



How We Address Race in the Great First Eight Curriculum

Great First Eight wants all children to feel safe and accepted in childcare and school settings. You may remember from your own education—or from experiences since then—children being teased, bullied, or mistreated in school based on their race. Race is not biological—it is actually an idea that people made up, but it has come to have deep consequences that negatively impact children, schools, and society.ⁱ Great First Eight uses research findings to work against unfair practices in age-appropriate ways. The made-up idea of race and the real consequences that come from that idea can be challenging for adults to understand and talk about. There are also many different perspectives on how race should be addressed with children in educational settings. Great First Eight believes that early childhood curriculum content should be based on child-development research.ⁱⁱ

The idea of race is typically associated with differences we can see in physical features, such as skin color, hair texture, and face shape.ⁱⁱⁱ Babies notice and respond to the differences they see in people long before they have an understanding of race as a concept.^{iv} It is important for early educators and caregivers to offer guidance to infants as they notice differences and begin to connect these differences with meaning.^v This development continues as toddlers start to understand themselves as unique individuals.^{vi} Not only do they notice differences in others, but toddlers also begin to connect specific physical features as being “like me” or “not like me”.^{vii} By the preschool years, children start to connect value to the differences they notice, and they may start to think of people as good or bad, nice or mean, pretty or ugly based on their racial features.^{viii} Preschoolers also begin to think about race as they choose playmates and toys.^{ix}

All of this development is expected and can be healthy. Unfortunately, children are bombarded with social messages that spread the false idea that some races or racial features are better than others. These messages can influence how young children think about racial similarities and differences. The consequences of these messages expand in the early elementary years as children begin to consider their own ethnic-racial^x identities while also developing an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to promoting justice.^{xi}

The Great First Eight Curriculum seeks to help teachers incorporate race in research-informed, age-appropriate ways that contribute to the positive development of young children.^{xii, xiii} Some key points of our approach:

- We **do not** teach critical race theory, as it is an academic theory that is not appropriate for children in the birth-through-age-eight years.
- We **do** teach children to treat others with dignity and respect and to not stand by when others are mistreated.
- We **do not** shy away from noticing differences. Instead, we use the vocabulary of similarities and differences to call attention to them in neutral and affirming ways.
- We **do** strive to ensure that, collectively, the books, materials, and photographs we feature in Great First Eight include a wide diversity of ethnic-racial representation, avoid reinforcing ethnic-racial stereotypes, and respect families’ ethnic-racial identities, cultures, and traditions.
- We **do not** isolate race as the only element of diversity. Instead, we elevate many aspects of diversity, including gender, language, culture, family structure, and ability.
- We **do** respect the fact that individuals and families get to name their racial and ethnic identities and come to their own understanding of ethnic-racial identity, and we engage families as we help children foster their own identity development.

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