

FOREWORD BY TIM WISE

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*To Andrew,
In solidarity,
deep fraternal
love!*



RAISING WHITE KIDS

BRINGING UP CHILDREN
IN A RACIALLY UNJUST AMERICA

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CHAPTER 1

From Color-Blindness to Race-Conscious Parenting

"I've always taught my children to treat everyone with kindness and fairness no matter who they are or what their circumstances and my kids do have friends of a lot of different races and from different cultures. They never seemed to notice or care what race someone was, until they came home from school after Martin Luther King Jr. Day last year. Then, all of a sudden, they were talking about people's race all the time, saying things like 'Our friend Joe... he's Black, right?' And I felt like they actually might have been better off without that celebration. Because I really don't think it's good for them to focus on people's race and put them in boxes! Isn't that the opposite of what we should be trying to do?"

The concern this mother is expressing is not an uncommon one among white parents. Her suspicion about the move in school to emphasize difference comes from her sense that a color-blind approach might better support harmonious relationships

among racially diverse children than an approach that emphasizes their differences and seems to put them in boxes—or even makes them start to put one another in boxes. This mother is not expressing resistance to difference, itself. Quite the contrary, she seems to value it. But she's afraid that teaching children to notice and name racial difference is backfiring. She wants her children to recognize human dignity, value equality, and embrace everyone. Rightly so!

Color-blindness became one of the most prominent ways to approach race and difference in the United States after the civil rights movement. The basic principles of color-blindness include the idea that we shouldn't notice race, should look past race, and/or, especially, should never use race as the basis for making decisions, policies, or judgments about people.

Such principles can obviously be used in a cynical way. Color-blindness can be used, for example, to shut down racial discussions before they even get started—that is, “We’re all just human after all, so why don’t we just get over it?”

Color-blindness can also be used to short-circuit attempts to respond to the long-term effects of racism. Namely, decade upon decade of racist policies and practices have created uneven playing fields. If we want to address such unevenness in the interest of creating equity, we have no choice but to notice race. We have to use it in some way to develop policies and practices aimed at leveling the playing field. Granted, there are legitimate discussions to be had in response to difficult questions and diverse perspectives on how we best do that. But if color-blindness is invoked at the start of such inquiry, any

serious discussion about how to even out the field is shut down before it can even begin.

The motivations behind color-blindness are often genuine and full of good intentions, however, as is true in the case of this mother. Indeed, color-blindness is an outgrowth of a central moral message of the civil rights movement: we’re one human family and race should never cause a difference in treatment.

Many of us have rightly learned, moreover, that assuming someone’s race can tell you anything meaningful about that person is the epitome of racial stereotyping. So the conclusion that a good way to teach our children tolerance and equality is to teach them to not notice or to look past race is actually really logical. Color-blindness seems to stand on sound moral reasoning.

To top it all off, there is at least one more reason color-blindness can be so appealing. Many serious challenges do emerge when we start to name and notice race. This is especially the case as we teach children to do so. What does it mean to say Joe is “Black”? Does Joe identify that way? What are these children assuming they know about Joe or saying about him by debating whether or not he is Black? Obviously, it’s a problem if white children run around loudly labeling other children, and especially if they do so in ways that don’t feel good or accurate to those children so labeled.

Later in this book we’ll return and dig in to these challenges

and explore ways race-conscious parenting helps with them. At this point it's important to simply be clear: to "not see" or "not name" race is not a solution to the challenges this mother raises. So let's begin by understanding why color-blindness fails if the goal is to teach white children to value everyone and work for equity and justice, and why, in fact, color-blindness actually causes harm to white children's understanding of race. After that we'll explore some of the reasons teaching our children to value diversity as a primary parental strategy, although better, also falls short and what race-conscious parenting looks like in contrast to these two approaches.

Color-Blindness Doesn't Work

Even when the motivations are good, there are many reasons to reject color-blind approaches in our parenting. First, and most fundamentally, color-blindness doesn't work for the simple reason that we cannot *not* see race. In a society as thoroughly racialized as the United States, unless one has a visual impairment it is literally impossible for any human, past their first few months of life, to "not see" it.

Race is a social construction. This means that differences such as skin tone, hair texture, shapes of faces, and so on don't have any significance or meaning in and of themselves. None of these have any innate bearing on character traits. There is no racial DNA. Instead, such physical attributes are *given* meaning by society through a whole array of social practices.

Before going any further, let me emphasize a very important point. Even though it has no innate meaning, because race *is*

given meaning—it has been and continues to be constructed—it *is* real. Sometimes realizing race is not biological leads people to conclude that race is only an illusion. Couldn't we get rid of some of the challenges it creates by just ignoring it?

But constructed realities are real and cannot be ignored. My house is constructed. Just because it was built at some point doesn't mean it doesn't exist. In fact, every time it rains I am especially aware that my house exists and am grateful it does. Further, my house could be remodeled, changed in some fundamental way, or differently constructed. And all of these descriptions of my house are analogous to race as well. (In fact, the understanding that a construction is something that has been built by people is a really helpful part of this analogy when thinking about raising white children. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers are part of the construction crew for children's embodiment of race.)

Because race is social and human beings are deeply social creatures, we learn to see race in and on the bodies of ourselves and others. We also observe, internalize, and eventually mimic the many social practices that abound in daily life that give the physical attributes society uses to "mark" race powerful social meanings and effects. In the United States, the attributes revolve heavily around skin color, but can also be hair, an accent, the sound of a name, and many other overt and subtle markers. This entire process gets underway very early in life—much earlier than many adults presume is possible.

There are thick socialization processes through which we learn to see and feel race. This means race's impact is much

deeper and more encompassing than something having only to do with how we think about difference, each other, or with what we believe about people. In other words, race goes beyond just our minds. The ways people of different racial groups speak to one another, hold our bodies as we do so, are or are not present or represented in various physical spaces (especially in a deeply segregated nation)—all of these are dimensions of our social, racial experiences. Imagine how different the space of a predominantly white church, a historically Black church, or a church made of up Latino/a citizens or recent immigrants from Mexico feels when one enters each of these respective spaces, for example. Even as one can imagine the different feels of such distinct spaces, parents need to understand that young children pick up on and experience these differences no less than do adults.

Within a few months of being born, babies begin to observe and absorb, and even respond to the racial dimensions of our society. Children continue to do so throughout their development, day in and day out. This is true whether they are raised in very multicultural contexts or in the whitest of spaces.

Many studies help us understand how early these observations begin. Some studies have provided evidence that by the age of six months babies begin to notice the physical differences that mark race. A chapter in the book *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children* reports on a number of these studies. It shares one in which, when shown pictures of different faces, babies pause. Their eyes linger longer on pictures in which the face has a different skin tone than that of their

parents.¹ Other studies suggest this phenomenon starts as early as three months.² Researchers interpret the pause as indicating that babies are noticing skin tone difference—because they don't similarly pause on faces of those who are not their parents but who share the same skin tone as their parents.

Such studies don't mean we are all innately predisposed to racial prejudice. Noticing differences and developing prejudice are two distinct processes. Prejudice is learned. Prejudice is the step taken after one notices physical differences in which differences are assigned meanings—negative ones. One does not inevitably have to take such a step. Rather, the *NurtureShock* studies show that “children's brains are noticing skin color differences and trying to understand their meaning.”³ It's safe to say prejudice is a likely developmental outcome, however. Children

neurologically predisposed to notice the physical attributes marking race are immersed in a myriad of social experiences in which people who have such attributes are constantly treated or portrayed in particular ways.

As early as age five, children recognize that different groups are treated differently.

The point here is to make clear that noticing racial differences is simply part of neurological development. For our purposes, studies like these offer insight into a concrete biological reason color-blind approaches are a nonstarter if we want to raise white children able to engage race, navigate racially diverse environments, and grow deep antiracist sensibilities and

abilities. Color-blindness cannot teach children equity because it does not line up with how their brains actually function. They notice racial differences, and if we don't interpret the meaning of these differences with and for them, society will.

Because color-blindness is out of alignment with neural development, it would fail even if the United States had no history of being racially hierarchical or white-dominated and was not replete with legacies of hostility and tensions among racial groups. But we *do* live in a society with such histories, hierarchy, hostilities, and tensions. Encounters among and between people of different racial groups are almost always marked with these tensions, even in amiable contexts. So beside the fact that their brains notice differences, in this act of "neurological noticing" children also take in many nuanced dimensions of tension and racial embodiment that constantly impact interracial exchanges in our society, however subtle these may seem to adults.

Many other studies have demonstrated that the youngest of children internalize racist perceptions of themselves and of others.⁴ As early as age five, children recognize that different groups are treated differently. They understand something about the social status of different racial groups—their own group and others'.⁵

It's pretty remarkable how astute children are and the precision with which they interpret the social meanings of race. Other types of studies have shown that the youngest of children begin to "play" with race as they engage one another.

Sociologists Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin con-

ducted a yearlong, in-depth study of a multicultural preschool. Van Ausdale spent countless hours observing children's interactions with one another. In *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*, Van Ausdale transcribes story after story in which children as young as three or four, themselves of many different racial and ethnic identities, make both subtle and overt references to race and difference as they play with one another.

The children Van Ausdale observed enacted larger social messages in sophisticated ways. Many of these messages adults might assume would go right over their heads. To share just one account, Van Ausdale transcribes an exchange among two white girls (both aged four) and one Asian girl (age three) who are playing with a wagon. One of the white girls is pulling the other two children. When the wagon gets stuck the Asian girl jumps out to help pull. The white girl responds,

"No, no. You can't pull this wagon. Only white Americans can pull this wagon." Renee has her hands on her hips and frowns at Lingmai. The Asian girl tries again to lift the handle of the wagon, and Renee again insists that only "white Americans" are permitted to do this task.⁶

Here, a four-year-old is using a construction that joins race and perceptions of citizenship to exclude in her play. This is complex understanding on display. She already knows something about the white racial assumptions of who counts as American.

I frequently hear adults who see or hear of children acting

in ways that look like bigotry simply conclude: “Well, obviously, they must’ve been taught this at home!” This is a tempting explanation. Shocked to hear an exchange like the one between Renee and Lingmai, it seems clear an adult must have said something direct for such a young child to invoke such a blatantly racist trope. Children, we believe, are so innocent.

But there are many reasons to reject this one-dimensional explanation. Most important, it leads us to conclude that if we aren’t actively teaching racial bigotry at home, then our own kids won’t fall prey to mimicking such messaging. This conclusion couldn’t be further from the truth. If we believe overtly bigoted parenting is the only or even main cause of the kind of behavior seen in the wagon incident, we don’t appreciate how pervasive racial messages are and how deeply observant our children are. These messages are everywhere and our children take it all in.

Let me share an example from the world of gender. When my oldest daughter was four, she told me one day that she knew “God must be a boy.” Now, I’m not only a feminist, but I have training in theology. I have many great arguments about why giving God a gender—especially a male gender—is not only *not sound theology*, but actually reinforces sexism. My feminist Christian self was beyond alarmed.

But the declaration got worse. When I began to probe and ask how she knew God was a boy, first she said something about “God” being obviously a boy’s name. But then she said, “God has to be a boy, because boys are better than girls!”

An outsider listening in, someone who knew nothing about

my children or me, might understandably assume that such a confident declaration must have been taught in our home. What four-year-old would otherwise spout such sexist nonsense? But such a conclusion wouldn’t be more off base. My kids are being raised by two moms. Both of us buck many of the common stereotypes about gender. Neither of us has consciously given either of our children anything but intentionally positive messages about both gender equity and fluidity. We are overtly pro-girl and antisexist in our modeling and teaching.

But gender and gender messages are everywhere. So are race and racial messages. “Generally speaking, whites and people of color do not occupy the same social space or social status, and this very visible fact of American life does not go unnoticed by children,” for example.⁷ This and so many other realities of racial life in the United States are absorbed by our children who go on to make conclusions about them—conclusions such as this: *If white Americans are at the top of our racial hierarchy, pointing out Lingmai’s difference from me on this front is an effective way to make sure I get to keep control of the wagon!*

The preschool where the wagon incident took place had an explicitly multicultural mission and curriculum. That doesn’t mean no racist teaching was taking place in any of the homes of the children who attended the school. But one could reasonably conclude that many or most families sending their children to such a school weren’t explicitly engaging in such teaching. As is true with sexism and many other “isms,” the reality is the presence of racial messaging and experiences is pervasive and

powerful. These transpire and impact our children well outside of specific parental language and teachings.

Children observe the world around them so carefully. They notice patterns. For example, they see how many places and spaces have only one racial group present in them (and which racial groups are present in what kinds of places). They notice who holds which jobs at supermarkets, restaurants, schools, or doctors' offices. They then generalize what they see to draw specific (false) conclusions about why it would be that doctors are white and custodians are Latino/a, or why no Black people go to church, and on and on. If children aren't taught the causes of the inequity they see, explains antiracism activist Emma Redden, their observations combined with the racist messages they pick up from various forms of media lead "them to assume then that inequality is a reflection of people's intelligence, capability, or skills." Meanwhile, Redden writes, "talking about racism is not actually 'telling them about something they didn't even know existed,' but helping them understand what they witness, experience and/or participate in every day."⁸ Direct adult intervention is necessary; then, to challenge and question the conclusions children will otherwise draw, conclusions that will reflect the broader, racist messages that float freely throughout society. We can't intervene if we're teaching color-blindness.

As psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, an expert in racial identity development, puts it, racism is like smog in the air.⁹ We all breathe it in, every day. Our children inhale it from the moment they are born. The examples I've just shared from

careful sociological and psychological studies could not make the truth of Tatum's claim any clearer. If it's literally the case that we cannot *not see* race because of our neurological wiring—and if children are absorbing negative messages about racial differences from the moment they draw breath—but we avoid talking explicitly about differences, then we are deluding ourselves about what the results will be. We fail to equip our children for the long-term in a fundamentally important way.

As we abdicate the responsibility of specific, clear racial teaching in our children's lives, we step away from them at the precise point we need to be intentionally stepping in. Without us, society's deeply racist messaging and the profound racial tensions that permeate life in the United States move in and take over. Our children continue to develop and interpret race's meanings, whether or not we actively cultivate this development. Even when they are rooted in good intentions, color-blind parental approaches leave our children on their own to just keep breathing in society's "smog" without benefit of a face mask. And the impact is serious: left unintended, racialized behaviors and perceptions of self and others that are innocent at age three will not remain innocent by age ten, twelve, or twenty.

There's another reason to reject color-blindness. Even if we could actually choose to not see race, being unable to see race renders us unable to see and address racism. If my children's ability to challenge and resist racism when they encounter it is important, then I must utterly and actively reject color-blindness. Over the long-term, the only way to address and

challenge racism is to practice and learn effective strategies for doing so.

There are two other kickers worth sharing at this point. During her year spent at the preschool, Van Ausdale discovered that the same children playing with race also already knew that adults considered such behavior inappropriate. Thus

they would often hide their racialized play. When the conflict came to a head in the wagon episode, for example, what was reported to the teacher was simply that the four-year-old girl was “being mean.” In numerous other scenarios kids similarly downplayed or evaded the racial nature of the meanness that had resulted in a conflict. “Children were usually encouraged to be ‘friends’ and to ‘work out’ their difficulties without name-calling and anger, but [racial] details of their conflicts were rarely offered to teachers, nor did the teachers seem to expect such particulars.”¹⁰

This doesn’t surprise me. Children pick up on taboos very easily and know when they are violating them. Just one incident managed to convey to me that something was very wrong with what J. had said to me. The power of taboos around race make it all the more urgent that parents and teachers step in and give children language, tools, and support to navigate the difficult social life in which the United States places all children.

The second kicker is more counterintuitive. Teachings such as “we’re all the same inside” or “we’re all equal” do not serve

our children any better than does silence. To this point, one might want to respond to everything I’ve said with, “But I want my children to value everyone, of all races,” or “I want to be sure my children understand that we are all human.” In fact, when the mother in my opening example said she was worried celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. Day had caused her kids to notice race in ways they shouldn’t, and that she wanted her kids to treat everyone with kindness, this is precisely what she was calling for. To all of these desires, I would first respond, “Yes! I want that for my children too.”

But numerous studies also make clear that generic teachings like “we’re all equal” don’t counteract racism. One reason is that such teachings are much too vague for young children to understand. When parents teach “we’re all friends,” as a way to talk about valuing everyone regardless of differences, children have no idea they’re supposed to connect that teaching to skin color.¹¹ Researcher Po Bronson writes about a friend who “repeatedly told her five-year-old son, ‘Remember, everybody’s equal.’ She thought she was getting the message across. Finally, after seven months of this, her boy asked, ‘Mommy, what’s ‘equal’ mean?’”¹²

Equality is an important aspiration. It is a value many of us long to implement. But it is a very abstract notion. When it’s used as a way to teach race it becomes an empty mantra. As I often say to my college students, “Yes, we’re all human, at our core. But have you ever met another human who had no race, no gender, no sex, no class, and so on?” They always answer no. “That’s right,” I respond, “the only way we show that we

actually respect our shared humanity, is by taking people's specific, diverse experiences of their humanity very seriously."

We've got to do the same with our kids. If we want children who value everyone, and who deeply and authentically understand we're all part of shared humanity, if we want them to actually live in ways that help to realize equity, the only route is to consciously and explicitly teach them about difference!

Color-Blindness Causes Harm

I hope it is clear by this point why color-blindness fails as a parenting strategy. Before moving on, I want to take the case against color-blindness one step further. Color-blindness doesn't simply not work, it is actually harmful to our children. It damages their ability to embrace equity.

Color-blind teaching presents as an aspiration ("don't see it!") a charge that is fundamentally out of synch with their daily experience ("I see it everywhere!"). In doing so, it actively distorts children's engagement with and interpretation of reality. When we teach an approach to race that fundamentally clashes with children's actual experiences and emerging knowledge, we are active participants in this distortion.

Imagine the long-term impact if a parent or teacher repeatedly insisted to a child that he should call the sky green, as the child is meanwhile learning his colors, pointing at the sky, and saying blue! "No," says the caregiver, "that's green." It's not difficult to imagine the intellectual distortion and confusion that would emerge out of such a contradictory toggle between the child's experience and adult response. Neither is it difficult to

imagine the emotional distortion that would result from such disorienting messaging being repeatedly conveyed by someone the child trusts.

The cognitive dissonance of color-blindness cannot help but disable our children's attempts to put their experiences into meaningful language and develop concepts that resonate with something resembling reality. On its own, this dissonance is damaging. But the consequences to the parent-child relationship are also serious. Over time, meaningful parent-child dialogue on an aspect of social experience in which this contradictory set of teachings is being experienced is extinguished. The possibility of needed mentorship and nurture in regard to race becomes deeply eroded because the child knows his or her parent is not being truthful.

A second harm of color-blind teaching comes in regard to the impact of white children's relationships with children of color. The children in the opening example may or may not have handled their discussion of Joe's racial identity appropriately. But if these kids are friends with Joe and Joe is, indeed, Black, it's unlikely they'll be able to sustain a meaningful friendship with him for the long haul if this mother goes with her gut and insists on countering their school teaching with color-blind messaging.

Race and racism matter in the lives of children of color, and they are recognized by such children as maturing, in deep and profound ways. This recognition happens early. On top of that, we know parents of such children, at rates two to five times more often than their white counterparts, teach their children

explicitly and in age-appropriate ways about the many ways race matters in their lives.¹³

As children of color develop and learn the ways race matters while white children are left alone to internalize racism or taught to actively ignore race, the possibility of meaningful friendships and connections between children of different races becomes more remote. Many observers have noted that elementary-age children in racially diverse settings play contentedly across racial lines. By middle school these same children start to self-segregate.¹⁴ Interracial friendships among adolescents are exceedingly rare. If you account for all other variables (for example, different demographics in a school setting), youth are almost twice as likely to form a same-race friendship than an interracial one.¹⁵

There are many reasons for these dynamics. For example, adolescents go through all kinds of new, personal self-identity explorations that impact interracial friendships. Many teenagers, of various racial identities, begin to explore their individual relationship with their “own” racial group.¹⁶ And the racial dynamics that exist in many school environments (between teachers and administrators, and students) in the United States have an effect on kids’ friendships, as well.¹⁷ But aside from all of this, it also stands to reason that if white children become increasingly unable to identify with, to understand, or even begin to actively deny what becomes for children of color a deep and formative dimension of daily life experience, authentic meaningful friendships across racial lines would be very difficult.

In fact, the difficulty of cross-racial friendships—a near impossibility if the white partner in the friendship doesn’t understand race—is one reason teaching children to value diversity or even making sure white children experience diverse contexts as they grow *does not solve the problem* of how to raise white kids. There are serious benefits to experiencing diversity early in life for raising antiracist white children. But if parents don’t take up discussions of race and racism explicitly with children, they are unlikely to succeed in remaining good friends to children of color over time.

A third harm of color-blindness is most directly antithetical to the goal of raising healthy white children. There is an often-unspoken but fundamental message on which color-blindness rests—whether we realize it or not—that there is something wrong with color.

Consider the moments in which white children are taught to not notice race. These are almost always moments in which a white child hears that it’s not good to notice the race of a person of color. It is rare-to-never that children are told not

to notice someone is white. White is typically not marked in the same way that being Black or Latino/a is marked. Thus a message intended to communicate that “all races are as good as each other, don’t notice” is actually received by kids as “it doesn’t matter that that person is Black or Latino/a, we should

Race-conscious

parenting is a broad and proactive way of thinking about how we engage race with our children.

like that person *anyway*.” The implication is that blackness or brownness is somehow undesirable or shameful. It shouldn’t be held against the person. And, more subtly, we white people are somehow doing well and being kind by not noticing that difference.

Race matters everywhere one turns in our society. Thus, color-blindness can only mislead and present children with a false view of reality. Even if it is used as an aspirational message, color-blind teachings backfire badly. They convey to children that something is wrong with people of color, ask them to ignore their own observations, and fail to support them in developing language for their own experiences, thus actively impeding a crucial area of their moral and social development.

What is Race-Conscious Parenting?

Race-conscious parenting is an approach that insists on noticing and naming race early and often. Being race conscious means thinking about, talking about, acting in response to the recognition (or consciousness) of race. It means noticing race, seeing race, and admitting that we do so in direct and overt ways. This approach stands in dramatic and stark contrast to color-blindness.

Race-conscious parenting is a broad and proactive way of thinking about how we engage race with our children, and teach and live out antiracist commitments with them on a regular, day-to-day basis. This broad approach rests on particular understandings about what race is, and how it is communicated and experienced that will be taken up throughout this

entire book. But in addition to this big picture, race-conscious parenting also enables particular responses and postures in the many specific, challenging racial moments parents in the United States so often face.

To make this concrete right away, I’d like to illustrate the contrast between the behaviors to which a color-blind response versus a race-conscious response lead. Let’s take two examples many parents of white children will recognize; the first is hypothetical, the second is an actual experience I had with my daughter.

Example 1: A parent is out grocery shopping with his three-year-old. His white child sees an African American person in the same aisle. She points and says, “Look at that woman’s brown skin.” The embarrassed father quickly slushes the child and whisks her away from the encounter.

Example 2: One day at school my six-year-old pointed at a Black student who looked to be a couple of years older than she, who was standing at her locker putting away her backpack. “Look,” she pointed, “that kid looks like A. [my daughter’s cousin, who also happens to be Black]!” I froze.

Can you imagine yourself in either of these scenarios? Just as in the case of Ms. B. and two six-year-olds outside a bathroom talking about starting a white club, few parents of white children can fail to appreciate how much anxiety either of these scenes would evoke. The anxiety here is not triggered

by the pointing alone. Children do rude things all the time and, as parents, we know it's simply part of our job to teach them otherwise. The anxiety has everything to do with the racial dimension of these encounters.

But even though they are understandable given the anxiety evoked by each situation, the shushing and whisking in the grocery store causes a huge problem. These are enacted versions of "be color-blind" or "don't notice!" It's not difficult to see how shushing and whisking this child away, especially if this parent fails to have a follow-up conversation that specifically addresses the racial dimensions of this exchange, will almost surely be understood by the child as noticing race is bad. Even telling this child generically "it's rude to point" won't cut it in terms of interrupting that conclusion.

More alarming, the child is likely to infer there's something wrong with racial difference itself and with blackness specifically. (Again, it's unlikely a white child is ever going to point like this at a white person, so she's not going to get messages that there's something wrong with white.) This learning that something is wrong with blackness may be so subtle it's indiscernible at first. And it might not happen in just this one moment of encounter. But over time, when coupled with more overt teachings of color-blindness, it will become very powerful.

Of course, the solution here is obviously not to allow this young child to continue to point at people of color! But at this point, a race-conscious parental approach offers a really different set of assumptions, asks a different set of questions, and moves toward different kinds of reactions than a color-blind approach.

First, we have already rejected the notion that children should not notice or observe race—even if they could do so. So even while we need to support them in growing their abilities to discuss race aloud, we do not assume a three-year-old should not have made this remark. Instead, the starting assumption is that *what this three-year-old did was a developmentally normal activity*. Our task as a parent, then, is both to support our child in engaging in a more appropriate manner but to do so while simultaneously affirming and encouraging the fact that she is noticing race and giving her a positive description of difference.

In short, the noticing itself needs to be affirmed, supported—even celebrated! The awkward and inappropriate—but utterly age-appropriate—parts of this scene need to be redirected.

So what could that look like in this uncomfortable moment? Well, a race-conscious parental response to the grocery store encounter is going to consider first whether the woman saw and heard the child. If she did, minimally, a response to the child within earshot of the woman is appropriate and necessary. This response might go something like this, "Honey, it's not polite to point at people. But, yes, that woman's skin is a beautiful shade of brown." Depending on the situation, a turn to directly address the adult who has been pointed at might be appropriate as well.

Right off the bat this response takes the child and her developmental state seriously. It responds without further loading the moment just because it happens to be about race. Race is loaded for both adults in this scenario but is not, yet, for this

three-year-old. This response treats this moment no differently than it would treat other moments of pointing (namely, pointing is rude).

This response also treats the woman being pointed at with the respect she deserves. That is treatment the white tendency to avert the eyes and rush away from uncomfortable situations simply does not offer. Besides giving this woman her due, such a response also models for the child a critical nonverbal teaching: direct engagement of other people if, or when, we have been disrespectful (even unintentionally) is no less appropriate in racially fraught situations than it is in any other situation. The proposed response I describe here is the equivalent of making a child who forgets to say thank you go back and do so.

There is no doubt an encounter like this remains awkward. It may or may not bother the person at whom your child has pointed. You may not ever even know. Everyone is different. The best we can do as a parent in this moment is to know and accept that and to assume that our public and visible attempt—because the pointing was public and visible—to positively characterize dark skin and teach our child about the importance of being polite to others is required. This remains the case whether or not the woman was bothered.

It's worth noting that when we as adults commit to daily living out our belief that we should notice race and teach our children to do so, we become better equipped to respond well in challenging situations. Part of the discomfort of this situation is that white adults tend to have little daily practice in talking about and responding to race; race feels loaded for us because

we don't engage it directly as often as we should. When we do so with regularity, even if they remain awkward, moments like these cause much less anxiety. Racial tensions and challenges are real because we are all impacted, and our relationships are all impacted, by the racially fraught context in which we live. But the more we engage, the more we develop emotional intelligence and resiliency for navigating the many racial tensions and challenges that exist in our worlds.

A second point is worth noting here as well. Early and consistent race-conscious parenting practice actually makes situations like this less likely to happen in the first place. For example, a three-year-old who already has lots of diversity in her life, diversity cultivated in intentional ways (despite the reality that the organization of US society leaves us so racially segregated) is much less likely to point in the grocery store in the first place. Of course, white Americans' social networks are 91 percent composed of white people. So cultivating diversity in our children's lives takes intentional and sustained effort.¹⁸ There's nothing easy about accomplishing actual diversity in segregated America. Nonetheless, white children for whom diversity is more normal are better set up from early on.

The potential of these two gains alone—namely, a reduction in adult anxiety and children less likely to be surprised by difference—is a case for pursuing race-conscious parenting.

But there's an additional gain here, one that might be more unexpected. The more equipped we are as parents, because we ourselves talk about and engage race in our own lives, the less likely we are to impose adult anxiety onto our children. The less

we impose anxiety on our children, the greater the likelihood that our responses to them will invite and open up conversations with them, rather than closing them down. And when that happens, sometimes we're going to be happily surprised to find ourselves learning things from our kids or having conversations with them we wouldn't have anticipated. To put it differently, it's been my experience that when I've managed my own anxiety and been therefore able to respond more openly, I often discover some of my anxiety was unfounded to begin with.

Remember? First I froze as I heard my own child (example two, above) seem to enact the worst version of "white child points at and speaks about a black or brown person." Even worse in this scenario, I heard her seem to (loudly) prove the stereotype that white people think all Black people look alike. After I froze I tried consciously to relax and take a deep breath.

"Really?" I said to my daughter (not sure if the other student heard her or not). "In what way does that girl look like A.?" "Her hair!" my daughter responded. "Her hair is just like A.'s hair." And, indeed, it was similar. The girl had dreadlocks; dreadlocks that looked much like cousin A.'s dreadlocks.

"You're right!" I said. "Her hair looks a lot like A.'s. But remember honey, it's not nice to point."

Was my response a perfect response? No. Could it have backfired? Yes—in so many ways. My daughter might have doubled down and said, "Her skin is dark like A.'s." The child to whom she was responding might have heard her. And if these things had happened, I would have addressed my daughter directly and also made sure the other child overheard me

as I did. I likely would also have said something directly to the other child, such as, "I don't know if my daughter's observation bothered you, but if it did I'm very sorry."

But even with the risks and the imperfections, this response did not leave my daughter with any residual learning that race, blackness, or difference are not to be noticed, let alone that they are somehow bad, embarrassing or shameful. The words *race* or *Black* were never used at all. But this is an example of the kinds of moves one makes if one is committed to race-conscious parenting.

A Quick Word About Diversity

Race-conscious parenting is different than simply teaching our children they should value diversity and difference. It's important I state this clearly. While color-blind teaching remains a prevalent mode for engaging race with white children (especially among parents), an increasingly common approach, especially in educational and religious contexts, is to teach children and youth to value diversity. The difference between valuing diversity and race-conscious parenting is worth laying out here because, like color-blindness, valuing diversity has proven inadequate. It also fails for reasons we can identify. Naming these reasons helps clarify the aims and approaches that, in contrast, are implied by race-conscious parenting.

The notion that we should value diversity rests on the basic premise that differences should be embraced and celebrated. Many parents are committed to this value. We demonstrate this value in different ways, depending on our families and

contexts. Some of us talk with our children about how wonderful our differences are. Others of us may seek to put our children in diverse settings early in life. I have heard many parents, including my own, for example, explain they chose public schools for their kids because they wanted their children to learn in diverse contexts.

This posture of valuing diversity is much improved over color-blindness. In fact, this was the kind of approach taken in the preschool about which I have written. Diversity as a framework avowedly “notices difference.” This is highly important. But many approaches to diversity are insufficient.

These insufficiencies can backfire in ways that leave white youth little more equipped in racial environments than color-blindness leaves them. When they do backfire it causes great harm to the children or youth of color with whom white and privilege in systematic ways while children of color do not.

To put it in stark terms: without a carefully cultivated race-conscious approach to being white, valuing diversity doesn't offer *white* children anything positive to claim or hold on to. The things white children might be able to positively claim as unique to *whiteness* come out of privilege and injustice—so I'm not talking about encouraging kids to hold on to these things!

The challenge of living in a white racial hierarchy, as

opposed to just a diverse society, is that we are not all just *different*. If we lived in a diverse society that was equal and fair in terms of racial treatment, valuing difference would be sufficient. Saying we're all “just different, let's celebrate” would be great. But we live in a society in which white people receive benefits, protections, and privilege in systematic ways while children of color do not. This distinction creates a number of challenges that are unique and specific to parenting white children.

For example, the racial identity white children develop is distinct from that of nonwhite children. If we know that children have internalized racist perceptions of themselves and of others by age five, this means children of color are aware of and have perhaps accepted to some degree negative assessments of their own race. It also means white children are aware of and perhaps have already started to believe there is something superior about themselves as white.¹⁹ The messages children receive in society are different among these different children. Differently raced children thus need different parental responses in search of cultivating their abilities to live lives committed to equity and justice.

What we need to teach white children is complicated. Consider this example by thinking about the phrase “Black is beautiful!” When I ask my college students what they would think if they saw a group of African American students walking across campus carrying signs that said this, they overwhelmingly indicate they would be at least curious and probably supportive. In dramatic contrast the phrase “White is beautiful!” immediately evokes from them a radically different reaction. A

group of white students carrying such a sign evokes a fear of white supremacy.

The point of this example is not that it should be okay for white students to carry “White is beautiful” signs. My students are nervous about this for good reason! The point is that the dramatic contrast in these seemingly parallel accounts exposes the limits of teaching our kids to value diversity. Teaching kids to value diversity, on its own, doesn’t capture the whole truth about our racial, social life. It doesn’t include attention to the fact that white racial domination is the norm in our society. It certainly doesn’t equip us to challenge that norm. When we present valuing diversity as the primary or only response to difference, then, we still set white children up for failure.

Being white and committed to equality is complicated in a racial hierarchy. Adults in significant caregiving relationships with kids must figure out how to help them understand and navigate this difficult juxtaposition.

Another way in which diversity fails to offer parents and white children what we need in order to journey toward racial health is a direct outgrowth of this dilemma. When we talk about valuing diversity we are often thinking about learning from our different histories and cultures. But if one is committed to truthfully talking about history and culture, this posture does not go very far in terms of the white racial experience. For example, children of color have freedom fighters we can point to and teach about when the agenda is diversity. If you ask children of color about their culture they usually have something to share and discuss. But the reality of *white* racial history is

that white people do not really have “white” histories we can celebrate. Ask any white US American (who is not committed to white supremacy) to talk about white culture and we stumble. White cannot be celebrated in the same way Black or Latino/a can. Our work to value diversity does not admit and wrestle with this problem. But white children experience this problem as they grow (we’ll look more closely at how this plays out in older kids in chapter 6).

If we do not explicitly work with white children and youth to understand how they fit in to diversity frameworks, with specific attention to their identity as white people, they are vulnerable to becoming deeply disaffected from and disengaged with diversity. In fact, it may be counterintuitive, but the more diverse the context and the more pronounced the emphasis on diversity, the more disaffected white kids may become, as they lack support for navigating their white social position.

This specific problem, along with responses for it, will be explored in detail later in this book. Here it suffices to be clear that diversity is leaps and bounds better than color-blindness. But if it is not utilized in a manner that enables white youth to find a positive route through which they, as *whites*, can authentically connect or contribute to diversity and to building a just racial present and future, it is not enough.

Race-Conscious Parenting, Some Basic Principles

Race-conscious parenting rests on a number of principles. It goes beyond naming difference and engages with children about the ways difference impacts our experiences.

Race-conscious parenting goes deeper than a commitment to introducing different-colored dolls and toys, reading books at early developmental stages in which diversity is reflected, or participating in multicultural playgroups and schooling. Race-conscious parenting certainly affirms and includes these strategies. But such parenting involves parents (and teachers) seeking out—sometimes even creating—opportunities to address not just race and difference but also racism—proactively and on a regular basis. It also distinctly shapes the kinds of responses adults might make when race and racism are “in the room” in situations that were unanticipated. It actively models and teaches the importance of work against racism and for racial justice.

By explicitly engaging the racial dimensions of experiences, spaces and places, and relationships, and by addressing these in age-appropriate ways, race-conscious parenting conducts a deep reading of the *actual* racial environment. It is able therefore to respond to children’s actual experiences, not the racial experiences we wish they were having. It also teaches children as they develop and grow to be able to do the same.

Consider this example. As noted above, many Black children are taught by their parents that they must behave in certain ways around police officers—that is a much more complex discourse than “police officers are safe.” If my white daughter is only taught that police are safe, her relationship with her Black cousin, who is (necessarily) being taught that police are complicated, is directly and negatively impacted. The depth and authenticity of that relationship will erode over time. Moreover,

her actual racial experience—one in which she will pick up on the many social cues that reveal the truth that police are much more dangerous to some people than others—is ignored.

In contrast, a race-conscious approach assumes my white daughter needs to and *can* be taught about this dimension of the experience of African Americans. She must learn, just as does her cousin, about the complexities of police-civilian relationships. Such learning is critical in support of her ability to develop deep and sustaining individual interracial relationships both in her present and in her future. It also starts her early in the long, complex learning she needs to be able to locate herself in US social structures as a white person. And it builds her own capacity for acting with agency as an advocate for a just, egalitarian, and genuinely diverse society.

Assuming my white eight-year-old needs to have some version of “the talk” (tailored to her specific experience) as does a Black eight-year-old obviously takes us well beyond an approach to race that ends with “embrace and celebrate your cousin’s blackness as just as beautiful as your whiteness!” I do want my children to celebrate the blackness of their loved ones. But I also want them to know that society, as a whole, does not. And I want my children to learn that their whiteness needs to make them conscious of the work required to be active anti-racist partners with their beloveds in surviving and challenging such realities.

This basic orientation I am describing here, of course, raises many difficult questions. Figuring out when and how to teach a five-year-old about police killings of Black men, for example,

is difficult. Subsequent chapters will explore the complexities we face when teaching about injustice. But the reality is that these questions are not new. Parents of children of color have always asked these questions. Nor are these questions unique. It's not easier for a parent of an African American child to have "the talk" than it is for a white parent. Parents of children of color are only better at it because they have long been doing it.

Those of us who are parents of white children are simply further behind. We have yet to directly face the challenges of talking about race and justice with our children and to develop strong parental strategies. We have yet to cultivate a basic tool kit and set of age-appropriate frameworks for addressing the specific ways these same issues play out with children who are white. But knowing that we must and, more important, that we *can* nurture our children's capacity to function in racially complex, tense, and difficult environments is an essential starting point. Committing to such nurture is critical for enabling our children to constructively address and respond to those environments both now and as they develop and grow.

Race-conscious parenting engages in honest dialogue about the inherited experience of being white, as well as the history of whiteness. It is attentive to the developmental needs of white children. This is not a "white people are bad" approach to parenting. Rather, by responding to children's actual environments, race-conscious parenting teaches advocacy and anti-racism combined with the values of equality and justice. Thus, even as white children are parented to take seriously the ways their location in a white racial hierarchy privileges them, it sup-

ports their growth into a sensibility that helps them navigate this with antiracist commitment. It models for them the reality that a commitment to equality and justice as a white person is not only viable but deeply empowering.

So these are the basic assumptions. When it comes to parenting white children for racial justice, there are many unanswered questions. There are also many questions in regard to which there are few clear-cut right and wrong answers. Every child is different. Each family is different. But in much of what follows, examples and possibilities, questions and exploratory responses to these questions, will be laid out. My commitment as a guide is to be part of an emerging conversation taking place among parents of white children who are seeking to raise a generation of equity, justice-committed children far more able and equipped than were most of us—despite having been raised by well-intentioned parents—currently reading this book.

Takeaways

- ✓ Color-blindness *seems* like a good idea, but it doesn't address the unlevel playing field created by generations of racist policies and practices. And the simple fact is, we cannot *not* see race. Race matters everywhere one turns in our society.
- ✓ The celebration of diversity as a framework avowedly "notices difference." Noticing differences and developing prejudice are two distinct processes: Prejudice is learned. Seeing racial differences is natural neurological development.
- ✓ Children notice racial differences and pick up on individual and structural racism from young ages.
- ✓ We need to proactively interpret the meaning of racial differences for our children or they will simply absorb the negative messages about race and people of color that pervade our society. Telling children to not notice race or that race doesn't matter actively distorts their interpretation of reality.

- ✓ Children need concrete language about racial justice and antiracism because messages like "we're all equal" are too abstract for them.
- ✓ Race-conscious parenting is an approach that insists on noticing and naming race early and often. Talking authentically about race and racism responds to children's actual experiences and teaches children as they develop and grow to be able to do the same.