they were often abused physically, including twisting their heads and body parts, with one child even boiling the doll. What do you think this says about what children are learning about the value of the Black body? Where do you think they are learning this?
- Dr. Toni says that, although our schools are desegregated, we have not desegregated society. She was not surprised by the results of the test because of the messages children are getting about the Black body in the world in which we live. What do you think some of these messages are? Where do we see them or hear them?
- Dr. Toni states that in her book, "I Like Myself," she wanted to show early childhood educators that you can teach all your content that you would normally teach in a high-quality classroom AND confirm the identities of the children in the classroom. It does not need to be separate—and, in fact, is more impactful if it is not separate. Is this framing different from how you, as an early childhood educator, have been instructed (or not instructed) to include positive identity in your coursework?
- Dr. Toni talks about how to pull in learning about identity into learning about patterns and colors. Discuss other areas in your curriculum where you could make positive identity associations around skin color, hair, language and culture.
- If you are a parent of color, think of some experiences that you can have with your child that would affirm their skin color, hair and culture to counter messages of anti-Blackness.
- If you are an educator, administrator or parent, can you walk into your child's classroom and "know as clear as day," as Dr. Toni states, that children are affirmed in that space?

Closing the Discussion

This may have been a difficult conversation for some. As you close your discussion encourage people to scan their bodies and release any tension and encourage them to seek out safe people with whom they can continue this conversation. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources participants can use to continue learning.

Additional Resources

- More from Toni Sturdivant: [her books and other interviews](#)
- Toni's [personal statement](#)
- Video: [Unpacking parenting with Toni Sturdivant](#)
- 2021 Scholarly research report from UNC: ["Ethnic-Racial Identity Formation in the Early Years"](#)
- [More resources](#) on positive racial identity in BIPOC children

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