



# Society for Research in Child Development

## Office for Policy and Communications

1313 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20005

OFFICE: (202) 289-7905 • FAX: (202) 289-4203

### **PRESS RELEASE**

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#### Contact Information:

Andrea Browning

Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

(202) 289-7905

abrowning@srcd.org

### **Teaching About Racism Helps Children Value Fairness**

Students in schools across the United States learn about European Americans' history of racism toward African Americans, but very little research has examined the effect of these lessons. The first study to look at white and African American children's cognitive and emotional responses to learning about historical racism has found that teaching children about racism makes them more aware of historical realities and more likely to value racial fairness.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin and State University of New York at Stony Brook, appears in the November/December 2007 issue of the journal *Child Development*.

To examine the consequences for white and African American children of learning about historical racism, the researchers presented biographical lessons about 12 historical figures (6 African American and 6 European American) to two groups of children aged 6 to 11. The first group included 48 white children; the second group included 69 African American children.

For each group of children, some of the lessons provided information about racism, such as racially biased hiring practices and segregation, experienced by African American figures, while others left out this information. For example, some children learned about baseball legend Jackie Robinson in lessons that highlighted the racial discrimination he faced, while others heard the lesson without the information on the discrimination. After the lessons, the children were interviewed about their reactions, including guilt, defensiveness, and anger, and their racial attitudes.

White children whose lessons included information about racism had more positive and less negative attitudes toward African Americans than their peers who were taught the lessons without the prejudice component. This finding suggests that learning about racism is beneficial for white children because it promotes more positive and less negative views of African Americans.

White children whose lessons included the information on discrimination also reported more valuing of racial fairness, showed more defensiveness, had more racial guilt (for those over age 7), and were less likely to accept stereotypic views about African Americans than their peers for whom the discrimination information was omitted.

By contrast, African American children who learned about racism and African American children who heard similar lessons that omitted that information did not differ in their racial attitudes toward African Americans or European Americans. This could be because these children had prior knowledge about the historical figures and how they were affected by racism.

Instead, both types of lessons had positive effects on African American children's racial attitudes, especially among younger children. African American children who heard the biographies with the discrimination component enjoyed the lessons and reported valuing racial fairness more than their peers who did not hear about the racism. This indicates that teaching African American children about racism has benefits, apart from changes in racial attitudes.

"On the basis of this research, we concluded that discussions about historical racism are beneficial to African American and white elementary school-aged children," according to Julie Milligan Hughes, a doctoral candidate at the University of Texas at Austin and the study's lead author. Hughes notes, however, that the lessons did not present information about the most violent and virulent forms of racial prejudice (e.g., lynching) and took

place in racially homogeneous settings. “Additional work on the topic is needed so that we know how best to present to children some of the most abhorrent facts about U.S. history and human behavior.”

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 78, Issue 6, *Consequences of Learning About Historical Racism Among European American and African American Children* by Hughes, JM, and Bigler, RS (University of Texas at Austin), and Levy, SR (State University of New York at Stony Brook). Copyright 2007 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.