early risers

Waking up to racial equity in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 8, Episode 5: *What Children Notice When Adults Say Nothing*, released November 4, 2026

Learning Goal: The cost children pay when adults are silent.

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes

little moments count

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

Children don't need adults to explain that race matters before they begin noticing it. They pick up on what happens around them, how people treat them and even what adults leave unsaid. In this episode, host Dianne Haulcy talks with Sondra Samuels, co-founder, president and CEO of the Northside Achievement Zone in North Minneapolis, about how early experiences with race can shape the way children see themselves and their place in the world. Samuels shares how moving from a predominantly Black community to a predominantly white suburb in third grade changed her understanding of race and her own abilities and how those experiences stayed with her into adulthood. Together, they reflect on growing up without adults to help them process difficult experiences around race and what that can teach us about children growing up today. Six years after the murder of George Floyd, they explore what Minneapolis children may still be carrying, why adults need to talk honestly with children even when they don't have all the answers, and how families and communities can help children feel safe, valued and hopeful in a world that can sometimes feel frightening.

Guest Bio

Sondra Samuels is the co-founder, president, and CEO of the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ), a nationally recognized nonprofit working to end multigenerational poverty and create pathways to prosperity through education, family stability and racial equity. Since co-founding NAZ in 2009, Sondra has brought together families, schools, nonprofits and community partners across North Minneapolis to ensure children have the support they need to thrive from cradle to career. A longtime North Minneapolis resident, she is a national leader in place-based solutions, systems change and educational equity. Under her leadership, NAZ has become a national model for community-driven transformation, earning recognition including a federal Promise Neighborhood designation. Sondra has also been named to TIME's inaugural Visionaries list and serves as a senior fellow with Harvard's Education Redesign Lab. She continues to advocate for policies and partnerships that help children, families and communities reach their full potential.

Discussion Questions

- Sondra talks about not being prepared to move from an all-Black neighborhood to an all-white neighborhood. How could her parents have prepared her for the culture shock she would experience?
- Sondra talks about a white couple who had a German shepherd dog and why she thought that dog was a "biracial" (because in her old neighborhood all the Black families with dogs had a German shepherd). What does this tell you about how young children (Sondra was about 5) process issues of race, especially without adult intervention?
- Sondra describes how her school testing experience in her new neighborhood ending with her feeling like "the Black girl who wasn't smart enough." Name the verbal and nonverbal behaviors by her white teachers and her mother that contributed to her feeling that way.
- Dianne talks about the implicit bias that Sondra experienced during her school testing. Define implicit bias in your own words and describe how it shows up in your world today.
- Discuss how the murder of George Floyd in 2020 changed your school, community and the country collectively.

- Dianne and Sondra talk about the reactions to the initial airing of "Roots" in 1977. If you are old enough to remember this, what was said (or not said) in your home and classroom about the program? How can we help children process our country's history of enslavement today? (HINT: See Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's answer to her son's question about slavery in Chapter 3, "The Early Years," of "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?")
- Identify the similarities between how young children may have experienced the country's first airing of "Roots" in 1977 and the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

Closing the Discussion

As you close the discussion, check in to see if anyone wants to share their experience if they watched Roots when it originally aired in 1977 and take deep breaths to ground everyone in their bodies. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned. Finally, point out additional resources available to participants.

Additional Resources

Northside Achievement Zone – Sondra's organization works with North Minneapolis families through a network of schools and community organizations, supporting children from before they enter school through college and careers. Its approach goes beyond academics to include housing, career and financial support, mental health resources and other services.

"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race" by psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum – This book explores how racial identity develops, particularly during childhood and adolescence, and why people often seek connection with others who share their racial experiences. The book explains how racism, stereotypes, and social environments shape our understanding of race and offers guidance for having honest, meaningful conversations about racial differences.

"The Danger of Being 'Color Silent': Talking about Race with Young Children" – In this episode of Early Risers, psychologist and author Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum explains how children begin absorbing messages about race as early as age three or four and why staying silent about race can reinforce harmful stereotypes. She shares practical ways parents and caregivers can talk openly about racial differences, answer children's questions, and help young children develop a positive sense of identity and belonging.

"Conversations That Matter: Talking with Children About Big World Issues" from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) – This article explores why silence can be harmful when children witness racism, injustice or frightening events. The National Association for the Education of Young Children explains how avoiding difficult conversations can leave children feeling anxious, confused or afraid to ask questions. It offers guidance for helping young children understand what they see and hear through honest, age-appropriate conversations.

General Facilitator Tips

- Read through all the questions first.
- Reiterate 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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