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

On Early Risers, we talk a lot about how very young children are constantly absorbing information around them, including information about race. One of the places where our children can have these formative experiences is in an early childhood or Pre-K classroom. According to the Center for American Progress, about a quarter of all children under the age of five are attending some kind of formalized childcare in the United States. These early childhood programs can be a great start to learn about the world, and to learn how to interact with other people beyond their immediate family. But part of this learning also involves absorbing the implicit biases in our environment. These unconscious assumptions can be challenged when teachers are trained to recognize their implicit biases.

Guest Bio

Sheila Williams Ridge is co-director of the University of Minnesota’s Child Development Laboratory School and an expert on nature-based learning. She is training a new generation of early childhood educators to recognize their own implicit biases and respond when racialized incidents happen in the classroom. Williams Ridge is an instructor for the Institute of Child Development and is an adjunct professor for Hamline University in St. Paul, Minn. She serves on the governing boards for the Natural Start Alliance, the Minneapolis Nature Preschool and the Friends School of 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?

• What are your hopes and fears for your young children or the children in your care? What do you hope they will learn?

• Reading books is especially useful to help children process situations they may be experiencing in the world around them. But it’s not enough to just read the book. You must be willing to have conversations with children that provide them with age-appropriate context to understand how it connects to their world. How can you prepare for holding these conversations with children?

• Same goes for music. In this episode, our guest shared an example of a group of children and a teacher dancing and singing along to an Ella Jenkins song. While Jenkins is a beloved storyteller and musician, lots of her songs were slave songs and the way some recordings were made included stereotypical dialects. This could make some people feel uncomfortable. So just like with books, listen to the music, and talk with the children about the messages and dialects to help them understand the broader, historical context. What can help you become more prepared to hold these conversations?

• An excellent way to help mentor teachers is to spend time observing them in action within their classrooms. Pay close attention to how the adult interacts with each individual child. If you notice that a teacher may be showing implicit bias, talk with them about what you observed and provide them with an explanation of why their behavior could be harmful. Then, share with them strategies they can use that will reinforce non-biased behavior. Can you think of a time when you later realized that your own implicit bias impacted your behavior? How did it feel? What did you take away from that experience? Did reflecting on this experience help you feel more comfortable talking about race and racism?

• Often, adults struggle to talk about race because it makes them so uncomfortable. What are some ways adults can become more comfortable talking to children, and other adults about race and racism?

• Sometimes parents have different ideas about race and racism than teachers do. What are some strategies you can use to learn what ideas parents have? How can this help you in conversations with young children?

Closing the Discussion

As you are closing your discussion, encourage people to continue learning about how to talk about race, racism and bias with children and adults of all races and to encourage continued discussion on these issues. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned during the discussion. Finally, share additional resources participants can use to continue learning.
Additional Resources

- “Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom,” by Lisa Delpit

- “What if All the Kids are White: Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families,” by Louise Derman Sparks and Patricia Ramsey

- “White Teacher,” by Vivian Paley

- “We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom,” by Bettina Love

- Introduction to implicit bias from UCLA’s Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

- “Our Hidden Biases,” from Project ABC, an Early Childhood System of Care Community

- “Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism,” from The New York Times and POV

- Harvard Implicit Association Test, which includes a variety of free online assessments to get insight about your own implicit biases

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