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The Toddler of Color in Daycare

by Joy Viveros

What happens to the self-concept of the toddler of color in daycare? How does (s)he learn her race and how (s)he fits in to her culture's matrix stereotypes? As one of the few Third World parents at my son's day care center and a member of a racially diverse family, I have spent a great deal of time attending to how racism manifests in America. I have also experienced and witnessed a variety of ethnic and gender stereotyping directed at loved ones. I believe that it is purposeless to discuss racial prejudice in the abstract. Reasonable people are "against prejudice," and popular mythology suggests we as nation have moved beyond it. None of this serves to challenge inherited biases where they survive in us. Therefore, let us abandon the etiquette of the nonspecific pronoun, and set about the difficult work hand - let's talk about you.

Am I Racist?

Perhaps you have asked yourself if you are racist. If you have, I applaud your desire to explore this issue. I also suggest the question is not a productive one. Given the historical and cultural context into which we as Americans have been exposed throughout our lifetimes, the chances are extremely slim that any of us is not. Further, this question implies an all-or-nothing search. If after a search of your soul you determine that you are not in any way racist, then you may feel yourself to be under no obligation to act - but action is always necessary to combat racism in the world. For these reasons I suggest a better question to ask yourself is "In what ways am I racist?" or, "What prejudice do I feel and how is it manifest?" You answers will be unique, but rest assured, you are not alone in having absorbed attitudes about people of color (even if you are one yourself) that you wish you didn't have. Below are some of the things I have noticed in the various daycare facilities my son has attended as well as in the world at large. I hope you will find them helpful as a guideline in exploring you own attitudes and behavior towards toddlers of color.

What Is This Child's Upper Limit?

When interacting with children of color, I would suggest some questions to ask yourself. Do you have any preconceived inklings about how far a child of color can or will go in her or his life? Do you really see the child as a potential future CEO, astronaut, pediatrician, brain surgeon, Supreme Court Judge, Senator, orchestra conductor, author, ambassador? Are there any differences in your knee-jerk reaction about what this child can or will achieve compared with White children? If there are differences, be aware that this information is communicated in a hundred subtle ways, even to toddlers. It is conveyed, for example, in the kinds of images in children's literature you are tolerant about. (If it doesn't bother you when a book for toddlers portrays nothing but White males achieving, ask yourself why.) It is also conveyed in how you classify the child's behavior and therefore how you react to it.

Interpreting Behavior

The upper limit you imagine for a child affects how you interpret that child's behavior. For example, do you see aggressive behavior in a child of color as showing evidence of potential to be a great lawyer or a great street thug? If the truth is the latter, be aware your reaction to that child helps create the reality. Think about the qualities you have come to associate with certain races and genders. For example, your stereotypes about Black females may be radically different from your stereotypes about Black males. The same applies to Latino, Asian and Native American males and females. Children are vulnerable to your prejudices. You cannot hide them. The fact that toddlers do not understand the rationalizations we use to justify subtle disparate treatment does not mean the impact of our attitudes will not be felt.

Affection and Censoring

One of the most striking things I have noticed with respect to my son and other children is a disparate enforcement of rules. Countless times I have noticed individuals censoring non-White children more rapidly, frequently, and forcefully than they do the same infractions by White children. Perhaps I sound paranoid here. The differential in censorship levels is not necessarily crude and overt. The person applying these different standards may not even be aware of the discrimination. Or she/he may be aware of it and not want to dwell on it. Unfortunately, the toddler feels it, experiences it, incorporates it into his levels of self-esteem, self-worth and trust.

Just as children experience different standards and judgments, so too do they differ in the affection they receive. While White children may be effortlessly praised, cuddled, hugged, kissed, and admired, children of color are often offered a less appetizing menu. Many White adults are unaccustomed to being around children of color. It may be difficult for them to touch and cuddle a child of color. They may end up doing what so many parents do: telling their child to greet, hug, or otherwise respond to a child of color when they themselves do not. I would venture that no child is fooled. Toddlers look to their parents for direction about what is and is not safe in the world. If children are to grow up truly believing that

"'they' are the same as us," then we have no choice but to treat "them" with the same levels of affection and approval. Not only will children otherwise not believe you, but they will inherit prejudices. In transmitting these messages, we are not only insuring the continuity of the madness of the world we were born into but we are crippling our children from being free emotionally.

Praise

Praise too, can be loaded. When you tell a girl that she is pretty, pretty, pretty rather than smart, competent and articulate, she understands something about what she is allowed to be. My son is often told by White adults that he dresses "sharp." I have never heard this adjective applied to a White child. In fact, my son is complimented in an entirely different way than are well-dressed White children. I suggest that Black men in our society are often viewed as slick, sharp, hip, cool, etc. All these are stereotypes which may or may not apply to a given Black man (or any other man for that matter), but that have nothing to do with my toddler. No child needs to receive a message that his/her qualities and attributes are interpreted according to a formula. What I wish to convey is that stereotypes include a number of so-called admirable qualities or traits. If you think of people of color in terms of these stereotypes, you will pigeonhole their good qualities into these preconceived boxes. This does the child no good, for then you have failed to see the child.

Physical Differences

Noticing a child's physical differences can build or undermine esteem depending on the beliefs of the adult commenting on them. It is willful blindness to ignore the truth that in our society, light skin ranks higher than dark, both straight and curly hair higher than kinky, and round eyes higher than elliptical. Of course, all of these traits are beautiful in their own right. But often when we notice children's physical characteristics we are conveying to them - without meaning to - the place in the social hierarchy determined by these traits. What we mean matters more than what we say. If even a small piece of you is conveying to the child the social rank accorded by those physical characteristics, ¬then I suggest you comment on something else such as asking how he feels or noting how well she accomplishes a task.

Relating

From the time my son was in early infancy, droves of White people have insisted that he "Give them five." Perhaps I don't need to tell you that I deeply resent this. I resent that people apparently offer my beautiful child a single narrow path demanding that even in infancy and toddlerhood he must be spoken to in a dialect he "can understand." I further feel that inducing my son into Black culture is the responsibility of Black males and females and that it is not properly the place of non-Blacks to attempt to educate my son in these matters. It is entirely possible that not every mother of a child of color agrees with me. But I suggest that you can feel entirely certain and comfortable in your actions toward a child of color if you treat her or him with the same manners and respect you would accord any child. Since all children need respect, approval and recognition of their individual strengths, qualities, accomplishments and struggles, truly all else is extraneous.

I have focused here on my child's experiences because I am familiar with them, not because I value them more than those of any other child of color. Because racism is a subtle thing, oftentimes only the parents involved have catalogued how it hurts their children. I hope you will keep your heart open to this information. If you have seen yourself in this article, then I thank you for your willingness to do so. Whenever your courage fails, think of the children who lack the means to tell where it hurts or why.

Joy Viveros is a storyteller working towards her doctorate in English at UC Berkeley. Her poetry has appeared in the San Francisco Bay Guardian and Essence Magazine. Her favorite published work, however, is her son, Nesaru.