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The Developmental Racial Dialogue Model: A Practical Framework for White Families to Engage in Age-Appropriate Conversations About Race

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Abstract

Racial socialization plays a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of race, yet White families often lack structured frameworks for discussing race. This paper introduces the Developmental Racial Dialogue Model (DRDM), a practical approach to racial socialization for White parents. The model provides a structured method for engaging in race-related conversations with children at different developmental stages, addressing the absence of a culturally specific "talk" like that found in families of color. By breaking down these discussions by age and stage, the DRDM offers White families a practical tool to engage in intentional, developmentally appropriate conversations about race and racism.

Keywords: Racial Socialization; White Families; Developmental Racial Dialogue Model; Anti-Racist Parenting; Age-Appropriate Conversations

Introduction

Children are constantly receiving signals from an overwhelming number of sources covering an immeasurable number of topics. One of the most powerful sources of influence is their parents [1]. For White parents, discussing race can be a complicated topic to cover. Yet, socializing children to race remains an unavoidable process, shaping children's perspectives regardless of intent [2]. Racial socialization is an ongoing process in which messages are both explicitly and implicitly transmitted to children through verbal and nonverbal communication [3]. These messages can be categorized into two dimensions: 1) message expression, encompassing verbal and non-verbal communication, and 2) message intent, distinguishing between deliberate and inadvertent [4]. For decades, most scholarship related to racial socialization has focused on families of color. While research related to racial socialization within White families has increased, gaps remain in understanding the specific race-related messages White parents transmit, particularly concerning anti-racist messaging [5] as well as how White parents communicate White racial identity to their children [6]. Although White youth receive fewer intentional racial socialization messages than youth of color, they are still socialized into viewing Whiteness as the norm and internalizing the racial hierarchy [7]. This socialization perpetuates racial hierarchies across generations unless actively disrupted.

However, White families face significant challenges when discussing race. Many White parents cannot rely on their upbringing to model these conversations [8]. When White parents seek guidance on facilitating race-related discussions with their children, they encounter a notable lack of effective and practical strategies [9]. For instance, while parents may recognize interpersonal racism, they often struggle to connect it to broader societal structures [10]. As a result, many White parents tend to lead by example rather than engaging in direct discussions about race [2]. At the same time, White children rarely discuss racial differences, yet research suggests they are aware of them [11]. This silence from both parents and children reinforces the belief among many White children that conversations about race are unnecessary [12]. Moreover, the absence of direct discussions can allow negative racial messages to shape children's ideologies [13]. Without intentional intervention, these implicit messages continue to influence White children's racial attitudes in ways that maintain racial disparities.

White parents must send explicit messages to their children about race because they are already implicitly reinforcing racial biases [14]. The framework outlined in this paper provides White parents with a structured approach to engaging in explicit, research-based conversations about race given a child's age and/or stage of development. This paper first examines how families of color engage in racial socialization, then explores the realities of race talk in White families and the barriers that prevent these conversations. It then introduces the Developmental Racial Dialogue Model (DRDM) for White racial socialization, detailing its theoretical foundations, practical application, and broader implications for policy and practice. While many theories inform this framework, including Narrative Theory [15], White Racial Identity Development [16], the Social Identity Approach [17], and Critical Race Theory [18]—its specific structural foundation draws from critical literature on intergenerational conversations about sex [19,20]. By outlining the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of this model, this paper provides a comprehensive guide for White parents seeking to engage in meaningful racial socialization. Research on how families navigate discussions of sexual activity offers valuable insights into facilitating similarly difficult

conversations about race within White families [21]. By applying these insights, White parents can engage in racial socialization in ways that parallel the intentional efforts long practiced by families of color.

"The Talk" Among Families of Color

Racially minoritized parents face their own challenges when engaging in race-based discussions. Many parents of color struggle with the confidence needed to have effective Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS) conversations, particularly those focused on preparing children for bias [22]. Despite these challenges, they still have discussions that significantly contrast typical White racial socialization. This distinction presents an opportunity for White families to learn from families of color, who are more likely to recognize the importance of frequent, balanced discussions about race and bias to build resilience [22]. While families of color prioritize these conversations, White parents often do not view them as urgent or necessary, leading to significant differences in their methods of racial socialization.

One notable example of these differing approaches is evident in how White and racially minoritized parents navigate cross-race friendships. White parents often approach these friendships as optional or desirable but not essential. In contrast, African American parents view them as necessary for their children's social and emotional development [23]. This disparity underscores the broader challenges White parents face in recognizing and addressing racial socialization in meaningful ways. Moreover, even when White parents express a willingness or intention to discuss race, this does not always translate into actual conversations with their children [24]. For those who desire to learn about race, racism, and its effects, there remains a persistent tendency to believe that it is not their responsibility to initiate these discussions. This starkly contrasts with parents of color, who often see these discussions as essential to their children's upbringing [25]. While families of color have long recognized the importance of these discussions, recent trends indicate that White parents, although not yet consistently proactive, are beginning to demonstrate a desire to engage in conversations about race [26].

Race Talk Realities in White Families

There is potential for the rate of race-talk conversations among White families to shift. Recent trends suggest that White parents are more open to discussing race [5]. For example, discussions about the deaths of Black Americans killed by police doubled in frequency in 2020, indicating a growing awareness of racial violence. However, the most significant increases in race-related conversations occurred among families of color [6]. While parents of color intensified discussions about racial inequality, White parents' conversations about race remained essentially unchanged. This lack of meaningful change raises questions about the assumption that widespread racial events fundamentally alter White parents' approach to racial socialization, potentially moving them away from color-blind messaging [9]. It also calls into question the extent of White parental motivation to engage in these discussions at all.

Unlike parents of color, White parents often exhibit neither urgency nor deep concern about discussing race. Instead, they tend to be unmotivated or, at times, actively shield their children from these conversations [21]. This reluctance plays a crucial role in how White parents respond to their children's racial attitudes and behaviors. Research by S. P. Perry et al. [13] indicates that parents who are internally motivated to discuss prejudice engage in more frequent conversations about racism. In contrast, those who are externally motivated—concerned about appearing racist—are more likely to avoid the topic altogether [13]. Even when race-related discussions do occur, White parents often hesitate to confront racism directly. For instance, many believe it is "not nice" to label racist remarks as such, reflecting a broader reluctance to address racism head-on [3]. While this hesitancy is problematic in itself, it represents only a fraction of the broader issue—namely, the deep-seated historical and cultural factors that have contributed to the absence of racial conversations in White families.

Why the Conversation is Not Had

Two substantial reasons emerge from the research regarding why race-based conversations are often absent in White families: (1) parents actively avoid the conversation, or (2) they do not perceive the topic as essential or relevant to their children. Each of these explanations will be examined further.

Avoidance

Avoidance, whether intentional or not, is a common strategy White parents use to shield their children from the complexities of discussions about race [27]. The privilege of choosing whether to engage in these conversations [28] is shaped by several recurring factors identified throughout the literature. These include concerns about their children's age and maturity, a desire to protect them, or the assumption that racial issues have already been addressed and resolved by history. Some parents delay the conversation, waiting either for external influences to introduce the topic [25] or for their children to express curiosity, which they interpret as a signal of readiness [29].

Concerns about Age and Maturity

Some White parents believe that young children neither perceive race nor develop biases [14] despite research demonstrating that children begin to recognize skin color and racial labels at an early age [30]. Even when parents acknowledge that their children notice racial differences, they often assume the topic is too complex or mature for their child's cognitive development [14]. However, a critical issue arises: while many parents of younger children feel their children are 'not ready,' they rarely specify how they will determine when their child is prepared for these discussions [31]. Some parents assume that racial conversations will be more effortless when their children become teenagers [6]. Yet, even if parents could identify a definitive age of readiness, by that time, their children may have already developed racial attitudes shaped by external influences [14]. This misalignment between parental perception and children's actual racial awareness underscores the limitations of delaying these conversations.

Shielding Children from Discomfort

Many White parents perceive discussions about race as sensitive or uncomfortable and, therefore, avoid them to prevent distress—for both their children and themselves [27]. This protective instinct is evident in their emphasis on shielding children from potentially upsetting emotions associated with racial discussions [29]. Parents often fear that engaging in these conversations could evoke feelings of fear, anxiety, or guilt in their children [11]. As a result, they may censor discussions about current racial events, such as protests or police brutality, to avoid exposing their children to emotionally charged topics [12]. Many White parents are deeply concerned about their children experiencing guilt over racial injustices [11]. Thus, even when they do address race, they often frame the conversation in ways that distance their family from responsibility or direct engagement with racial issues [32].

Historical Framing Alternative

One-way White parents achieve this distance is by framing race solely as a historical issue. Rather than engaging with contemporary racial dynamics, some parents confine discussions to historical moments such as slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, implicitly suggesting that racial issues are a thing of the past [14]. Similarly, parents may cite examples of racial progress, such as the election of Barack Obama, to reinforce the notion that racial equality has already been achieved [27]. While some parents do emphasize the systemic nature of racism [29], the historical framing allows White families to avoid confronting race as an ongoing reality. In some cases, this perspective aligns with a broader color-evasive ideology in which families perceive themselves as existing 'outside' of race altogether.

Unimportance and Irrelevance

Most people must feel a sense of belonging in order to feel connected to something or someone. Because Whiteness is both normative and isolating, there is a lack of opportunity for connection within and across races for White individuals [33]. This disconnect leaves many White families with the perception that race is a non-issue within their family. White parents argue that racism does not affect their children, and they perceive race as irrelevant in their family's experience [14]. This includes having conversations about systemic issues. Close to 60% of parents choose not to engage with topics like police brutality and White supremacy because the issues feel abstract or unrelated to their immediate lives [6]. Rather than addressing racial differences and their broader societal consequences, many parents believe in teaching their children to treat everyone equally and not see race, often using vague references to God, creation, and equality when racial bias arises [14]. Even those who attempt to send a message of racial equity to their children often fail to do so effectively. White parents intend to convey that race "shouldn't" matter but frequently instead send the message that race "doesn't" matter, ultimately downplaying the necessity of these conversations [34].

It is difficult for White parents to know when and how to engage effectively, especially when they have likely never seen productive models of such conversations themselves. Some avoid the topic unintentionally due to perceived age appropriateness or a desire to protect their children from discomfort. In contrast, others intentionally omit it because they do not find it relevant. What White parents fail to understand is that while racism may not directly affect them, it does not mean it is any less relevant to their children's lives [35]. In reality, racial issues likely impact their children in subtle yet significant ways—if nothing else, by discouraging them from openly discussing what they observe.

Developing a "Race Talk" Framework for White Families

While racial conversations are often absent in White families, as mentioned, this does not indicate a lack of interest or desire to engage in them. There is a growing demand for guidance on discussing race with children. For example, Google searches for "how to talk to kids about race" increased by 400% in June 2020, coinciding with a rise in protest activity, compared to the highest points in the preceding seven years [26]. This surge in interest suggests a heightened awareness among White parents, who are increasingly seeking strategies to navigate these discussions. They recognize the importance of these conversations and are demonstrating a willingness to engage in them [12]. In a qualitative study including 35 families headed by White caregivers, Gillen-O'Neel et al. [29] found that 77% of the parents expressed a desire for their children to actively contribute to dismantling racism.

The need for structured, developmentally appropriate strategies to engage White children in conversations about race is well recognized. However, numerous challenges hinder the development of effective guidance. Many of these issues have been identified by Scott et al. [36]. First, there is a notable lack of empirical evidence supporting much of the advice given to White parents. The authors observed that while the popular press encourages these discussions, the absence of rigorous research raises concerns about the potential consequences of uninformed approaches [36]. They caution that, without proper training, parents may inadvertently introduce misinformation or foster anxiety in their children when discussing racial history and current events. Although these concerns were warranted at the time of publication, the rapid expansion of the White racial socialization (WRS) field has generated empirical evidence that suggests withholding these conversations is equally, if not more, problematic. Avoiding discussions of race in an effort to shield children from discomfort ultimately does more harm than good [37]. Also, recent evidence suggests that WRS is not a one-directional process but rather a reciprocal one, in which both parents and children actively contribute to meaning-making around race.

Furthermore, parents of color—by necessity—engage in difficult conversations about race and safety with their children despite often lacking any formal guidance. In the interest of genuine solidarity, White parents must be willing to do the same, acknowledging that mistakes are inevitable but necessary for growth. White families must also work to establish a generational cycle of racial dialogue, one that mirrors the intentional, ongoing conversations practiced by families of color. By creating this cycle of learning, teaching, and growth, White families can ensure that these conversations about race are not isolated events, but part of a lasting, evolving process passed down through generations.

This growing recognition of necessity underscores the urgency of providing White parents with an evidence-based model to facilitate these discussions effectively. The search for an optimal approach to racial socialization within White families has long been underway [38]. Existing recommendations acknowledge the limitations of current knowledge and highlight the necessity of rethinking traditional approaches. Experts have emphasized the need for innovative, evidence-backed strategies to help White parents understand the significance of racial socialization and equip them with the necessary tools [14]. White parents themselves echo this sentiment. Participants in both exploratory studies [38] and direct practice WRS interventions [40,41,42] consistently express a need for more profound, more practical guidance. This model emerges in direct response to that demand—not merely to address a gap in research but to provide White parents with a structured, anti-racist framework for engaging in developmentally appropriate conversations about race within their homes.

The Model

The gaps in existing research underscore the need for an anti-racist framing of racial conversations that considers child development. While developmental science has examined racism, it has primarily neglected anti-racism [5]. Exploratory studies examining core principles of effective racial socialization have also pointed out this necessity. White parents recognize the importance of being developmentally appropriate when discussing race with their children [28]. In response to this gap, the Developmental Racial Dialogue Model (DRDM) presented here draws upon sex talk developmental strategies as a guiding framework, integrating perspectives from the literature to create an ever-evolving and progressive ladder of thought, worldview, and perspective. Steered by Freire's [43] assertion that liberating education focuses on transformation rather than mere information transfer, this model is designed to move beyond passive knowledge dissemination and cultivate authentic solidarity through direct practice.

White parents are not asked to be experts when incorporating these practices into their lives; instead, they are encouraged to actively engage with their children. Research indicates that certain practices are more effective in fostering meaningful conversations, such as providing children with specific language to discuss race confidently and accurately [14]. However, this does not imply that every strategy will work for every child or that all White parents will convey the information flawlessly. On the contrary, racial socialization is a reciprocal process, requiring White parents to normalize mistakes and practice racial humility as they learn alongside their children [29]. By fostering an environment of continuous learning and adaptation, this model encourages the mutual growth of both parent and child. To illustrate its application, Table 1 outlines the DRDM's developmental stages, detailing the corresponding racial socialization themes, practical implementation strategies, and the literature supporting the necessity of these discussions at each age range.

Developmental Racial Dialogue Model (DRDM)
Approximate Developmental Age: Explicit Racial Socialization Discussion Strategies
Zero – 3 Years Old: Race - Name It, Claim It, and Explain It
Strategic Practices 1. Begin early conversations about race, even if the child isn't asking. Offer simple, clear explanations. 2. Address race when it becomes relevant, and offer opportunities to explore ideas about race and fairness. Relevance to Developmental Stage • Children are beginning to interpret the world around them, and guidance helps shape their understanding (Vittrup, 2018). • White parents typically talk about race in negative contexts, so it is essential to provide positive and informative insights (Michael & Bartoli, 2014).
Three – Five Years Old: Time for Ask and Tell
Strategic Practices 1. Use open-ended questions to invite conversation about race. Model inclusive behavior and vocabulary. 2. Validate their curiosity by explaining complex concepts simply and providing examples. 3. Encourage conversations that acknowledge bias and support empathy. Relevance to Developmental Stage • Three-year-olds grasp racial stereotypes and begin to understand racial identity (Spencer, 1983). • As children enter kindergarten, they are developing racial awareness (Csizmadia & Ispa, 2014). • Children in this range can recognize hierarchies and biases, requiring action to correct and educate (Hazelbaker et al., 2022).
Five - Eight Years Old: Racism Introduced
Strategic Practices 1. Introduce concepts of racism and its effects using age-appropriate language. 2. Share real-life examples of discrimination, making the connection to personal experiences and feelings. 3. Avoid simplifying racism into a binary of "good vs. bad" but explore its complexity. Relevance to Developmental Stage • Children this age can articulate their biases, which helps foster more effective teaching on overcoming prejudice (Aboud & Doyle, 1996).

• Understanding begins to develop that racism goes beyond simply acknowledging prejudice or personal bias, but also about deeper structural issues and systems of inequality (Cooper et al., 2022; Braveman et al., 2022).
Eight – Ten Years Old: Less Questions, More Curiosity
Strategic Practices 1. Allow space for children to reflect and share their thoughts recognizing they will make mistakes. 2. Use discussions to challenge their and others stereotypes and assumptions in the space in which the error occurs. 3. Provide clarity and guidance when children express confusion or conflicting ideas about race by talking with them and not at them. Relevance to Developmental Stage • Children's responses to parental racial identification can be shaped by how they're guided (Csizmadia & Ispa, 2014). • Short, direct responses may be given without prompting deeper reflection if appropriate and may demonstrate the ability to discuss race without intensity, however, certain statements or events may signal the need for more intentional conversations (Perry et al., 2021).
Ten to Thirteen Years Old: What Makes an Effective Ally
Strategic Practices 1. Engage children in discussions about privilege, fairness, and empathy. Use real-world examples to explore different perspectives. 2. Encourage critical thinking and challenge them to consider the broader societal impact of their actions. 3. Guide them in taking action that reflects genuine support for racial justice, rather than superficial gestures. Relevance to Developmental Stage • At this age, children can develop a moral framework to understand White privilege and structural inequality at a deeper level (Hazelbaker et al., 2022). • White youth may not recognize their privilege unless prompted by societal discussions (Smalls Glover et al., 2022). • Effective allyship starts with understanding of personal moral responsibility and broader social inequality (Levy, 2017).
Thirteen – Eighteen Years Old: The Levels & Systems Talk
Strategic Practices 1. Deepen discussions on systemic racism, incorporating real-world examples of policies, laws, and societal structures. 2. Help them connect the dots between prejudice they see and the broader systems that perpetuate inequality. 3. Encourage activism and critical engagement with social justice issues. Relevance to Developmental Stage • Adolescence is a critical period for understanding how racism operates beyond individual biases (Tatum, 2017). • Parents often focus on teaching kindness and friendship rather than addressing racial policies, leaving gaps in understanding (Heberle et al., 2021). • Systemic racism is pervasive in policies and practices, and youth need to understand it as more than just individual prejudice (Braveman et al., 2022).
Eighteen + Years Old: Open Up
Strategic Practices 1. Encourage ongoing self-reflection about identity and privilege. Share diverse perspectives and engage in deeper self-exploration. 2. Focus on long-term, sustainable engagement with racial justice rather than immediate solutions to perceived problems. 3. Address the complexities of being White in a diverse society, encouraging ownership of the role they play in racial issues. Relevance to Developmental Stage • Quick fixes and oversimplifications may hinder deeper understanding of complex racial dynamics (Freeman et al., 2022). • White racial identity autonomy is a continuous process of growth and learning, rather than an endpoint (Helms, 1990).

Table 1: Developmental Racial Dialogue Model (DRDM).

DRDM aims to offer a direct strategy for White parents that extends beyond academic discourse and creates tangible change within White families. Historically, many White parents have failed to engage in explicit conversations about race, instead relying on implicit socialization to communicate racial norms and values [44,45]. However, White parents cannot assume that their children automatically understand their beliefs and values. Research emphasizes that values must be explicitly verbalized rather than left unspoken to ensure meaningful transmission [27]. DRDM addresses this challenge by providing direct strategies to eliminate ambiguity and operationalize explicit racial socialization. Beyond individual households, its structured approach has broader implications at multiple levels, contributing to a more significant cultural shift toward anti-racist practices.

Potential Implications for Policy and Practice

DRDM addresses the need for systemic change in education and training. While parental socialization provides the most frequent and earliest opportunity to shape children's racial understanding, equipping them with age-appropriate lessons that can be extended into schools, extracurricular programs, community organizations, and other youth-centered settings enhances its potential to effect racial socialization efforts outside the home [27]. Similar to encouraging White parents to confront their own biases and mistakes related to racism, it is equally vital for White adult leaders working with children—whether in schools, community programs, or other settings—to engage in similar self-reflection. These leaders play a critical role in racial socialization. By applying the methods outlined in DRDM, they can reinforce and extend the racial socialization efforts that begin at home, contributing to a more cohesive and systemic approach to shaping children's understanding of race.

DRDM also offers practice and research recommendations for the future. As with many other diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks, longitudinal studies have yet to demonstrate or refute the model's efficacy. Tracking DRDM's implementation in individual family practices or across large-scale studies could shift the focus from superficial interventions to more profound, systemic changes. Specifically, attention should be given to the rate and depth of conversations White parents are having with their children. To ensure the DRDM's impact, utilizing validated measurement tools to assess progress and effectiveness in racial socialization practices is essential [46].

This approach allows for ongoing discussion and refinement, incorporating feedback and child participation to continuously improve and adapt the model.

Conclusion

Anti-racism is an active choice that White parents must make for themselves and their families [10]. This underscores the importance of racial socialization, but not just any form. While both subtle and overt forms of racial socialization play a crucial role in shaping children's understanding of race [2], direct expressions of messaging ensure that a child does not simply inherit their parents' beliefs without critically engaging with them or understanding how to emulate them. Thus, the DRDM challenges the assertion that there is no direct framework available to guide White parents' discussions, enabling these conversations to transition from taboo to a more normative practice within the family.

White individuals often believe that anti-racist education should be the responsibility of those living and working in diverse environments rather than a universal commitment for all [47]. The DRDM transcends performative allyship, advocating authenticity and solidarity through direct, actionable practices. Rather than striving for perfection, whether engaging in these conversations starting from birth or later in life, White parents should model what taking ownership of mistakes looks like, demonstrating a commitment to growth and recognizing the role of community in fostering ongoing progress in anti-racist parenting. Community support is essential for White parents engaging in anti-racist parenting, as it provides guidance, accountability, and shared learning experiences [48].

The DRDM is based on the notion that no one in the family should be learning alone, and similarly, no family should face these challenges in isolation. Therefore, the model is designed to be shared and disseminated, not for professional accolades but for practical implementation in times of uncertainty.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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