

“Finally! Jennifer Harvey provides a long-awaited and much-needed answer to a question often posed by white antiracist allies: How do we raise our children to be allies in the struggle against racism? *Raising White Kids* provides practical advice and examples for parents that are well-grounded in the scholarship on racial identity and racial socialization. It would be a mistake, however, to think that this book is only for parents of white children. It is a critical resource for educators whose efforts to teach about racial oppression are routinely hampered by the wide knowledge gap between white students and students of color. Harvey helps faculty to understand why white students often need intense remediation around issues of race and racism, and provides both faculty and students with language and tools to grapple with the culture shock that comes with learning about racism for the first time.”

—Chanequa Walker-Barnes, PhD, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, McAfee School of Theology

“*Raising White Kids* asks parents to reconsider the conventional yet failed strategies of promoting colorblindness and valuing diversity (without addressing whiteness), which prove inadequate in the face of our racial crisis by ignoring or white-washing racial difference. Instead, Harvey proposes a ‘race-conscious’ approach to raising white children that helps children not only to perceive racism in ways a colorblind approach veils but also to contest racism through directly engaging with children about race and racial injustice—early and often. Combining research on child development with her extensive scholarship on racial formation and practices of antiracism, Harvey has written an easily readable book full of examples and concrete practices that helps parents give their children the tools they need to develop a healthy white racial identity. *Raising White Kids* is urgent, important, and practical reading for anyone involved in the rearing of white children.”

—Dr. Kristopher Norris, Visiting Distinguished Professor of Public Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC.

FOREWORD BY TIM WISE

Author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*

RAISING WHITE KIDS

BRINGING UP CHILDREN
IN A RACIALLY UNJUST AMERICA

JENNIFER HARVEY

ABINGDON PRESS
NASHVILLE

Ch. 5

Our Bodies in Racial Scripts

During a three-day workshop I facilitated with a large group of justice-committed Christians, folks had expressed grief and frustration. They'd wrestled hard with the level of racial alienation, turmoil, and violence in the United States still existing this far past the civil rights movement of the 1960s and with what this meant for their role in justice movements. During our last discussion, a white woman stood up. She cried as she spoke. "I feel like such a failure. My husband and I wanted our kids' lives to be different than ours. We intentionally put them in a diverse school, and when they were little they had friends of all different races. But you know what? The older they got, the whiter their group of friends got. And we were like, 'Oh my god! Why is this happening?' We couldn't figure out what was going on and certainly didn't know what to do about it. And I feel like we really just failed. For all our hopes, their worlds became as white as ours."

It would be difficult to overstate the frequency with which I've heard disclosures like this. This mother's words spoke

aloud a real, complex, and sometimes painful layer of our collective racial experience. Many adults who believe in justice and equality and who yearn for sustainable multiracial community in our own lives and in the lives of our children have found our hopes dashed for reasons we sometimes can't understand.

It matters what we teach our children to think with their minds. It matters what we tell them to hold as true in their hearts. And, of course, what our minds and hearts believe informs the ways we act and move.

But race is not primarily about ideas or beliefs. In fact, one serious misunderstanding perpetuated by color-blind approaches to race is the idea that getting white people to change our views of people of color is what we should mostly be worried about. The commonsense use of *racism* in our public dialogues doubles down on this inaccurate perception. It's regularly used in ways that imply racism is primarily about individual biases.

If these perspectives on race and racism were accurate, ensuring that white children experience robustly diverse environments where they can make friendships across racial lines early in life would go a long way to eroding injustice. The logic would be impeccable.

But these perspectives on race and racism are very incomplete. Our commonsense definition of racism and our heavy use of color-blindness, turn our attention away from structural racism. That's a problem. Another big problem is that these ways of thinking cause us to dramatically overestimate the degree to which changing our (or our kids') individual views

of people of different races will end racism. At the very same time they cause us to dramatically underestimate the extent to which our interracial encounters are constantly shaped and impacted by structural racism.

Race-conscious perspectives affirm a decision like the one made by this woman and her husband to intentionally seek out diversity. Sustained experience in diverse racial environments is critical for the healthy development of white children. But the experience described by this mother and so many other justice- and equality-committed parents of white children belies the ways our bodies and relationships are embedded in race. Our racialized bodies live, move, learn, work, and play, in larger racial scripts. We did not individually write these scripts. But whether we want them to or not, they directly and deeply shape our day-to-day lives—including our interracial relationships.

If having and ensuring our children have the right ideas about difference were all it took to raise healthy white kids, racial tensions and division in the United States would have been long gone by now. All the families that live in diverse communities or who have made intentional choices to put their children in diverse spaces would have raised young people whose lives and actions would have fundamentally changed our national racial landscape. That clearly hasn't happened yet.

We need to try to get this deeper dimension of race on the table. It's difficult to do, because it goes beyond language and concepts, and into bodies, habits, and space. It's even more difficult to address for the purposes of antiracist thinking and

action. But we must attempt to account for this dimension of race nonetheless. As difficult as it is to get at with words, reckoning with the power of racial scripts and learning to pay attention to, recognize, and respond to the ways race is in our bodies is a key component of race-conscious parenting.

What's a Racial Script?

Whatever our unique personalities, commitments, beliefs, geographical locations, and unique individual identities, all of our lives unfold within a larger racial story. This story began long before our individual lives did. But the story continues to be written daily.

It doesn't matter who I am, for example. The day after news of yet another killing of an unarmed Black person rivets the nation, when I pass an African American person on the street *I am just another white person*. Our open national racial wounds, violence, and trauma exist—pulsing in the air—between that person and myself. These long-standing wounds mediate all initial encounters between people of different races. They often prevent anything more than a first encounter from taking place.

Racial scripts are about intergroup racial relationships and histories. They are collective. We inhabit them no matter who we are: regardless of when our ancestors migrated here, if our ancestors were forced by way of enslavement, if our ancestors were original occupants of this land, and/or if they migrated here in recent decades because conditions and crises in their country of origin were such that doing so was the only way to

ensure we, their descendants, would have a chance to flourish.

Sometimes, when we get to know people across racial lines, the power of scripts becomes muted. Stereotypes that exist about people of color are debunked. The assumption that white people just don't care about the plight of Black or Latino/a people might begin to hold less sway. At the same time, racial scripts are so powerful and thick they impede our ability to get to know one another deeply. Even if we're around one another a lot—at work or school, for example—they don't go away without some type of specific (and sustained) attention to address the history of injustices and inequity in which all of our lives unfold.

On top of this, even when we do build relationships with one other across racial lines, the power of racial scripts means they can take over at any moment and negatively impact our relationships. I was talking to a pastor of a local, very multi-racial church not so long ago. He was telling me about how successfully and beautifully his unusually diverse congregation engaged one another, sitting down for meals, worship, and life together week after week. They had done so for years, he said.

But as video after video rocked the nation in the months and years following Michael Brown's killing in August 2014, his church began to change. A different tenor began to manifest in people's relationships. It was more obvious there were things going unspoken. He began to realize there was a whole other level of relationship to which even this successful multiracial congregation, full of relationships that seemed authentic and

meaningful, had yet to arrive. The relationships in this community were impacted by—and became more obviously impacted post-2014—the social and political environment in which they were embedded.

At this point, the congregation began to engage the vulnerable, difficult, and harder work of engaging the crisis of anti-Black police violence (slowly and with great care). They began a journey to explicitly engage the power of structural injustice and white supremacy in their lives as differently raced people. They did it together. This was a harder project and required a different kind of language and learning for white members of the church than for Latino/a and African American members. But it was only then that entirely new possibilities for and depths within relationships in the community began to be unveiled.

This story illustrates the power of racial scripts. It also illustrates the ways deeper multiracial engagement might go beyond embracing individual difference and into the harder work of collectively addressing the wounds, violence, and harm that are present in the environments in which our diverse relationships are being pursued.

Besides being larger than our individual or familial lives, or our personalities and commitments, racial scripts contain highly predictable patterns. Patterns repeat.

My white students are reluctant to discuss race. Their individual reasons for such reluctance tend to be highly predictable. But whatever those reasons, if or when they succumb to this reluctance they step into a predictable role: for their peers

of color, white students perform “white disinterest” and “lack of care.” These roles are part of an existing script.

Before any serious, authentic dialogue has even been tried, the air is already loaded with stories and expectations. In a classroom setting, only carefully addressing these racial scripts *before* dialogue even begins reduces the likelihood of predictable pitfalls emerging during said dialogue. For example, we have to get on the table—for everyone to see, discuss, and, we hope, understand—the reasons behind white students’ reluctance to engage race. We have to get on the table the reasons behind the suspicion of students of color regarding white authenticity and frustration about white reticence. These discussions focus on the larger context in which we are coming to the table, and we have to have them before we can have good interracial race-talk itself.

Or consider interpersonal engagements across racial lines. An argument between two coworkers or a frustrating encounter between an airline agent and a customer—the content of which has nothing to do with race—can become racialized in a split second! Did that white person use that tone with me because she is actually racist? Did that Black person use that tone with me because I’m white (that is, is she assuming I’m racist)? The wounds of structural injustice, unhealed violence, and, for many of us, prior painful experiences across racial lines hover so close to the surface that any conflict can suddenly become all about race. No racial words need be spoken for this to happen.

People of color regularly describe the experience of having

their unique personalities, interests, and experiences reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes. Racial scripts function similarly. They are less about inaccurate or negative stereotypes regarding white people, however. They are more about the ways being white has put white people in a particular location in a system that is larger than we are individually, but which continues to damage and harm people of color. Our being white communicates complicity in that system long before our true character can be revealed.

We who are white might feel frustrated about the existence of racial scripts. They seem unfair. Of course we want to be responded to on the basis of our individual personalities and commitments. None of us want to be judged on prior assumptions that come out of larger histories we didn’t personally control. Meanwhile, our insulation and privilege in a system of white racial hierarchy tends to give us lots of experience being given individual, benefit-of-the-doubt treatment.

But of course, people of color want to be treated as individuals too. It’s rare, however, that they are able to count on such treatment because of the pervasive presence of racism.

For all of us, race is always about larger stories, group experiences and structures, and shared, inherited histories. The phenomenon of being reduced to being “just another white person” because of our location in larger histories and systems is a corollary to the endless ways people of color are constrained and contend with roles or assumptions and expectations placed on them as a result of systems of white supremacy. (White supremacy is the cause of this, not people of color. So

if we don't like this, we need to challenge white supremacy.)

Structures of racism impact all of us. They impact how we see one another or expect to be seen. And they consistently mediate our relationships with one another as a result.

Racial Scripts in the Lives of Kids

Racial scripts continually shape our experiences across racial lines because much of the time we go on to play the part we are handed. Racial scripts can be disrupted—but disrupting them takes informed, intentional, and specific choices. These choices must be made over and over again, and sustained over time.

As we seek to raise healthy white children, parents must come to understand this phenomenon so we can practice reckoning with scripts' impact. If we can learn to respond to and disrupt racial scripts ourselves, we can also teach our children to see and disrupt them as well. A story from my own life gives a glimpse into a way racial scripts impact children and have long-term developmental effects.

In first grade (again with Ms. B.!), I had a good friend named M. I was white. M. was Black. We were tight. I invited M. over to spend the night at my house. After checking in at home we both thought we were a go.

When Friday came, I called my mom at work and she told me to call M.'s house to let her know when my mom would pick her up. But when I called and started to explain this to the adult female on the phone, the woman (probably M.'s mother) became incredulous. I

don't remember all of what she said, but I remember her emphatic "M. is not sleeping over at your house."

I crumpled. I was devastated and embarrassed. I knew I had bumped into something big and powerful. When my mom got home from work that evening, she found a stack of notebook paper in my room. Over and over again, in my first-grader scrawl—more than one hundred lines of writing by her count—were these words: I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad.

All children are better off when they experience and perceive diversity as the normative state of reality. This is especially important for white children, however. Kids of color in the United States are already more likely to live lives in which they learn to relate to, and engage and work with white people. White kids, on the other hand, are being raised by white adults whose social networks are 91 percent white.¹ They are more likely to spend most of their time in contexts that are demographically mostly white. They are uniquely vulnerable to internalizing notions of being superior because of being white in a society that is a white racial hierarchy.

Experiencing diverse environments can potentially mitigate some of the perilous socializing environments white contexts pose for white children. They may become better able to function well in diverse contexts. They are more likely to create meaningful interracial relationships. My relationship with M., for example, was only possible because I was being educated in a robustly diverse setting. Remember? I was only one of six

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white girls in my first-grade class. And even though it isn't guaranteed to bear out, such relationships do create more possibility that white youth will be positively impacted toward antiracist dispositions as a result of those relationships.

Acknowledging the existence and power of racial scripts is not a case against the value of diversity.

On the contrary, acknowledging the existence of scripts and dealing with their impact is essential if the outcomes many parents of white kids say we want from diversity are to be realized.

Without specific work to counteract the power of racial scripts meaningful diversity simply cannot sustain itself. Children engage, imitate, and respond to adult modeling, much more than they do to what adults say. Children perceive, feel, and internalize adults' affect, energy, and behavior. They integrate these noncognitive perceptions into their sense of reality and do so at levels much deeper than they do the explicit teachings adults offer them.

As a result, diverse environments cannot fundamentally change the racial dynamics in, and experiences of, white children and children of color's lives. Children experience their friendships in the context of the same racial tensions and larger societal racial alienation that adults do.

Simply put, adults haven't figured out how to address and

reduce racial tension among ourselves. This is true at the individual or micro level—for example, in relationships across racial lines with coworkers. It's also true at the collective or macro level—for example, in the staggering racial divides in this nation measurable by any number of data sets. How could this *not* impact our children's relationships with one another? If we live in a nation, in communities, and in families in which either or both racial separation and racial tension are present, *we should expect* our children to bring this to their peer groups.

At best, the expectation that diversity alone can make our children immune from racial separation and/or tension (and sustain itself), is a result of a flawed and simplistic view of race—that difference is “only skin deep” and we merely need to teach them to not have biases against those who are different. At worst, we are thoughtlessly expecting our children to do, and solve, something we have not ourselves done or solved; and our kids have experienced us not do or solve. If we want diversity to be meaningful for white kids, then we have to model disruptions of racial scripts and have frank conversations about their existence and impact.

Letting Them in on the Story

When we see children like M. and myself in elementary school, happily playing across racial lines, who are no longer friends and sitting at racially segregated tables by middle school, we are not observing middle-school students having suddenly become racist. We are observing the symptoms and long-term effects of their having breathed in the racially complex, tense,

and difficult climates in which we all live and through which all our bodies move. We are witnessing youth who have not been provided the tools to navigate these climates. Self-segregation over time is a highly predictable outcome of the racial scripts in which our children live with us.

Part of race-conscious parenting, then, is to become attentive, careful interpreters of racial scripts. We need to know how to address, redress, and defuse them. We also need to find ways to teach our children about the social conditions and wounds that impact interracial relationships. If we don't, when they experience the frustrating dynamics racial scripts create or have to navigate the tensions and hurt that multiracial spaces are often seething with (especially in schools), they are more likely to direct their frustration at people of color. They, like we, need to direct this frustration instead at the structures of injustice that generated the scripts to begin with. Our children's abilities to build and sustain meaningful interracial relationships and engage in friendship and advocacy means they must learn to navigate and capably disrupt racial scripts too. That I'm just another white person until proven otherwise means diversity in my life requires actions and behaviors that constantly attempt to *prove otherwise*.

If diversity alone is not enough, recognizing the presence of scripts reveals constructive options we can choose. Explicit conversations with our children about their experiences in diverse context are a must. We have to talk with them about the ways diversity is *hard*.

A few years ago my five-year-old nephew, who attended

a very racially diverse school, started talking about playing dodgeball at school. He announced to my sister and me, "We're not supposed to say 'Black kids against the white kids!'" My sister and I suppressed a laugh. But when we asked him if he knew *why* his teachers didn't want the kids to say that or whether the teachers had talked to the kids about why, we were troubled. "Nope!" he said.

What a perfect example of diversity having created an opportunity for explicit racial learning. Misguided as it was, the idea of Black versus white dodgeball wouldn't likely have come up in a nondiverse setting!

I suspect there was a mixture of a kind of developmental naiveté going on, combined with an emerging, conscious awareness among these kids that racial tensions exist in their school. But when teachers chose not to explore the reasons not to play racially divided dodgeball, these students were left more likely to succumb to tension-filled racial scripts as a result. These kids are going to square off as Black and white in some other way.

An added layer of irony here is that the social existence of hostility between racial groups, which exists even when nothing explicitly racist has happened, is the very reason these teachers don't want the kids to make divided dodgeball teams. What an incredible opportunity! Not only did many constructive options exist for race-conscious dialogue in this moment, but such responses would have been actual interventions in and disruptions of the scripts themselves.

I can imagine any number of interesting and important mul-

tiracial conversations teachers might have invited in response other than shutting down racialized dodgeball with a no.

In the immediate response, a line of questioning that would invite the more open-ended dialogue might include one or more of the following:

- “What an interesting idea. What made you think of this? What makes you interested in dividing up the teams like that?”
- “What about kids who are white but have good friends who are Black, or Black kids who have good friends who are white? What if they want to be on their friend’s team?”
- “But how do we know for sure who is white and who is Black? What about students who have family members who are Black *and* white? What about students who are Latino/a or are from Vietnam? How do you think these students would feel about that kind of dodgeball? Whose team would they play for?”
- “What an interesting idea. Have you seen this way of dividing people up in other places? Are there sports teams that you’ve seen divide people up by race? Are there places in our city where you see only white people or only people of color? Are there places in our school where it feels like white kids and Black kids are competing against each other?” (Sidebar: I imagine this line of questioning

in particular would elicit fascinating and highly important insights into what kids actually observe about their communities; things teachers don’t typically hear. These would open great potential.)

An outgrowth and longer-term set of dialogues and educational explorations that could follow from an open-ended, nonshaming and non-anxiety-laden response to this incident:

- “You know, I’m uncomfortable with Black-versus-white dodgeball, but I want to talk about why and share some stories about my reasons.” Here would be a great opportunity to engage in some historical or contemporary stories about racial injustice and hostility, in which both white perpetration and people of color resistance was featured. This could be shared as one reason for the teacher’s discomfort about racial teams and as a way to ask students about their values. In this context, stories in which some white people broke ranks and engaged in justice-work with people of color would be important as well. Such storytelling would educate kids about why racially divided dodgeball seems dangerous and invite students into moral visioning about what kind of world they want. It would almost surely get them talking about their relationships with one another.
- “You had such an interesting idea when you

wanted to divide up to play white kids versus Black kids in dodgeball. And we talked about why the teachers didn't think that was a good idea. But it made me wonder—is Black kids against white kids sort of like making girl lines and boy lines at school? What do you think about that? Maybe we shouldn't do that either?" Or "Is playing Black kids against white kids the same thing as if we played boys against girls, or students against teachers in a game? What's the same about it? What's different?"

- "You had such an interesting idea when you wanted to divide up to play white kids versus Black kids in dodgeball. And we talked about why the teachers didn't think that was a good idea. Do you think if we let you play dodgeball that way it would be harder for white kids to stay friends with Black kids, and Latino/a kids with white kids?"

I wish I had been there to be in on such a conversation. I'd bet that incredibly nuanced, powerful, and unexpected dialogues would have opened up among these children and their teachers if some of these questions had been asked. And, again, the responses they elicited could become routes for all kinds of further race- and justice-conscious explorations.

As with other race-conscious responses, these questions get at what's being communicated by the kids about their self-understanding and their understanding of others. They attempt to humanize and get specific about the individual people who

are being grouped into larger categories (destabilizing these categories a bit too). They resist imposing adult anxiety, but engage in a redirection that is open-ended and joins alongside these kids in their reasoning process. And by taking these types of postures, these lines of inquiry lay groundwork for ongoing explicit dialogue about race, difference, and interracial relationships and community. They do the important work of bringing our collective histories and contemporary experiences into the room for shared investigation.

Meanwhile such collective dialogue would have also, in and of itself, been a disruption of the racial scripts that this dodgeball moment suggests some students were becoming aware of on a conscious level. It would have countered the scripts' power by making them visible to the students and modeling "no fear" in talking about them. It would have put on the table for the kids to see (and thus develop language to talk about and better understand) the larger contexts in which their relationships exist. This is very much along the lines of needing to have a discussion with my college students about why talking about race is hard, prior to actually having the racial discussion itself.

If we become aware of how pervasive racial scripts are, we will stop overestimating what diversity alone can be expected to accomplish. More important, we can become more prepared to create constructive opportunities out of the moments in which our kids experience and encounter these larger inherited racial dynamics in diverse contexts and interracial encounters and exchanges.

Relationships Can Always Get Racial

I now know, of course, that my first-grade friend M. and I had been set up. Not by anyone on purpose. But we were playing out a racial script. In this case, this script had more to do with social structures than it did with tension in our friendship because neither of us had internalized larger, collective racial tensions—yet.

We kids had made the sleepover plan. I don't think my mother ever actually spoke to M.'s mother directly, though I can't be sure. Now before you conclude *this* was the obvious reason the sleepover didn't happen, more relevant than race having been in the mix, please remember that parenting culture today makes that detail of this story far more unusual now than it was back in the mid-1970s. As hard to imagine as it may be for parents now (including myself!), in elementary school I had sleepovers all the time with white kids whose parents had never met my parents!

But my family lived in a part of Denver, Colorado, that was geographically far removed from M.'s. We lived across town in a mostly white neighborhood. She lived in a mostly Latino/a and Black neighborhood. The city was very segregated. Looking back, I think, *Of course! What African American mother would possibly think it safe to let her child go sleep over at the home of a white kid and family she'd never met? Let alone allow her daughter to be picked up by a virtual stranger and driven across town.*

There were many layers to this experience. Among the most important were the adult postures and structural realities:

her family's understandable suspicion, my mother's unawareness that such suspicion should be expected, and deep-seated residential housing segregation. Our lives were worlds apart in ways I did not see at all before this incident, and for reasons I didn't understand for years afterward. A structural address of injustice—a system of busing to create racial integration—was the only reason our friendships could come into existence at all. But the remaining social scripts in which we still lived made it virtually impossible for the diversity we were immersed in at school to sustain itself or be meaningful for the long haul.

There were various and diverse types of failures by the adults (parents, teachers, school board legislators, and on and on) under whose watch this childhood relationship took root. As a result of these a deeply important friendship between M. and myself became utterly racial that Friday. I have no memory of M. after this point in first grade. I viscerally remember the feeling of being so stunned by having my high, happy hopes abruptly dashed, and knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that something deeper and bigger than “not this time” was afoot, that the pain stayed with me far longer than it took me to write *I'm sad* one hundred times. I have no idea what M. thought, felt, or experienced. Of course, I experienced no adult support afterward to help me process the racial dimensions of this incident. I don't know if M. did or not.

This is just one story of so many. It's no surprise my diverse school experience would, by seventh grade, manifest as self-segregated groups of children wandering the halls. My own friend group became almost exclusively white. And this was

without even accounting for the ways racial tracking of students within the school through accelerated courses and programs for gifted and talented further engineered our alienations.

Proactive, race-conscious attention to the various layers of our children's social realities—from what they learn about difference, equality, history, and so on to the kind of environments in which we choose to place them—creates a larger framework within which the impact of racial scripts stand to be significantly reduced. Prior race-conscious parenting practices might have altered some of what transpired between M. and me. We might have persisted further in our friendship if racial self-awareness and facility had been more developed in my own life.

But even within a race-conscious framework it's crucial that parents cultivate understanding of the specific ways structures and larger collective narratives shape the racial lives of the communities of which our children are a part. We have to respond to these specifically. In my story, much more was required than simply better equipping M. or me.

For example, at minimum, there needed to be a clear-eyed appreciation of the barriers posed by a long drive from one side of town to a mostly white part and to the home of an unknown white family. In this context a white parent must go above and beyond the behaviors a parent might otherwise embody if the child being invited to a sleepover is also white. This might mean the white parent reaching out with a phone call asking or offering to come by and meet the friend of color's family. Perhaps it might mean asking first about meeting

up to play at a playground near that child's house, in *their* neighborhood.

Going further, parents of white children who value the diversity their kids experience at school need to also commit proactively to full participation in all matters pertaining to the needs and concerns of Black and Latino/a families at the school. One way to disrupt the power of scripts is to find ways to embody visible antiracist commitments long before a sleepover invitation is extended. Sustained, public commitment as white parents can challenge, to a degree, the racial scripts that otherwise impact our children in specific contexts. Meaningful, interracial relationships at our kids' schools stand a much greater chance of being strong and sustainable to the extent cohorts of white parents are active, visible antiracist allies to parents and children of color at school.

Authentic, meaningful, and powerful interracial relationships can be built. They do exist. With sustained and serious effort over time we can slowly rewrite these scripts if we so choose. And a commitment to raising healthy white children is a commitment to figuring out and engaging in concrete practices to do precisely that.

Race Is in Our Bodies

Chuck E. Cheese was packed during my daughter's friend's birthday party. A large group of young African

The bodily dimensions of race can create racial dynamics in collective spaces without words ever having to be spoken.

American kids (ages in the range of, perhaps, seven to eleven), who seemed to be part of an extended family, were running around enjoying themselves immensely. Fewer adults were present with these children than there were other groups (mostly white people) in the space.

Before long I began to experience in my body that the dynamics in the space were feeling racial. I noticed white adults giving quick glances toward this group of children. The glances weren't hostile. But they definitely had a vibe. The kids were being pretty loud and they were running—a little overwhelming given how crowded the place was. But there was more: a discernible physical avoidance of these kids by the white adults in the space that was really unnatural. I also noticed the kids never made eye contact with the white adults or white kids in the space and vice versa. Avoidance was everywhere, even when someone might accidentally bump into someone else; a case in which eye contact would be a pretty typical response.

It was like each respective group of folks was closed off inside a racial bubble. You didn't see it exactly. No one would have named it. But I am betting most of us could feel it.

It's difficult to describe this experience in words. But it's akin to this: imagine you as a white person walking into a room of twenty-five Black people. You feel race in your body.

And I know, because I have heard people of color say it many times, when you as a Latino/o person or African American person walk into a room of twenty-five white people you feel it. We feel race. Race is in our bodies.

I was feeling race that afternoon and it didn't feel good. The feel was markedly different than it would have been if the kids running around in a group had been the same race (white) as the majority, in which case the white adults wouldn't have been so avoidant. I was sure these children had to be sensing the racial vibe too.

Then, at one point, just as I stepped up to help my daughter with a game, a boy (perhaps about nine) from this group stepped up at exactly the same time. Consistent with the larger dynamic in the room, he didn't look at either me or my daughter, even though we were going to have to negotiate who was going to go first, a negotiation that would often happen by way of some type of body language and eye contact.

This child happened to have a great haircut with amazing designs shaved into his hair. In the moment in which it wasn't clear whether he or my daughter was going to play the game first, I stopped him and said, "Hey! I totally love your haircut." For a microsecond he paused and looked startled. Then, as my words sank in, he broke into a huge smile. "Thanks!" he said. After that we both made person-to-person eye contact and smiled.

Then this: for the next hour, this child and several

of the kids he was with chased my daughter and me around Chuck E. Cheese. They came up to my daughter over and over, shoving tickets in my daughter's hands every time they won a game. Handfuls. Hundreds. It was particularly sweet because she was so much younger than they were; she was beaming from the attention and generosity of older kids. Even as we were trying to leave after we exchanged her undeserved, unearned stacks of tickets for more toys than she could have ever dreamed to hope for, they came up to her again—more tickets.

This was the only interracial interaction I saw transpire at Chuck E. Cheese the entire afternoon.

This experience illustrates another dimension of race. It pertains to the larger scripts in which our lives unfold, but goes deeper still because it brings into focus the literal, physical, bodily dimensions of race. Race is in the way we move and hold our bodies in shared spaces. The bodily dimensions of race can create racial dynamics in collective spaces without words ever having to be spoken. And interracial relating happens physically, too, in such contexts. Again, without words needing to be spoken, the ways our bodies relate increases or reduces racial tensions or hostility, or increases or reduces connection and engagement. Meanwhile, our children all experience all of these feels.

If it's difficult to write about racial scripts, it's even more difficult to write about race within and lived out through bodies. This experiential, bodily dimension is that much more beyond

words. It pertains, in part, to a shared, collective awareness of social racial tensions, suspicions, and sometimes animosities—because many of us know, in some way, that we've all been handed a role in a larger play.

I felt like I was breaking a real taboo when I spoke to that young boy. This wasn't because I feel uncomfortable engaging young children or African American people. It wasn't about me or him. It was about the creation of spatial (and racial) dynamics at a collective level.

The racial dynamic at Chuck E. Cheese that day was palpable and so much bigger than this child or me. I am convinced he felt it as much as I did. The dynamic, too, was intensified by the restaurant's location in West Des Moines, Iowa—a suburb of a very racially segregated Des Moines, Iowa, which lies at the heart of a state that is demographically very, very white.

Racial dynamics manifest in any place or space. But the way they communicate or the ways we read them is informed by local contexts. How I experienced and read what was happening at Chuck E. Cheese was different than what I would have read had we been in Brooklyn, New York. The bodily dimensions of race are always context specific.

Because of his initial response, it seemed to me this child anticipated some sort of correction as he heard me begin to speak. His subsequent smile and exuberant reaction seemed to suggest our exchange was somehow unanticipated and, ultimately, welcome. I can't know for sure of course. But, really, what nine-year-old voluntarily gives up hundreds of coveted Chuck E. Cheese tickets?

My hypothesis is that race and racial divides—in this case, the unexpected crossing of a divide—had everything to do with the interactions that unfolded between this child (and his friends) and myself and my daughter. For my part, I *felt* the relief and release of not staying inside my racial bubble in that highly racially divided space.

Researchers have attempted to study the ways that racial perceptions, scripts (my word, not theirs), and divides show up in our bodies and how we hold our bodies in space. These have something to say about what *might* have been going on at Chuck E. Cheese.

Even if we have all our ideas, beliefs, and thoughts correct, as white people, our bodies will give us away every time.

For example, social scientists Phillip Atiba Goff, Claude Steele, and Paul G. Davies attempted to understand how racial inequality has continued at the same level for the last sixty years in our society, when studies find “a consistent decline in the expression of anti-Black racial attitudes.”² Looking for mechanisms that perpetuate racial behaviors, even when conscious bias is absent, these researchers conducted a study in which they measured how far away white people placed their bodies from Black people in various scenarios where they were supposed to have a one-on-one conversation. They found that in situations in which white people were afraid their engagement across racial lines put them at risk of being perceived as racist, they would literally sit farther away from African Americans.³

It’s possible something like this could have been going on, at least for some of the white people at Chuck E. Cheese. So much of the engagement there might have involved negotiations over which kid was going to get in line first for skeeball, or asking running ten-year-olds to be a bit more careful around the two-year-olds in a crowded space. Perhaps there was fear that engaging African American children in these ways might have been interpreted as racially biased somehow. So white adults in the room dramatically opted to disengage completely. Don’t look or make eye contact. It’s too loaded!

There are other possibilities too. Philosopher Shannon Sullivan writes about the ways our ongoing habits and practices over time literally make up the physicality of our bodies—the feel, movements, perceptions. She explains this to point out the ways that white privilege does not just impact white people’s way of thinking, but our ways of “bodying.”⁴ Bodying, the physical correlate to thinking, is produced by the ongoing experience of being white in a white racial hierarchy. We end up bodying whiteness because of the cumulative effect of what we do in spaces, how we are treated in and navigate spaces, what we do day in and day out—which creates habits, which creates environments, which “body” us again.

Sullivan writes, for example,

The books that a person reads, the films that she sees, the histories that she studies, the people with whom she socializes, the neighborhoods in which she lives, the social and political work to which she contributes—all

of these are environments that help shape a person's habits and on which a person can have some impact.⁵

In terms of Chuck E. Cheese, a different possibility than a fear of being perceived as racist might also be plausible. Sullivan's line of inquiry suggests it might have been that the odd "racial bubble" effect was a product of white people being *bodied* through endless participation in radically nondiverse—meaning, white—spaces. Such bodily formation could easily result in white people in a restaurant experiencing an aversion to physical interaction with a small but highly visible group of Black children.

For many reasons, including the fact that this is all so beyond words, it's impossible to unequivocally know for sure what was going at Chuck E. Cheese or what might be going on in other situations like it. It's also risky to make claims that are too certain. On top of this, because I can only write of my interpretation of this experience, I risk projecting my perceptions onto this child and his experience in a manner that disrespects him by being presumptuous about how much I can know, or that could be flat-out wrong. (Each of these caveats are also relevant to my writing about M. and our failed slumber party, as well.)

Having said all of that, I don't think I'm wrong. And writing to illuminate experiences like this is worth the risk because this dimension of race is so important. It has such a major impact on our racial learning. Even if we have all our ideas, beliefs, and thoughts correct, as white people, our bodies will give us away every time. The way race is in our bodies, the way we respond to

the feel of race and physically show up in interracial encounters can either disrupt racial alienation and division, or it can make them worse. Body language, eye contact, and nonlingual communications create, sustain, and/or disrupt racial dynamics when we are in a collective, group space.

Parents of white children need to tune into this dimension of race. Children learn to feel race and *stay in their place in racialized, divided spaces*. They, like we, experience race in their bodies and learn to hold, use, and move their bodies in certain ways depending on different contexts. Recognizing this is an essential dimension of responsive race-conscious parenting. We must teach to this dimension of racial experience with as much attention and intention as we do the verbal, analytical dimensions of race.

For example, our children are deeply impacted if they primarily experience deeply segregated or uniraical social spaces. The older they get, the more they will palpably feel out of synch or awkward if or when they are put in situations in which robust racial differences are present. This is not because of beliefs. It is because of feels. Ask any young person of color who spends time in both worlds—mostly Black or brown, or mostly white. They will tell you that they feel different in their bodies, spirits, and emotions in these distinct spaces. This is the case even if the white people in the white space are the nicest people in the world.

We need to seek out spaces in which our children can experience being a demographic minority.

The inverse is true. Drop a white child who has been equipped repeatedly with the most stalwart teachings and beliefs about racial justice and equality into a self-segregated seventh-grade lunchroom situation. That child is almost certainly not going to walk up and sit down at a table of Black children.

We have to constantly model different and disruptive interracial behaviors in contexts in which the unspoken but palpable collective experience of race is to stay within our racial bubble. I wasn't thinking consciously about this that day at Chuck E. Cheese. But I was very in tune with my own discomfort at the racial divides in the room.

There is no conversation I can imagine having had with my five-year-old that day to talk with her about what she was experiencing; none that could have accessibly explained to her the racial dynamics that were afoot. No verbal teaching would have prevented her from internalizing the racial divides that we were all *bodying* that day.

But it didn't take words. She observed and then, as a result of the generosity of this nine-year-old and his friends, *experientially participated in the disruption* of embodied racial division. She did not consciously recognize that this is what she observed and then participated in. But this experience still bodied her in some tiny but important way. For a five-year-old, that was developmentally significant.

So What Do We Look For?

We can become conscious about our own bodies and what we feel and then, in response, what we do with them in spaces.

And understanding that race is in our bodies allows us to make conscious choices. Where we spend our time and where we ensure that our children spend time matters. We can respond to the dashed hopes of the mother who tried diversity by making choices that act in response to racial scripts and the collective bodily dimensions of race. This is necessary for our hopes to become closer to realized.

There's no easy or abstract set of recommended practices that can be made about how to do this *in every context*. It's community- and location-specific, because it's about the concrete. I know some of what it looks like in Des Moines, Iowa. But we have to each actively figure out what it can mean where we live.

Still, I'm going to risk raising broad principles behind this dimension anyway. Despite the reality that it can be difficult in some geographical contexts, especially because of deep-seated segregation, nurturing healthy white children means we need to seek out spaces in which our children can experience being a demographic minority. Diversity is important. But given the power of white dominance to effect the bodily dimensions being described here, diverse racial experiences need to go well beyond ensuring our kids experience environments in which there is a relative racial balance or a healthy pluralist mix of difference.

Anna Olson, the mother of two white children, describes the formative impact of experiences in which white children are de-centered as she reflects on her own commitment to race- and justice-conscious parenting.

As a white parent committed to resisting racism, what do I want for my kids?

I want my kids to know how to be the only white person in the room.

I want them to know how to do this gracefully and without calling undue attention to themselves. I want them to know how to listen and observe and be a part of the action without feeling the need to dominate. . . .

My oldest daughter was, for a good part of her elementary school experience, the only white kid in the room. I could walk onto the campus of 900 students, and total strangers would direct me to my kid.

It wasn't always an easy experience for her. She felt different. Other people pointed out, sometimes rudely, that she was different. For a while, in her imaginative play, she used a pretend last name that reflected one of the dominant ethnicities in the school. She wanted black hair. When she brought hummus for lunch, other kids asked if it was "poo." . . .

What I see now is that when my daughter talks about race and culture, she gets things that many white adults struggle to grasp. She observes and has compassion for cultural differences that go way deeper than food and language, like the fact that the white kids in her middle school classes are quick to participate out loud, while other equally smart kids sometimes hang back and are judged to be less engaged. She identifies cultural bias on standardized tests (such as a vocabulary question that stumped an immigrant friend who had never had reason

to know the difference between cul-de-sac, à la carte, and à la mode). When a person of color talks about feeling left out or being made fun of or treated differently, she never questions the truth of that experience, or that it hurts. And she knows without a doubt that there is a very real world of experience within communities and families that include no white people at all.⁶

Olson goes on to say that in the wake of changing school patterns in Los Angeles where she lives, her younger daughter will be in a multiethnic school with more children of similar backgrounds to herself than was her older daughter. So, she says, as a parent she will have to be intentional to make sure her younger child has experiences being "outside the center."

Many of us don't have the option to ensure that our children experience school as one of six white girls in first grade or as the only one in a school of nine hundred. But recognizing bodily racial learning adds clarity about reasons to prioritize commitments about how we spend our time and in what places.

In virtually any community, however removed these may be from white awareness, people of color-led organizations and institutions exist. As parents, we need to find appropriate routes to participate in and to have our kids participate in such spaces—if (and only if) such participation is welcome. Sustained and ongoing participation in communities and contexts in which people of color are not only the majority but are also the leadership is a practice that deserves to be prioritized.

I have to name and highlight the real risk of making such

a suggestion. People of color, communities of color, and people of color spaces are not there for the sake of our educating our white children. This bears repeating: I'm not suggesting parents use people of color and their organizations to teach a racial lesson. White people often approach people of color in this way. I'm also not suggesting white people fall into the racist trap of trying to go "find a Black friend." This is another way of seeing people of color that is reductive and uses people to our own white ends.

But I am saying that we must consciously realize that deep segregation and division mean white people are all already racially formed and bodied by race and racism. And only through conscious choices to desegregate our lives can we learn *different* ways of bodying. Our white children also bodily learn race through the status quo ways that racial segregation and division shape their racial lives day in and day out. We have to intentionally prioritize the activity of de-centering ourselves and our children.

But, again, we only do that in spaces where people of color welcome white presence. Meanwhile, just like it's difficult to write about these dimensions of race at all, it's difficult to describe (but worth trying) the postures and dispositions we need to take if or as we engage in such spaces. For example, we actually have to decide we are engaging because we have much to learn and genuinely want to participate with humility and openness. We have to show up with a depth of commitment to stay in a sustained and reliable manner, living out a consistency of presence. We have to constantly pay attention to make sure we are taking postures that

de-center ourselves—and modeling for our kids what this looks like. Olson's description of what she wants her child to know how to do describes this very well, I think.

What this looks like if one joins a faith community different from one's own is different than what it looks like if one joins (in a posture of supportive solidarity) an activist or advocacy group that is people of color-led. It's different than what it looks like if one joins some sort of community center program or other kind of collective, social gathering.

There's no way for me to write out a list of works in the abstract that makes sense in the various contexts in which we all live. It's worth adding here, too, that when we talk about desegregating our lives there are other practices we need to commit to in addition to engaging in physical spaces that are demographically predominantly people of color and people of color-led. Not only are these practices possible for those of us who live in places where there may be very few people of color. Such practices also better equip us to be humble and respectful if or when we are physically in such spaces.

For example, what kind of media do we consistently listen to? Which public thinkers do we follow online to give us commentary on the day's events? What authors do we read and how often? The daily habit of engaging the voices, perspectives, and productions of people of color (in media, art, literature, news, scholarship of many different kinds) impacts not just what we think. It potentially changes what we feel in the world as we move through it after being shaped and informed by such engagement.

Again, there's no precise *to do* list. But the takeaway point is this. The racial scripts we all live in and the bodily dimensions of race that grow out of our daily habits, engagements in space and place, and interactions with other people, are a central aspect of racial knowledge and racial development. The normalcy of racial segregation requires active attempts to overcome the ways whiteness and white racial hierarchy "teach" us and our children. The empowering insight about our bodies in racial scripts is that it raises the recognition that what we do with our bodies, and the choices we make about this daily activity, shapes and forms our racial selfhood. We can exert a great deal of decision-making power about what we do day-to-day with our bodies: about the books, the films, the histories studied, the socializing we pursue, the neighborhoods in which we live, the social and political work to which we engage and contribute to. To repeat Sullivan, "all of these are environments that help shape a person's habits and on which a person can have some impact."⁷

What are the practices in your context that you can take? How are you bringing these into the lives of your children and bringing your children into these practices? When are you aware of what your body is doing and saying that goes along with prewritten scripts? And when and how can you decide to publicly interrupt and challenge the racial scripts in which we all live to change—even if just for a moment—the role that "white people always play"? These questions are difficult but life-giving. And our responses to them in the lives of our children have everything to do with the future that they will be physically part of creating.

Takeaways

- ✓ If ensuring our children have the *right ideas* were all it took to raise healthy white kids, racial tensions and division in the United States would have been long gone by now. But long-established racial scripts keep us divided.
- ✓ Racial scripts are about collective, intergroup racial relationships and histories that impact our individual relationships in the present. These long-standing patterns mediate all initial encounters between people of different races—even kids.
- ✓ Interracial relationships among kids are impacted by larger social structures they live in, so if we want diversity to succeed we need to actively support them in recognizing scripts and taking action for justice to decrease their power.
- ✓ We feel and live race in our bodies (think: body language), not just in our minds and in words; and these bodily dimensions of race are always context and location specific. Even if we have all our ideas, beliefs, and thoughts correct, our bodies will give us away every time—and will either create connection or make it worse.

- ✓ Despite the reality that it can be difficult, nurturing healthy white children means we need to seek out spaces in which our children can experience being a demographic minority, remembering to *determine if such participation is welcome*, and to participate with humility and openness.
- ✓ The daily habit of engaging the voices, perspectives, and productions of people of color (in media, art, literature, news, scholarship of many different kinds) impacts not just what we think. It potentially changes what we feel in the world as we move through it after being shaped and informed by such engagement.

Diversity Is Confusing!

"P. [white, age ten] came home today and started telling me about an incident at school. I never really could figure out quite what had happened. But it had something to do with her asking someone to pass her a brown crayon for a picture she was drawing. After that some of the kids in her class told her that because she wanted a brown crayon she was 'racist.' I kept trying to understand what had happened and then she looked at me—so distressed—and said: 'Mom, am I racist?'"

It's not uncommon for white children and youth to manifest confusion, even some anxiety, as they get older and become more conceptually aware of racism, diversity, white privilege, and other notions pertaining to race. Increasingly complex feelings emerge as they develop beyond glee ("I'm so glad we're white") or relief ("I'm white, so I'm safe!"). More challenging responses result as they start to recognize racial tensions or encounter racist discourse in their friend groups. More intellectually complicated ideas begin to be explored as they hear other young people describe things or people as racist.