



# Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

750 First St., NE • Washington, DC 20002-4242

OFFICE: (202) 336-5926 • FAX: (202) 336-6184

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Contact Information:

Andrea Browning  
Society for Research in Child Development  
Office for Policy and Communications  
(202) 336-5926  
abrowning@srcd.org

## **Children's Racial Attitudes May be Related to Ethnic Composition of their School**

Understanding the emergence of and development of attitudes about race and ethnicity is a critical step in combating prejudice and racism. Now a study published in the September/October issue of the journal *Child Development* finds that white children attending primarily white schools are more likely to attribute negative intentions to African-American children than children enrolled in more diverse school settings. They were also less likely to think two children of different races could be friends if the child who was perceived to be doing something "bad" was black.

Researchers from the University of Maryland showed picture cards depicting ambiguous yet common situations in school settings, such as a child possibly stealing, cheating on a test, not sharing toys or pushing a child off the swing. For instance, in the swing scenario, one child is standing behind a swing and another lies on the ground in front of the swing looking hurt. However, it's not clear if the standing child pushed the other off the swing or if the child fell by accident.

Each picture had two versions: in one, the white child was the potential transgressor; in the other, the African-American child was the potential transgressor.

The researchers showed the cards to 138 six- and nine-year-old children in primarily white schools and interviewed the children about their interpretations of the situations. The children were also asked if they thought the two characters in the situation could be friends. Children were also interviewed about their contact with children from other ethnic backgrounds in school and their neighborhood.

"These findings are quite novel since no previous research has explicitly investigated the relationship between the ethnic diversity of children's social experiences and their attributions of intentions in familiar, everyday interracial situations," said study co-author Melanie Killen, Ph.D., professor of human development. "Nor has any previous study found relationships between children's social experiences and their expectations of cross-race friendship potential using ambiguous pictures scenarios."

Importantly, a previous study conducted by the authors using the exact same methodology found very little evidence of racial bias in attributions of intentions in 6- and 9-year-old white, African-American, Asian-American and Latino children attending more

ethnically diverse schools. Moreover, minority children were more likely than white children overall to be optimistic about the potential for friendships between peers of other races.

“These findings inform our knowledge about the role that contact with members of different ethnic and racial groups plays in children’s intergroup attitudes,” said Dr. Killen. “This contact, under the right conditions, can foster positive attitudes towards ‘outgroup’ members.”

The findings have significant policy implications for school desegregation and curriculum programs, said Dr. Killen. “Educational programs should be designed to facilitate inclusive attitudes among all children. Understanding these phenomena will provide the foundation for promoting positive racial and ethnic attitudes in both children and adults.

Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 5, *Intergroup Attitudes of European American Children Attending Ethnically Homogeneous Schools* by McGlothlin H and Killen M (University of Maryland). Copyright 2006. The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

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