

# White parents teach their children to be colorblind. Here's why that's bad for everyone.

By **Megan R. Underhill**

October 5



[About US](#) is a new initiative by The Washington Post to cover issues of identity in the United States. [Sign up for the newsletter.](#)

How do white parents teach their children about race and racism? I asked myself this question a few years ago when in [survey](#) after [survey](#), I noticed that black people cited race and racial discrimination as factors that shaped their life experiences and outcomes, while many white people downplayed the significance of race and racism. As an academic, I was troubled by how many white respondents minimized racism in contemporary society, despite a vast body of scholarship showing persistent racial inequality in the areas of [income](#), [wealth](#) and [homeownership](#) — among others.



To make sense of this discrepancy, I've spent the past few years researching how white people think about race and racism and more specifically, how white parents verbally and nonverbally communicate racial messages to their children. What I learned was that white parents often refrain from speaking with their children about race, racism and racial inequality. If racial discussions do occur they are characterized by a colorblind rhetoric. White parents adopt these practices because they believe it will help them raise a non-racist child. From a sociological perspective though, white parents' racial messages may do more harm than good.

Understanding how white parents teach their children about race is important because whites remain the numerical majority in the United States. What is more, they wield significant [political](#), [economic](#) and social power. If racial equality is to be achieved, it will require white recognition that racism continues and white support of policies and initiatives designed to redress past and present racial inequities. As the primary caretakers of white children, white parents play an important role in this process.

Despite this, white people are seldom the subject of research on racial socialization, though there is a robust body of scholarship that examines how parents of color teach their children about race and racism. From the perspective of some [researchers](#), this silence reflects society's view that white people "don't have race" -- that race refers exclusively to people of color.

Among the 52 white parents who participated in my 2014-15 study, most also viewed themselves and their children as race-less. This was best evidenced when I asked parents if they spoke with their children about being white. Without fail, parents responded with an expression of shocked dismay, and then emphatically stated, "No. What is there to say?" White

parents' surprised responses underscore how whiteness and white privilege are often invisible to whites.

Whites, like people of color, are racialized — meaning that they grow up learning about race and what it means to be white from a variety of sources: their schools, neighborhoods, peer groups and families, among others. But white parents communicate very different messages about race than parents of color.

In contrast to the silence many white parents adopt with respect to their own racial identity, parents of color proactively speak with their children about their racial identity. The goal of these discussions is to instill in their children a [sense of racial pride](#) because parents of color understand that their children will seldom be presented with positive or celebratory imagery of their racial group growing up. Instead they will be confronted with images that position African Americans as [criminals](#), Asians as [perpetual foreigners](#) and Latinos as [illegal immigrants](#).

Parents of color also proactively speak with their children about racism. Referred to informally as “[The Talk](#),” parents of color broach these conversations with their children as a protective measure, to prepare them for future acts of discrimination. We see this protective racial logic in results from a [survey](#) of 104 black parents conducted after the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Parents said they wished they could avoid having upsetting conversations with their children about race, but they feared doing so put their children at risk of bodily harm. In the wake of highly publicized incidents of police violence toward [young males of color](#), these [conversations](#) increasingly also focus on how to safely negotiate interactions with the police.

Among the white parents I interviewed, the majority of whom were middle class, parents expressed a desire to raise non-racist white children. Most felt the best way to achieve that goal was to avoid speaking with their children about race, racism and racial inequality — past or present.

For example, shortly after I began my research in 2014, Michael Brown, an African American teenager, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo. News of Brown's death and the protests that followed were featured prominently in mainstream news and social media. [Despite this, almost none of the parents I interviewed spoke with their children about the incident, or the ensuing protests.](#) They also remained

silent about the topic of police violence toward African Americans. When I asked parents why, many said they didn't want to "upset" their children. Others noted that the subject didn't "relate" to their (white) family's life. When viewed in relation to the conversations of parents of color, white parents' silence about these issues is a luxury that reinforces their racial privilege — in part by reinforcing the idea that whites exist "outside" of racial matters.

Other [research](#) corroborates this finding: Most white parents who speak with their children about race adopt a colorblind rhetoric, telling their children that people may "look different" but that "everyone is the same." They also emphasize the importance of treating "everyone the same." While these kinds of statements appear laudatory because they advance a racially egalitarian message, many sociologists point to what these statements ignore — enduring systems of stratification that privilege whites and disadvantage people of color.

Like [many white Americans](#), these white parents understand racism as a product of discriminatory thinking or overt, individual acts of racism rather than as a structure of inequality in which racism is embedded within the policies and procedures of American institutions and organizations. This focus on individual thoughts and actions diverts attention away from how race is embedded in the social structure of the United States and the historical and contemporary policies that have secured white advantage. Thus, what escapes white understandings of race and racism is that white privilege exists irrespective of whether whites believe that they as *individuals* have taken active steps to discriminate against or exclude people of color. [Whiteness exists as a system of power](#).

Racial discussions, or the lack thereof, are not the only way that affluent and middle-class white parents teach their children about race. White parents also communicate important racial messages to their children nonverbally. As sociologist Margaret Hagerman argues in her new book, "[White Kids](#)," white parents' decision about the best neighborhood to raise a family or enroll their children in school shapes the social context in which white children develop an understanding about members of their own racial group and members of outside racial groups.

[Most white Americans grow up in majority white environments where they have few neighbors, classmates or friends of color](#). These mono-racial

environments preclude whites from seeing or understanding how race positively or negatively influences people's social environments or their life chances. It also hinders whites from developing an awareness of themselves as racialized beings and as members of a privileged racial group.

As research demonstrates, [identity development is relational](#). That means people develop an awareness of themselves as a member of a particular group when they spend time around people whom they perceive as being different from them. Hence, if a white person grows up in a mono-racial environment, it is unlikely that they will accord much attention to race. Instead, they will focus on the factors that differentiate themselves and their families from other members of their community — their class status, political affiliation or religion. Over time, race will fade from their view as a meaningful social identity for themselves and others.

When we reflect on the majority white environments in which most white parents raise their children, combined with the color-mute or colorblind messages they relay about race — whites' minimization of racism and racial discrimination is less surprising.

Here's what's important to remember: White parents have a powerful role to play in facilitating racial change. However, if racial change is to be achieved, it will require that *all* Americans recognize that they must be intentional parents when it comes to race. For white parents, this means admitting that they, as white people, are deeply implicated in racial matters. And that they, as white people, have secured advantages that people of color don't possess. To truly achieve racial equality, white people will need to come to terms with their privileged racial position in society. This awareness won't happen by avoiding racial discussions, or discounting empirical evidence highlighting racial disparities. It will only occur when whites expand the scope of their understanding about race and racism. White people aren't "outside" of race — they're at the top of the racial hierarchy.