

It's impossible to control all the factors that shape children's attitudes toward minorities, but positive experiences can counteract negative influences.

INDIRECT INFLUENCES ON CHILDREN'S RACIAL ATTITUDES

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In *South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein suggest that children learn racial prejudice from adults: "You've got to be taught to hate and fear . . . before you're six or seven or eight."

That view—that young children are not aware of racial differences unless they are taught to be—is fairly common. In a study I conducted recently (Morris, 1979) early childhood teachers said they think most young children are eager to accept any person regardless of race or nationality, and that negative attitudes are caused by parents.

The perceptions expressed in the song and by the teachers suggest that young children's attitudes toward the racially different are innately positive; that as long as adults do not actively indoctrinate racist attitudes children will grow up without prejudice.

It is true that many children are taught to dislike, mistrust, reject, or stereotype members of racial groups, but evidence from many cultures indicates that children absorb "meanings" about racial diversity even if those meanings are never presented directly.

All attitudes are learned, developed, and organized through experience. Each attitude has a cognitive component, what the individual believes; an affective component, what the individual likes or dislikes; and an action tendency component, the readiness of the individual to respond or react (Halloran, 1967). Direct experiences, observations, and internalization of concepts inherent in the environment are powerful determinants of children's attitudes and behaviors.

Cross-cultural research on the development of attitudes toward racial characteristics has demonstrated that

children positively evaluate objects and people on the basis of the colors black and white.

In a comprehensive study of the affective meanings of color names in 23 language cultures in Europe, Asia, and the Americas Adams and Osgood (1973) found that young children consistently rated white positively and black negatively. Williams, Boswell, and Best (1975) further substantiated that young children tend to view white as good and black as bad. Similar findings were reported by Best, Naylor and Williams (1975) from their research with French and Italian children.

Languages are full of symbolisms, color connotations, analogies, and similes which transmit dynamic messages. In many cultures white is associated with goodness and purity, black with evil and death. We refer to the black sheep of the family, black and ominous clouds, or calamitous events as in blackball or blacklist. We speak of "black as sin" and "pure as the driven (white) snow." Young children's internalization of these meanings was established in several studies.

When Stabler and Jordan (1971) asked black and white pre-schoolers to identify which objects were contained in black and white boxes, their subjects generally guessed the "good" objects for the white box and the "bad" objects for the black box. Stabler, Johnson and Jordan (1971) asked pre-schoolers to identify which of talking black and white boxes made positive and negative statements. Again, the color of the boxes indicated good and bad as the children associated positive statements with the white box and negative ones with the black box.

Porter (1971) conducted a study in which responses to specific questions, spontaneous verbalizations, and awareness indices were used to evaluate the racial attitudes of three- to five-year-old children. She found that white children made more positive comments and less negative comments about their own skin color than black children and that when whites spoke about their own color in affect-laden terms the reference was favorable while black subjects tended to be less favorable about theirs.

During the early years children be-

come increasingly aware of the ways people differ, especially in appearance. Williams and Morland (1976) suggest that "they [children] are capable of discriminating among stimuli which adults employ for racial classification." The foundations of prejudice are laid, often without children's awareness.

The growth of logic and the ability to place objects and things into categories also enable children to classify people according to racial categories. Early educational experiences include a preponderance of activities to help children develop concepts. Young children are presented with activities in which they must discern how one object or animal is like another but unlike a third, identify similarities and differences in objects, and discover patterns. Once such an understanding is gained and valued, the child may apply the same process in reacting to people. My own interactions with children demonstrate how this might happen.

My neighbor, Les, once brought his four-year-old granddaughter, Crystal, to visit me. Crystal responded reluctantly to me at first but became quite conversant as she recalled her favorite story. As my visitors prepared to leave I said, "Thank you for coming to see me, Crystal. Will you give me a hug?" Her answer was an unhesitant "No." "Okay," I said. "Perhaps we can be friends when we see each other again." Crystal said good-bye.

The following day I told Les that I regretted "setting Crystal up" by asking for a hug. I was two times a stranger to her—it was her first encounter with me and her first close encounter with a black person. My experiences with young children tell me that neither situation is very trustful. Crystal's response when her grandfather asked why she hadn't given me a hug was, "I don't hug black people." "Why?" "Because they are bad on television." This four-year-old had arrived at an obvious conclusion.

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Consider the tendency of young children to fear unfamiliar or unusual situations. "Stranger anxiety" is common among the very young. Faces or behaviors that are different from those with whom a child normally associates can be sources of anxiety. The attitudes of nurturing adults affect the child's developing attitudes.

The process through which the child reacts but can be helped to accept discrepant schemata was apparent when a new colleague brought his fifteen-month old son to meet me. Matthew was encouraged to be friendly but he drew away from me. His face showed signs of apprehension. I retreated, speaking from a distance. On his second visit to my office Matthew clung tightly to his father, who was embarrassed by the behavior of his usually outgoing son. Eventually Matthew was transferred to my arms with his face away from me. From the window we watched squirrels and talked of many things. He was absolutely content! It was only after he was returned to his father that Matthew realized it was I who had held him. On subsequent visits to my office Matthew and I developed a friendship. In each interaction we shared experiences, particularly those in which Matthew was the star. Our visits extended to our homes. Within a short time Matthew and I were having spontaneous conversations. He became comfortable in my office. At home his parents were delighted when he engaged in quite a conversation with a black repairman.

Matthew's story illustrates the process by which children use associations to draw conclusions. It also demonstrates the impact of positive exposure. To a great extent, the attitudes that children develop toward racial diversity can result from logical conclusions and obvious explanations. Assumptions that negative attitudes result solely from adult teaching must be rejected and the teaching that occurs from indirect influences acknowledged.

The minds of young children are sufficiently receptive to positive teaching which corrects erroneous conclusions and explanations, stereotypes, and negative impressions. The effects of positive experiences on the development of attitudes toward racial diversity has been clearly demonstrated by Campbell and others (1958), Litcher and Johnson (1969), and Best



and others (1975). In 1971 Andrews and White used a Black Studies curriculum with young black and white children in different settings. White reported a significant positive change in the attitudes of Whites towards Blacks; Andrews' results indicated significant positive modification of the self-concepts of young black children. Similar results have been reported by both Yawkey (1973) and Blackwell (1976).

Experiences that promote the acquisition of positive concepts of racial diversity must be provided in the early years. Early childhood teachers have a vital responsibility and unparalleled opportunities because of their positions as significant adults in the lives of children. Unless the young have positive experiences they can become victims of indirect influences which can translate into rigid prejudices. ■

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