

# Minority Parents' Perspectives on Racial Socialization and School Readiness in the Early Childhood Period

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## ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** To describe how minority parents help their young children navigate issues of race and racism and discuss implications this racial socialization may have for school readiness.

**METHODS:** Sixteen focus groups were conducted among 114 African American, English language-primary Latino, Spanish language-primary Latino, and Korean language-primary Korean parents of children ages 0 to 4 years old. Transcripts were coded for major themes and subsequently compared across the 4 language-ethnicity groups. Parents also shared demographic and parenting data by survey, from which group-specific proportions provide context for identified themes.

**RESULTS:** In this sample, nearly half of surveyed parents had already talked to their young child about unfair treatment due to race. The proportion of such conversations ranged from one-fifth of Korean parents to two-thirds of Spanish language-primary parents. In focus groups, Korean parents reported fewer experiences with racism than African American and Latino par-

ents. Within each language-ethnicity group, fewer fathers than mothers reported addressing race issues with their young children. All focus groups endorsed messages of cultural pride, preparation for bias, and a strong focus on the individual. The majority of parents viewed racial socialization as an important part of school readiness.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Racial socialization was believed to be salient for school readiness, primarily practiced by mothers, and focused at the individual level. The smaller role of fathers and systems-based approaches represent opportunities for intervention. These results may inform the development of culturally tailored parenting interventions designed to decrease the race-based achievement gap and associated health disparities.

**KEYWORDS:** early childhood; parenting; racial socialization; school readiness; social determinants of health

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## WHAT'S NEW

Minority parents feel that racial socialization in early childhood impacts later school readiness; they describe both individual- and systemic-level race issues but rely heavily on individualistic strategies. Providers within child-serving systems may encourage healthy racial socialization strategies early in life.

A SEEMINGLY INTRACTABLE educational achievement gap exists between many minority and white children. Disparities in education, meanwhile, directly predict disparities in longevity and other markers of health.<sup>1</sup> Several factors are responsible for the ethnic achievement gap, but it is posited that the majority of the gap may be explained by poverty-related factors and differences in parenting.<sup>2</sup>

Minority parents face unique circumstances related to race and racism, and racial socialization through parenting may play a role in the school readiness and subsequent health status of minorities.

Thornton and colleagues<sup>3</sup> define racial socialization as the messages and practices that communicate race status pertinent to "1) personal and group identity, 2) intergroup and interindividual relationships, and 3) position in the social hierarchy." Different types of racial socialization have been associated with different outcomes. Cultural pride reinforcement has the most consistent track record for positive outcomes, including enhanced academic achievement, mental health, and behavior in various age groups.<sup>4-6</sup> Mixed effects have been associated with preparation for bias, which combines warnings of racial bias with coping strategies. These include no effect on

the cognition and behavior of preschoolers,<sup>4</sup> a negative effect on the mental health of first graders,<sup>7</sup> and positive effects on the academic and socioemotional outcomes of adolescents.<sup>8</sup> Negative outcomes are associated with promotion of mistrust, a type of racial socialization that does not provide coping strategies.<sup>9</sup> In this case, children of various ages have been found to experience poor academic and socioemotional outcomes.<sup>7,10–12</sup> Finally, limited studies of adolescents have linked egalitarianism to negative school self-esteem<sup>6</sup> and silence about race to poor grades.<sup>8</sup> In sum, the type and timing of racial socialization are salient for school readiness outcomes.

Just as medicine has begun to recognize atherosclerosis as a disease with pediatric origins, racial bias can be reliably detected in children as young as 3 years old.<sup>13</sup> This finding was first identified in the Clark doll studies, which tasked 3- to 7-year-old children to assign positive or negative attributes to white and black dolls.<sup>14,15</sup> More recent reports suggest children as young as 6 months old recognize and respond to phenotypic differences.<sup>16,17</sup> These trends parallel that of the ethnic achievement gap, which can be detected as early as 9 months of age.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of the early childhood years for school readiness is gaining increasing traction with economists, psychologists, sociologists, social workers, and physicians. It is described as a period during which both positive investments and toxic stressors may significantly alter the trajectory of a child's life;<sup>19</sup> racism itself has been considered a toxic stressor.<sup>20</sup> Sanders-Phillips and colleagues<sup>21</sup> describe a conceptual model relating racial discrimination to child health disparities. This early time period has typically not been the focus of racial socialization studies. The present study addressed this gap and its potential import for school readiness and health through focus groups and surveys of minority parents of young children.

## METHODS

A community advisory board representative of the target study sample advised all aspects of study design and procedures. Members were drawn from 6 local community agencies.

### ELIGIBILITY AND RECRUITMENT

Study participants were purposively sampled from 11 community organizations serving parents in the Los Angeles area. Online [Appendix A](#) lists the organizations. In most instances, study staff gave on-site recruitment presentations and distributed flyers. Some community partners directly contacted parents for recruitment.

Eligible participants self-identified as: 1) aged 18 years or older, 2) parents of at least 1 child 4 years old or younger, and 3) English-speaking African American, English- or Spanish-speaking Latino, or Korean-speaking Korean. African American, Latino, and Korean parents were selected for the study due to their minority status, high prevalence in Los Angeles underresourced communities, and pertinence for assessing how encounters with discrimination inform parental perceptions of child needs, parenting behavior,

and resulting school readiness. Parents of children up to age 4 years were targeted to sample the population of parents with experiences recent enough to inform an early childhood parenting program. This study was approved by the institutional review board at the University of California, Los Angeles. All parents provided informed consent prior to participation.

### FOCUS GROUPS

From June to October 2012, a total of 114 parents participated in 16 focus groups—4 groups each of African American, Spanish language-primary Latino, English language-primary Latino, and Korean parents. Multiple focus groups were planned for each language-ethnicity group to increase the likelihood of thematic saturation. Each ethnicity-specific set of 4 focus groups included 2 focus groups of mothers and 2 focus groups of fathers.

Semistructured focus groups, averaging 90 minutes with 5 to 11 participants, were led by moderators of similar gender and racial or ethnic identity as participants. Moderator training reviewed standardized procedures for obtaining informed consent, delivering the focus group script, facilitating discussion, and administering surveys. Focus groups addressed ethnicity-specific parenting that prepares children for racism and any relevance for school readiness ([Table 1](#)). Moderators and scribes debriefed with the principal investigator at the conclusion of each focus group to summarize findings and track progress toward thematic saturation. Procedural feedback was also collected from each moderator and disseminated to all moderators to enhance consistency.

### SURVEYS

We used survey data to better characterize the sample and provide context for the focus group responses. A survey of study eligibility, demographic data, and parenting experience was administered prior to each focus group. A post-focus group home environment survey evaluated each parent's country of birth, preferred language, educational background, marital status, and household income. It also assessed parental concern regarding child school readiness (adapted from the National Survey of Children's Health, 2007)<sup>22</sup> and racial socialization practices (adapted from a racial socialization scale).<sup>23</sup> Participants received child care and a \$50 Visa card as study incentives.

### ANALYSIS

2@Applied thematic analysis was conducted as described by Guest et al.<sup>24</sup> Transcripts were made of each of the 16 audiotaped focus groups and inductively analyzed using Atlas.ti software. No preconceived conceptual frameworks were used to build themes. The principal investigator and a research assistant reviewed 8 transcripts (2 from each language-ethnicity group) to identify themes and create a codebook. Two research assistants (African American and Latina) iteratively revised the codebook as new themes emerged during review of all transcripts. Once the final codebook was established, each research assistant coded 8 transcripts and reviewed the remaining

**Table 1.** Selected Focus Group Questions by Category

Category	Child Needs	Parenting Behavior	Ethnicity-Specific Parenting	Parenting Rationale
School readiness	What do young children need to be successful in school?	How can parents help their children succeed in school?	Would those methods work for a/an [insert ethnicity] child?	Why do you think some kinds of parenting work so well for a/an [insert ethnicity] child?
Racial socialization	What do young children need to deal with racism?	What are some ways parents prepare their children for racism?	What are some ways that [insert ethnicity] parents prepare their children for racism?	Do the same strategies that help a child deal with racism also help him deal with school?

8 transcripts coded by their counterpart. Coding disagreements were resolved with a third vote by the principal investigator. Interrater reliability was assessed by calculating Cohen's kappa for a randomly selected sample (20%) of quotes.<sup>25</sup> Kappa scores ranged from 0.9 to 0.94 across each of the major themes, confirming consistency.<sup>26</sup> In order to enhance thematic representation, both consensus and key dissenting views of participants are presented.<sup>24,27</sup>

## RESULTS

### PARTICIPANTS

Table 2 describes participant demographics. Sixty mothers and 54 fathers self-identified into 1 of 4 language-ethnicity groups: African American (27%), English language-primary Latino (23%), Spanish language-primary Latino (31%), and Korean (19%). In general, African American parents were most likely to report single status and low household incomes, Spanish language-primary Latino parents were most likely to report low education, and Korean parents were most likely to report

high education, married status, and high household incomes.

### HOME ENVIRONMENT SURVEY

Most parents were "concerned a lot" about how their child was learning preschool and school skills. Spanish language-primary Latino parents were most likely to talk to their young child about unfair treatment due to race (two-thirds of surveyed parents), followed by two-fifths of English language-primary Latino and African American parents, and one-fifth of Korean parents. Online Appendix B provides details of group-specific proportions.

### FOCUS GROUPS

Focus group participants were asked how young children should be prepared to deal with racism. They were further probed to explore the relevance of racial socialization for school readiness. Participant responses have been organized into 4 major themes with subthemes as described below. Additional supporting quotes are presented by theme in Online Appendix C.

**Table 2.** Demographic Data of 114 Participants

Characteristic	African American (n = 31)	Latino English Speaking (n = 26)	Latino Spanish Speaking (n = 35)	Korean (n = 22)
Male sex, %	41.9	50	51.4	45.5
Average age, y	30.4	32.7	35.9	34.9
Country of birth, %				
United States	96.77	66.67	8.82	4.55
Mexico	0	16.67	64.71	0
Korea	0	0	0	95.45
Other	3.23	16.67	26.47	0
Parental education, %				
Less than high school	6.67	11.54	52.49	0
High school graduate	40	34.62	31.43	18.18
Some college	46.67	38.46	11.43	22.73
College graduate	6.67	15.38	2.86	59.09
Marital status, %				
Married	22.58	34.62	45.71	90.91
Separated	0	3.85	14.29	4.55
Divorced	9.68	3.85	0	4.55
Living with companion	19.35	23.08	28.57	0
Single, never married	48.39	34.62	11.43	0
Total annual household income, %				
<\$10,000	63.33	30.77	45.45	0
\$10,000–\$24,000	16.67	30.77	42.42	9.09
\$25,000–\$39,000	20	7.69	9.09	31.82
\$40,000–\$54,000	0	26.92	0	22.73
>\$55,000	0	3.85	3.03	36.36

**RACIAL AWARENESS**

*Racial identity development.*—Many parents thought that their young children were unaware of race-based differences. In contrast, some African American parents believed race recognition exists by the time their children are toddlers. The eventual need for young children to learn to manage racial and ethnic identity was consistent across all parent reports:

I think the children need to be accurately aware of who they are, whether you're Korean or black because if they go out in society without having a clear idea of who they are, they think they're Caucasian... They just think they are American, but when they face racial discrimination later on, they go through confusion. (Korean mother)

*Egalitarianism.*—As young children become aware of race, parents reported wanting their children to understand the fundamental equality of individuals regardless of race-based differences:

So [you] definitely do have to address it, and let them know there is different cultures. But we're all equal. You're not no better than him because you're black. And they're no better than you because they're white. (African American mother)

**RACE DYNAMICS: INSTITUTIONAL, INTRARACIAL, AND INTERRACIAL**

*Institutional race dynamics.*—Parents reported that ideals of equality directly contradict the organized forms of discrimination they have faced in the court system, police practices, the prison system, and the housing market:

I was the victim, a white person was at fault, and the judge was white. It was a case of 100% fault by the white person, and even though he admitted that he was at fault, the judge did not even give a judgment that would pay for my medical bills. (Korean mother)

It's just ridiculous, the profiling. And it has nothing to do—I mean, he didn't have on a hoodie, he didn't have on any gang member attire. Like I said, dude is a Rastafarian, just far from anything to do with gangs. But just because you're black, you're profiled. (African American mother)

But when people go to prison, you'll go in there not racist, and then you'll probably come out with a little anger in your heart because this whole racism in the system, the prison system. (African American father)

My... child care provider just moved back from [deleted to protect privacy] to out here because she said the area that she was living in, they started putting things on the door saying that the Klansmen were there. (African American mother)

*Intraracial dynamics.*—Despite these examples of institutional discrimination, parents largely viewed minority social mobility as an individualistic endeavor. Both African American mothers and fathers agreed they should not blame “the white man” for their troubles. Similarly, a Spanish language-primary father stated, “Success has nothing to do with race.” One Korean mother elaborated, “I think the child himself or herself is the most important thing... the child's personality and character.” The responsibility then lies with the parents to foster successful traits in their children.

When their children do not succeed, some parents blame themselves or their culture: “Black people are just bashful... a lot of us are ashamed of what we've been through,” and “We, Latinos, are too arrogant, too chauvinistic.” Some Latino parents countered this view with positive self-assessments (eg, “Our culture is very rich”), but no positive self-assessments came from the African American groups. In the end, both ethnic groups concluded that individuals within their group did not help each other enough. These feelings of isolation heighten the sense of betrayal when an apparent group member denies shared ethnic identity. In contrast, Korean parents reported no negative self-beliefs (eg, “Koreans are the best.”) and no denials of apparent Korean ancestry.

*Interracial dynamics.*—There was discomfort around incorrect and unsolicited racial identification. One Korean mother said Latinos had identified her as Chinese: “Just because you're Asian, you're not all Chinese or Japanese.” African American parents commented on the frequency with which their mixed-heritage children were asked to racially identify themselves: “A lot of people [ask], ‘Oh, well, what is she?’” One Spanish language-primary Latina mother wondered why blacks don't like to be called black, echoing the lessons of other black and Latino parents who teach their children to avoid referring to individuals as blacks or Mexicans.

Parents feared that once their children were racially categorized, negative stereotypes would be projected onto them. Latina mothers noted stereotypes of African Americans as violent, foul-mouthed, and unaffectionate with their children. In parallel, Latina mothers noted stereotypes of Latinos as combative, dirty, and less likely to read to their children. Korean parents worried their children would be affected by the stereotypes of smaller Asian habitus, uneducated parents, or negative family environment.

Self-espoused stereotypes were both positive and negative. African American parents thought that Latinos show unity and that Korean parents provide their children with a strong support system. Korean mothers lamented that while Korean fathers are less likely to come to parenting classes, Latino fathers are willing to miss work to attend. They also thought that Latino mothers were devoted to supporting their children's schooling. Some Korean parents generalized that Koreans look up to whites and look down on blacks and Latinos.

Parents realized these negative stereotypes set children up to experience discrimination: “Many people, when they see black people—they don't like to be next to them. I've seen it even with teachers. Some substitute

teachers just came to the school, and they look at them differently,” said one Spanish-speaking Latina mother. Bullying was reported between blacks and Latinos, especially in the Spanish-speaking Latino group: “‘I have black classmates.’ Perfect, no problem. ‘Don’t argue with them or let them raise their voices to you because you’re a girl just like them.’ So she already knows, at her age, 4, how to prevent people from belittling her.” Another Spanish-speaking Latina mother was surprised to discover her young son learned to fear blacks from his cousins. One Korean mother described how teasing drove her son to near silence: “They make fun of his accent, and that is why he keeps his mouth shut.”

#### *COPING PRACTICES: CULTURAL PRIDE REINFORCEMENT AND PREPARATION FOR BIAS*

*Cultural pride reinforcement.*—When asked how they might prepare their children to deal with racism, all language-ethnicity groups reported reliance on cultural pride reinforcement. Cultural events like parades and dances were highlighted as well as physical features like the protective melanin in darker skin. The smallest number of pride comments was in the Spanish language-primary Latino parent groups. Spanish-speaking mothers also recounted stories of children who were ashamed of their culture and Spanish language.

*Preparation for bias.*—All groups of parents acknowledged that their children would need to be prepared to deal with racial and ethnic bias at some point. Each emphasized the importance of the race talk as a starting point as exemplified by this English language-primary Latino father: “I had to finally sit him down and, you know, what color are you, son? Just by color, you’re brown, son, you’re Mexican.” Beyond addressing basic racial identity, fathers gave fewer concrete examples than mothers of how children might practically approach experiences of bias.

While both African American mothers and fathers advised exposure to different cultures as a key strategy, mothers listed many more strategies. These included sharing their personal experiences with the child, emphasizing mainstream attributes (European features, dress, and language), education for social mobility, and teaching children their basic rights. In sharp contrast to the sharing of personal experiences advocated by mothers, one father repeatedly asserted, “Why would I ever teach my child about this bad stuff?”

Common strategies involved confidence-building to foster resilience against discriminatory events. Both language groups of Latina mothers especially emphasized the protective functions of confidence and self-esteem. Similarly, Latino fathers stressed individualistic traits such as proving they do not embody negative stereotypes and remaining thick-skinned. Parents typically reported supporting children in this way at home, but Spanish-speaking mothers also relied on teachers to mediate race-based conflicts at school.

Korean parents also took an individualistic perspective to fight the ills of bias. A child could prove his or her value by becoming a great athlete, leader, or musician at school. The solution lay with the child’s character and personality traits.

Equally important were social skills augmented by parent support to invite new friends to the home or move the family to a new neighborhood if need be. It was key for children to understand that they are different in an important way, but not so much that they do not identify with the mainstream values that could secure future success.

#### *RACIAL SOCIALIZATION AND SCHOOL READINESS*

Each language-ethnicity group thought that racial socialization would advance school readiness. With regard to strategy, Korean parents primarily relied on cultural pride reinforcement. Spanish language-primary parents highlighted egalitarian approaches to enhance school readiness.

Children should be taught to interact with all kinds of people while they are very young, so when they go to school, they know that there is no racism... because we are all equal. (Spanish-speaking Latino father)

Spanish language-primary parents differed in that mothers also mentioned cultural pride strategies while fathers added preparation for bias. Preparation for bias was dominant across genders for both English language-primary Latino and African American parents. Among English language-primary parents, cultural pride reinforcement and egalitarianism were only minor themes.

## DISCUSSION

In this sample of 114 minority parents, racial socialization was considered an integral part of school readiness. To our knowledge, this is the first study to describe minority parents’ perspectives regarding the influence of racial socialization on the school readiness of young children. Despite parents’ egalitarian statements, race-based differences mattered for their children in big and small ways. Parents generally preferred to promote the positive aspects of ethnic differences (cultural pride reinforcement) and protect against the negative aspects (preparation for bias). Consequently, most parents agreed that children—even young children—need to understand how to manage race-based differences to succeed in school.

We note that our sample of exclusively minority parents is likely more predisposed to advocate for racial socialization than nonminority parents. The largest nationally representative study of racial socialization took place using the 1998–1999 kindergarten cohort of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K).<sup>28</sup> This study showed that nonwhites, particularly blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and multiracial families, were more likely than whites to teach children about their ethnic and racial heritage. Moreover, higher percent minority in schools was associated with greater racial socialization, but for whites and Hispanics only. In our study, where Latinos typically attend high-minority schools, Spanish-language Latino parents were more likely to racially socialize their young children than any other group.

Compared to all surveyed groups, Spanish language-primary Latino parents reported the greatest general use

of preparation for bias. However, during the focus group discussion of early school readiness, these parents reported more egalitarian approaches. The reverse was true for English language-primary Latino parents who reported more preparation for bias than egalitarianism in the focus groups. One explanation for this finding may be the greater length of time in the United States for the primarily US-born English language-primary parents who may have experienced more years of bias in US schools. In parallel, the primarily US-born African American group endorsed preparation for bias for school success, and the mostly Korean-born Korean group did not. Preparation for bias as a strategy may increase over time as families perceive racial bias in the school system.

With regard to school readiness, cultural pride reinforcement was heavily emphasized by Korean parents and briefly mentioned by African American and Latino parents. Of note, cultural pride is a key component of healthy ethnic identity. Well-adjusted children have a multicultural outlook, balancing strong ethnic identity with appreciation of other cultures.<sup>29</sup> In African American and Latino children, it has been shown that multiculturalism is associated with increased self-esteem, cross-ethnic social skills, and mental health.<sup>30</sup> Multiculturalism may be a vehicle by which cultural pride translates into school readiness.

An unexpected finding of this study differentiated mothers and fathers on racial socialization strategies. While fathers were more likely to describe institutional forms of racism, especially those related to law enforcement, they were less likely than mothers to address race issues with their children.<sup>31</sup> Thornton and colleagues<sup>3</sup> hypothesized that fathers were less likely to racially socialize their children because they may be noncustodial parents more often than mothers. However, our finding was consistent in all evaluated groups, including the more married Latino and Korean groups. It may be the case that 2-parent households also leave more of the child socialization tasks to mothers. Strategies that support shared responsibility for racial socialization between mothers and fathers may better incorporate gender-specific experiences with race and racism.

Regardless of gender, very few parents described coping strategies that addressed the institutional race issues reported. For example, the media environment reflects societal views of race and ethnicity. Parents may actively supervise media to support the type of racial socialization they prefer. While current evidence suggests the importance of cultural pride reinforcement for all ages and preparation for bias at least for older children, a multi-context, developmentally appropriate approach to racial socialization is lacking. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development requires consideration of the individual child and his microenvironment within the context of the larger macroenvironment.<sup>32</sup> The parents in our sample do not think they are prepared to model approaches to institutional race dynamics for their young children even when they acknowledge their importance. Early childhood, however, may be precisely the time when preferences and patterns of behavior develop most rapidly. Professionals who work in child-serving institutions may address both

individual-and systems-level race dynamics with appropriate racial socialization strategies.

Pediatricians are particularly well placed to address racial socialization during the critical early years. For example, many pediatricians participate in the Reach Out and Read Program, which distributes books to young children at health supervision visits. Books that feature children of various ethnicities might support multiculturalism and cultural pride. Parents who are interested in reducing bias in their children might be referred to American Academy of Pediatrics references on "Raising Children Without Prejudice" at <http://www2.aap.org/stress/resources.htm>. The section also contains a link to a list of books that promote diversity and discourage prejudice for children of various ages. Screen time guidance should address quantity and content of media. In addition to media's impact on obesity, sexual activity, and violence, its representation of racial and ethnic groups might be a topic for anticipatory guidance.

Parents enjoyed trading tips, venting frustrations, and even engaging in nascent community organizing in the focus group format. As innovative approaches to well child care include group visits, attempts might be made to cohort groups of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Fathers should be strongly encouraged to attend. Anticipatory guidance on racial socialization may serve as a starting point for dialogue on the impact of race on school readiness and health.

It may not be possible to protect young children from every negative racialized experience, but promotion of positive multicultural experiences is attainable. Racial socialization is known to improve socioemotional function, parental involvement in children's schooling, and quality of mother-child interactions.<sup>33</sup> Social and emotional skills are prominent in the scholarship on early childhood education<sup>34</sup> and toxic stress. Parents in this study have demonstrated an important strength in their use of individual-level socioemotional approaches and a significant weakness in employing systemic approaches to early racial socialization. This suggests the need for collaboration with individuals in child-serving institutions and further research in this area. These parental perspectives may inform the development of early childhood racial socialization interventions designed to systematically decrease race-based inequities in education and health.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi: [10.1016/j.acap.2014.11.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2014.11.002).

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