

“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.”

—Chaniqua 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
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Ch. 7

- ✓ Because of the system we live in, white people are all complicit with racism and we must help our kids contend with this even while we equip them with lots of explanations about concepts like inherited privilege, equity in contrast to equality, and the analogy of racism as a moving sidewalk!

What Does Resistance Look Like?

If you had asked my soon-to-be six-year-old about immigration during the presidential election cycle of 2016, E. would have told you this: "Donald Trump doesn't want people to be able to feed their babies. He thinks that the law is more important than people being able to feed their babies. I think being able to feed your baby is more important than following the law."

There's so much uncharted territory in parenting. This is true when raising kids in a nation experiencing the best of times and in regard to any number of issues. But there's nothing easy about *these* times and race is uniquely difficult. Raising white kids differently than most of us were raised, with few road maps, at a time when the failures of decades of color-blind parenting and tepid attempts to celebrate difference have been exposed is difficult enough. But with news cycles bleeding with stories of Black people killed by police, Latino/a peoples being terrorized by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—

whether they're immigrants or not—and rising numbers of hate crimes against Muslim and Jewish people, the words *difficult* and *uncharted territory* scarcely capture it.

Those of us raising children may feel like we're constantly watching and waiting and measuring. This may be especially true if we're raising white children we long to equip as participants in creating a more just and flourishing future for all. I know my partner and I often feel like we're second-guessing ourselves as we parent our two white kids in this terrain and in these times.

As increasingly hateful racial rhetoric became more widespread and pervasive in the public square leading up to and after the 2016 presidential election, we struggled with how to talk about it with our children. We worried about finding the line between communicating our values and engaging them in moral deliberations, while not using them as props in larger political debates in which they were only mimics of us.

I don't know that we got it right all the way. But I did end up feeling good about the perspective E. eventually took on the stakes in the political fight over immigration. I ended up in awe of her ability to listen to us and to break it down and see moral complexity in a way that made sense to her young mind and heart. This seemed particularly impressive to me since we spend a lot of time telling kids they're supposed to follow the rules.

But as awesome as I think my child is, I don't actually think she's particularly unique on this front. I think the more that more of us engage our children explicitly, the more often we do and will find ourselves similarly impressed.

I hold on tightly to the moments in which I find myself more awed by my kids' insights and wisdom than I am overcome by my own fears and missteps. I want nothing more than for those reading this book to experience and hold on to such moments as well. And it's my deepest hope that in the process of doing so, we collectively create communities of parent-peers. Such communities could generate and invigorate a society-wide dialogue about how parents of white children can step into the unknowns, chart what is mostly still uncharted, and become resilient participants alongside parents of children of color who are already at it and have long been so. It's my deepest longing that this book will enable more of us to deepen our active commitment to *everyone's children* by drawing more of us into the larger movement of social and racial justice. For, despite all that remains truly difficult and how far we have to go, such a movement is alive and resilient in this nation. And it needs all of us to be *all in*.

No book could ever speak to all that needs to be addressed nor offer a complete list of perfect responses for every challenging moment in our parental lives. No one book can address all of the larger, unanswered questions about how to effectively raise race-conscious, justice-committed white children in these days and times. At the end of the day, what resistance looks like still remains up to each of us to envision, create, and live out the best we can.

As we begin to bring the explorations we've moved through in these pages to an end, then, I want to reflect on several other dimensions of race-conscious parenting that deserve

focus. These dimensions augment and build on other principles and practices already presented in *Raising White Kids*. But they also lift up deeper insights and more open questions about some of the more difficult and rewarding emotional aspects of cultivating antiracism and justice commitments in our children.

White Children and Black Lives Matter

In September 2016, within a period of two weeks, Terence Crutcher and Keith Lamont Scott, two Black men, were shot and killed by police. Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Charlotte, North Carolina, the cities where these men were killed, each erupted in protest. During this period of time I had the following engagements with my children.

We were driving to school and a segment on National Public Radio came on about the protests taking place in Charlotte. I noticed my kids get quiet in the back seat and made a conscious decision to let the story play. When it was over, I turned the radio off before another story could come on. Then I kept driving and said nothing. After a few moments of quiet my seven-year-old said, "Mama, if you were in Charlotte right now, I bet you'd put on your Black Lives Matter T-shirt and go out there with them."

"I probably would, H," I said.

Over the next few minutes we pursued a conversation about the story. My kids' respective understanding

of what they had just heard varied, which made sense given their two-year age difference. But they both asked questions and I tried to answer them and follow their lead. I felt myself dancing the line between too much information and not enough. But I tried to be truthful and clear.

I explained that once again, in two different places in the country, police officers had killed Black people. I said that people all over the country, but especially African Americans, were very angry.

At some point in this conversation E. (who was five at the time) asked me, "Mama, some police officers are safe, aren't they?"

"Yes, E." I said, "Some police officers are safe. But some police keep killing Black people. People are protesting because they want that to stop. Nobody should have to be afraid of the police. Actually, even the police officers who are safe should be trying to make this stop."

"Is this kind of like what happened to T. at school, with the Doritos?" E. asked. "Yes," I said, "this is happening because of racism."

In her final question, E. was referencing her cousin's encounter with racism, which I wrote about in chapter 3. It's worth noticing that this police conversation took place three full months after that conversation (and I don't think we'd spoken of the Doritos incident since). Our kids hold on to the dialogues we have with them in ways we may not be aware of

Given the days we live in, if our hearts aren't broken we've already lost a core part of our humanity.

removed dialogue about police violence, is a great example of what we call in the world of teaching "scaffolding." Kids build upon what they've already built, which itself is built upon what came before that. If any of us needed a better example to be convinced of how effective it can be when we choose to talk about race early, directly, and often, I don't know that we could find one.

At this point the conversation ended. Both kids moved on to other appropriate topics and meaningful-to-them chatter about the upcoming day at school.

About a week later, students where I teach—led by Courtnei Caldwell—organized a solidarity rally. Once again, I debated the ethically loaded question of whether or not to take my kids with me and decided to give them the option.

"Girls, my students are organizing a protest. Remember when we talked about the men who were killed by police? My students are standing together, protesting, making clear they want this to stop. I'm going, and I'll take you if you want to go."

Both of them: "Yes, we want to go. Can we make signs?"

"Sure." I said, "What are your signs going to say?" In unison they responded, "Black lives matter."

So here's how this story ended. My kids participated with vigor at the protest. In contrast to the ways they were present two years prior at the protest in response to Michael Brown's killer being acquitted (which I wrote about in chapter 2), they chanted, were fully engaged, and both had a sense of what was going on and why. They spent nearly an hour physically present with Black and Latino/a people, other people of color, and a few white people, who stood together to say *no*. They observed young people being brave and loud about the value of their own lives and about their right to be free. And they experienced adults and these same young people responding to them directly: asking them about their signs, affirming them, hugging them for making their five- and seven-year-old voices heard. All of this was powerful in terms of their racial identity development and their experience of antiracist agency in the world.

But it was in the middle part of the story that I learned, yet again, from my kids' insights and wisdom. I relearned that trying to be brave in this uncharted territory matters so much and that it's worth all the self-doubt and second-guessing such bravery can provoke in me.

I had walked downstairs to where my kids were making their signs to tell them it was time to go. Upon entering

the playroom where they were working and seeing my seven-year-old's sign, I caught my breath. Her gorgeous, colorful sign said this [the spellings here are hers]:

"Black Lives Mater. They mater the same as white. Stop killing them."

Then, below all of this script she had written the names of people in her life that she loves. Her sign listed them out this way:

"People that are Blak are: t. [her cousin] a.[her cousin] tobi [her aunt]."

I didn't only feel my breath catch when I took in this scene, I felt my heart break as well. And almost every time I write about or tell this story, I find myself weeping.

What I relearned and re-remembered from that gorgeous but devastating sign and from witnessing firsthand my daughter's ability to connect the dots for herself was that these are not times in which any of us can dare live without a broken heart. Given the days we live in, if our hearts aren't broken we've already lost a core part of our humanity.

One of the things I hold on to from that moment is a recognition that is devastating and beautiful all at the same time. It's this: at this point in her life (nearly a year later as I write), my daughter is a whole, wonderful, smart, kind, beautiful, and very happy child. But she is also, in her eight-year-old and not-quite-old-enough-to-fully-get-it way, herself living with a bit of a broken heart.

The pain H. named during this experience had nothing to

do with me having ever told her explicitly: "Your aunt and cousins are Black. And police violence against Black people puts their lives in danger." I had never yet made the connection explicit for her. In retrospect, I wouldn't still. My parental sense, at least with my kids and at that age, is that doing so would be too intense as a direct teaching.

H. probably wouldn't even notice or name it as a kind of heartbreak. But by September 2016, my seven-year-old had hit an age at which she had put this all together for herself. She knew who the beloved people were in her life. Race-conscious parenting meant she understood that among these people, A., T., and Tobi were Black. She also knew that racism is a real thing with real consequences for people of color. And she had, thus, come to understand for herself exactly what the stakes were in going to this protest. On top of that she was still in touch with her own humanity, so in touch, in fact, that she would name the heartbreak of that recognition aloud.

(I was unsure and nervous about allowing H. to take a sign with her cousins' names on it—they were/are young children as well. Before allowing her to do so, I asked my sister and sister-in-law about it. My sister-in-law Tobi, whose name was also on the sign, called me back, asked for H., and told H. she loved her sign and thanked her for being an ally.)

There's so much to say about this experience, but at least three things are specifically worth lifting up in terms of parenting white children. Each of these pertain to the uncharted territory part of raising white kids.

First, the most truthful questions about raising white kids

aren't so much about how we best watch, wait, measure, and second-guess our attempts to teach them about justice and how we work for liberation and freedom. The real questions aren't practical how-to ones. They're not about doing it exactly right. The real and most truthful questions, I think, are what our children are going to teach us if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to make it possible for them to do so. And what might they teach us if we then slow down and listen to them when they try?

The second thing also has to do with vulnerability—about allowing our kids to be vulnerable. We are going to constantly face the desire and tendency to insulate and protect our kids from heartbreak and fear. And we live in parenting cultures these days that place a high premium on protecting kids from all kinds of things—avoiding difficult feelings, making things easy for them, doing more for them than perhaps we should, trying to give them the best kind of experiences possible. The hopes embedded in a commitment to race-conscious parenting necessarily mean we bump up against such tendencies because such parenting requires us to expose our kids to hard realities. That can be tough.

Meanwhile, the reality of racial injustice raises genuinely difficult questions about what and how much to say: when to leave the radio on and when to turn it off. As one parent put it to me, “I don't want to lie to my kids about US history and our society. But how do I talk about histories of violence—for example, what slavery or treatment of Native Americans was like? I don't even let my eight-year-old watch violent television shows.”

How much and in what detail are, in many ways, personal parental questions that have to do with many things, including the temperament of our particular children. At the same time, just as I felt myself viscerally react to the mom who said to me “I'm just glad she doesn't have to worry about any of it,” I felt in the painful experience with my daughter the visceral knowledge that having chosen to allow her some heartbreak was, in fact, life-giving, humanizing, and necessary.

It's deeply necessary we let our children's hearts get broken a bit if they are going to remain able to recognize the humanity of their fellow humans whose lives are at stake in the system we live in. It's necessary if they are going to grow any rooted sense of themselves as part of a larger, multiracial community of people to whom they are committed, and with and for whom they must speak out and act.

What I'm describing here goes well beyond tactical questions about teaching kids how to engage in activism. It goes beyond saying, “Well, if Black kids have to learn about police violence then so should white kids—otherwise we are just embracing white privilege.” This is certainly true, of course. But it's a rather surface assessment of the stakes.

What I'm getting at is creating space for our kids to move into their own deeply embodied relationships with injustice, as risky as that may feel. We need to create space for them to literally feel injustice and feel, touch, and ache from its real costs.

What I relearned in this painful experience with my daughters was that the entire enterprise of raising white kids for

racial justice requires a difficult, vulnerable recognition: in a world where human beings are suffering from human-caused injustice and violence, the humanity of even the youngest of our children is directly tied to their ability to identify with that suffering. And our children also need to explicitly come to understand that same truth.

It's understandable we want to protect our kids. But if we confuse finding age-appropriate ways to tell the truth about racial harm with overly insulating them, if we are too cautious because we are afraid it's just too much, if we withhold or sugarcoat truth because we don't want to cause them suffering, we withhold the very things they need to participate in deeper and more truthful ways of living. Indeed, we withhold the very things they most need to retain their humanity.

Complicating History (and the Stories People Tell) at Every Turn

The tendency to avoid leaving kids vulnerable by teaching them the truth about race isn't just manifested by parents. Another important relearning for me with my daughter came from an attempt by those responsible for her formal education to protect her and other kids in her first-grade class from painful truth.

We've already named the importance of teaching the histories of Native American, African American, Latino/a, and Asian American people. We've also talked about the significance of lifting up historical examples of white people who have engaged in antiracist action. But there's another aspect of

history we need to pay attention to. This aspect is subtle but pervasive. It, too, deeply forms our children's consciousness. That is, we need to complicate the one-dimensional histories that even the most progressive schools tend to offer our children about white people.

One spring H. was running around endlessly singing the praises of George Washington. I was happy to see her so engaged with what she'd learned at school. But I was dismayed her public school (a school that I love and is spectacular in so many ways) had left her with such a one-dimensional view of history.

I struggled with how best to respond. Then one morning, she overheard the news on our kitchen radio about a politician charged with an ethics violation. (It's worth noticing that having good media on around the house can be a great strategy for opening up dialogue with our kids that otherwise might not unfold!)

"What's that about, Mama?" she asked.

I told her someone in the government had done something wrong, and she asked me how "an adult" who was "a leader" could possibly do something bad.

"Unfortunately," I responded, "a lot of our country's leaders have done bad things."

When her eyes grew big and she said, "Like who and what did they do?" I knew I had my answer.

"Well," I said, "you know how you've been running around here celebrating George Washington? We

always talk about George Washington fighting for freedom. But George Washington also owned Black people as slaves."

"He did?" H. was shocked and horrified.

"Yes." I said. "He really was only fighting for freedom for white people."

The best part of this dialogue came next.

"But, if he held slaves," H. asked, "why do we celebrate him as if he was such a great man?"

"You know what," I said, "that's a really great question. I'm not sure why we do. Why do you think we do that?"

From there H. and I mused together about her why question. I shared my ideas. I explained that it seems like it's hard for white Americans to admit that our ancestors did really bad things, maybe because it makes us feel bad. But I also told her that when we don't tell the whole truth we're also not talking honestly about Black people's history and Native American people's histories. We also act as if we don't care how they must have felt about someone like George Washington back then and that we don't care now about the ways they must feel about him today.

We also talked about the fact that we don't have to only feel bad about what our white ancestors did. We can find ways to challenge injustice and fix some of the things that they caused that are still impacting all of our lives today.

This dialogue worked directly against the compartmentalization we often use when teaching racial injustice in the United States. So much discussion, especially as it shows up in history books and at school, emphasizes (in ways more or less adequate) injustice as having happened to people of color and as having hurt them. It is much less common that the specific things specific white people actually did—including white people we celebrate as a nation—are part of the story.

We teach enslavement. We teach George Washington. But we never connect the two. This is very dangerous to our children's sense of history and to their consciousness overall.

A few years ago, I heard Melanie Morrison, a committed white antiracist educator, writer, and activist speak to a group of Christians about the powerful long-term effects of being socialized as white people.¹ Among what she attempted to get the gathered community to reflect on was the way white supremacy and white privilege, over time, impact the deepest parts of us. We have inherited intergenerational legacies of silence, of looking away, of pretending not to notice and of numbness to the pain of our racial legacies. The long-term effects of repressing the truth means we are people, she said, "who don't even know how to begin to feel what we feel." These legacies misshape our morality and our spirituality. And, she said, these affective and embodied layers of white supremacy's effects, therefore, make the journey into bold, antiracist embodiment arduous, soul-stretching work for white people.

I would add to Morrison's evocative words that all of this

also impacts our consciousness and our consciences. There are many teachings and social practices that contribute to ways whiteness accomplishes this harm. One of them is compartmentalized and fabricated celebrations of history and important historical figures.

Emphasizing the agency of people of color and the richness, value, complexity, and diversities of their lives outside and separate from an emphasis on racism and racial justice are important for antiracist consciousness. In a similar vein, it's important we teach about the ways antiracist-committed white people have shown up historically as well. But constantly complicating white racial history by also directly teaching our children about white people's complicity with racism is of the utmost importance to developing antiracist consciousness.

The point of my exchange with my daughter was not to uncritically condemn Washington or be anachronistic. And, of course, the argument that has most often come back at me when I've shared this dialogue I had with her in other places is that "George Washington was just doing what others at the time did" and it's not fair to judge him by today's standards.

But there are several problems with that argument. It erases the truth that Black people of the time knew slavery was wrong and that some white people knew it was wrong (even though they all lived in the same time period as did Washington). It ignores the truth that some white people who participated in the practice of slavery knew it was wrong and chose to do it anyway. It also suppresses the recognition that we live right now with all kinds of systems and practices that are today *just*

what everyone is doing. The whole point is that it's too easy to be just like George Washington was then—too easy to just go along because it's how things are.

Our children need to wrestle with complex stories of what actual people have done and what people actually still do. These are critical stories to tell to enable them to see and face the complexity of moral decision-making in today's complex world.

On a related note, we also need to be specific about the historical violence of the genocide and displacement of Native peoples and the enslavement of African peoples. These are this country's original sins and have set the tone for so much about race and interracial relationships today. Long-term historical learning that starts early builds our kids' capacity to deeply understand how formative these histories and relationships are to the ongoing racial climate in the nation today. So many justice struggles being waged relate directly to these legacies. While our children may not quite understand this yet, building this historical understanding is scaffolding they need to be able to really understand this as they grow.

Meanwhile, we must connect the dots for our children so they see that the same people they learn about in school as heroes and sheroes are the same people who committed this violence. If we don't they are left exposed to internalize views of the United States as a nation innately and exceptionally good, and a pure beacon of equality and justice. The less critical our children are of such a narrative, the more difficult it will be for them to really stand up for justice. Standing up for

justice in the United States requires a willingness to challenge myths about this nation that relentlessly circulate in the public square and are simply not true. Exercising their moral muscle by wrestling with complexity is a critically important piece of enabling our kids to hold complicated truths.

There's another developmental gain in the type of exchange I had with H. about Washington, as well. This one may go more unnoticed, but is also of great benefit. Complicating racial history in response to what H. had learned at school planted in her mind the recognition that there may be more to a story (any story) than what she's being told—even if she hears it at school or from someone she trusts.

Before pursuing this discussion, it's worth stating boldly: I deeply value and respect teachers (both generally speaking and my kids' specific ones!). Public educators in the United States do so much with so little and receive woefully less respect and support than is their due.

But school systems in the United States remain embedded in unjust racial structures and teach racial history in ways that perpetuate racial inequity despite the valiant efforts of many good, justice-committed teachers. So we need to teach our kids to question and be appropriately suspicious. If we want white children to be able to ask, challenge, and intervene when injustice is happening, they have to develop the recognition that people in authority positions and with power aren't always correct. We need to position ourselves such that they assume *it's always worth asking whether there is more to the story*. To that end, even though H. was distressed to learn she'd been

taught to celebrate the greatness of someone whose willingness to enslave other human beings renders him anything but great, an early lesson in appropriate suspicion is a valuable learning in the journey to effective antiracism.

Supporting Children's Activism

When H. and I discussed George Washington, her question about why we call him good was heartfelt and genuine. By *we*, she almost certainly included her teacher, whom she adored and from whom she had learned about Washington. This was also the point in the exchange that I may have missed an opportunity that would have supported her agency, as well as her sense of vision about the role we can all play in truth-telling and action.

After she and I had explored the question of why we talk about Washington as good, I suggested she could ask her teacher the why question. Given what I knew of her classroom, I knew her teacher would welcome the question and that this would thus be a positive early experience in pushing back on formally conferred knowledge. But H. told me she didn't want to do this.

Despite her declining the invitation, my suggestion further affirmed the validity and importance of her question just by my having made it. It may have also offered her a glimpse of the possibility that she could and can have agency in spaces where an authority figure hasn't taught the whole truth. Moreover, had she taken me up on it, practicing such a response in a space in which I was confident she would be well received would

have been a great place to build some of the confidence she will need to engage in other interventions moving forward.

Had H. chosen to take me up on this suggestion, I also suspect her teacher would have responded in a way that generated an important and productive conversation in her classroom. So, in addition to affirming H.'s experience of agency, this would also have positively impacted her classroom environment.

In a different moment, and perhaps even if I could go back in time, I might for any number of reasons have made a different choice than the one I ended up making. Perhaps I should have pushed harder for H. to engage her teacher. Or perhaps I could have tried to pursue the conversation again later with some creative suggestions about how she might do this. Perhaps a role-play exercise, in which we practiced together how she might engage her teacher, would have allowed her to experience the possibility that it would feel good to go back and ask. And, of course, I could have taken this question up with her teacher myself. But while I have certainly done similar things in different moments, this time I didn't pursue it any further. I can't exactly explain why.

Still, a scenario such as this one or countless others similar to it are excellent contexts in which we can encourage our children to see themselves as capable of taking action. As we create opportunities to ask in age-appropriate ways about race and our children's encounters, our children will in turn raise questions and make observations themselves with increasing frequency. And in almost any of these dialogues, agency-inciting

visioning becomes possible, as does the possibility for action out of that visioning.

Questions like the following are really helpful:

- How would you have handled "x" if you had been there?
- If you were the person of color in this situation, how do you think you would have wanted a white friend to handle it?
- What do you wish you had said?
- Is there a way you and I could think together about how you might go back and deal with this/find that out/say you disagree?
- Why does that feel hard?
- Would you want to handle an experience like that differently next time?

Each of these questions exercises our children's moral and pragmatic imaginations. They build our relationships as parents who are on a team with them. And they enable opportunities to support our children in following through on insights at which they arrive.

Children are not too young to take action in response to both very specific incidents like the one at H.'s school or larger issues they are coming to some insights about. For example, I recently read an account of a parent supporting a child in writing the Lego company about the lack of Black and brown (and female) figurines in their play sets. What a great example

to share with my own children! In a few, but increasingly visible contexts, parents of diverse children are connecting with one another to talk about how they journey with their children in creating a better world. Example after example pops up of children taking action. I am regularly stunned and excited by the ideas parents have for engaging in justice-work with their kids. Connecting with such communities can go a very long way toward enabling us to capitalize on these opportunities with our own children.

Just as we make a habit of reading the news on a regular basis, for example, making a habit of exposing our children to stories like this—stories about youth their own age—is potentially transformative. Just as many of us make a habit of teaching the value of volunteerism and engaging in charitable work (and translating this to make it meaningful for kids), making a habit of translating justice and advocacy work is potentially transformative.

Actions like going back to school to challenge formal knowledge or writing a Lego company that seems to envision

Protest is a concrete expression of the belief in justice. It turns the abstract value of justice into a concrete practice.

Lego people as white and male enables developmental growth that is multilayered. They invite our children to experience a sense of possibility as they acknowledge their own relationship with injustice and choose to act in response to this relationship. These experiences provide them building-block practice in

talking aloud about race and being an advocate for racial justice.

Given how challenging race and antiracism is, and how fraught and loaded are our national contexts, lots of practice from young ages matters. Early work to support healthy white identity development will serve our children well, as taking action gets more difficult and more complicated as they grow. Meanwhile, in regard to all of these distinct areas in which we enable our children to act, we are not only cultivating our children's racial health. We are, more important, participating with them—however slowly—in changing the world.

Protests and Rallies

In the terrain of supporting children's activism, I want to return to the protest story. Earlier I mentioned my awareness that questions emerge around the wisdom of taking our children to protests. I want to circle back to some of these questions. I don't have definitive answers nor am I certain many clear-cut right and wrong positions exist on these questions. But I want to engage some of the ways we might see or respond to the dilemma of taking children to protests.

At this point in our nation's history, protests abound. They'll surely continue to abound for some time. I strongly believe antiracist-committed white Americans have a responsibility to participate in protests. Having said that, then, perhaps the first question is why protests are so important even for adults.

Protests, on their own, don't generate legislative solutions or changes in laws. On their own they may not lead to measurable, concrete outcomes. Meanwhile, protests often attract

people well beyond those who are actually willing and able to do the longer, harder, and more tedious work of strategizing and organizing. Sustaining long-term campaigns for social change is hard. Most people don't stay actively in it for the long haul. And so protests can end up bringing together lots of folks who show up for a one-shot event, and then leave feeling good about their contribution but don't do much else. Especially for people doing the longer, harder, more tedious work social transformation requires, that can be really disheartening or even frustrating.

But protests do accomplish many other things. They break public silence and create visibility. As they do so they impact the climate in a local context and put productive pressure on decision-makers in these contexts (as in, "this isn't going to just happen without people raising a fuss"). Enough protests across a nation similarly impact the larger national climate.

The visibility of a protest also creates the possibility of someone at least having to think twice: "What could be so important that people would stand out in the rain on a bridge and yell things?" "Wait! What on earth could be so important that my own neighbor would stand out in the rain on a bridge and yell things?" This type of breaking silence in a community is meaningful.

And something else is certain: when protest is not visible or silence is the strongest sound (the sound that a lack of public, visible protest makes), what gets communicated in a community is that no one cares. What gets communicated is that no one is upset enough to shout aloud and break silence

by announcing that things are very, very wrong. Pronounced silence makes us *all* more likely to go along quietly with injustice. That alone is a hugely significant reason to protest.

Protests also change the people who participate in them, and they create connections among folks who see the world in similar ways. In this way they are galvanizing and hope-giving. Physical presence with others who share your values makes it easier for each of us to sustain a practice of justice-oriented resistance for the long haul.

Still, there are many schools of thought on whether or when to take our children to protests and legitimate reasons parents have concerns about doing so. Protests and rallies are usually addressing issues of serious suffering and violence. Parents understandably fear exposing their children—especially younger ones—to such narratives. As one parent ruminated about how much to tell her kids:

- 1. *What are the implications of shielding my kid from knowledge*
- 2. *of police shootings of African Americans and what are the*
- 3. *implications of exposing them to it? It seems like there are risks*
- 4. *either way. Sometimes it seems easiest just to put it off until*
- 5. *they are older.*

This parent was concerned about the potential risk of talking about police violence both in terms of the impact on her own white kids, as well as on kids of color who were friends with her kids. This wasn't a selfish rumination.

- 6. *This parent wasn't specifically talking about protests. But*

her question raises matters germane to the question of children and protests. Namely, kids are going to hear heavy things at rallies and protests. So perhaps we should wait until they are older. Perhaps we should even wait to take them until they can truly choose whether or not they want to go.

Taking this first concern seriously might mean making choices about which rallies we do and don't take our children to. There are ways to involve kids in protest that don't explicitly expose them to overly graphic images or violence. At this point in my children's lives, for example, I will take them to a protest talking about police violence. But I won't take my children to protests that take the form of a die-in.

The latter concern insinuated here in the idea of waiting until kids are older pertains to the recognition that young kids don't yet have deeply informed perspectives. A child is certainly not a fully informed agent and didn't freely choose to be at a protest (or not). Some argue, therefore, that a child at a protest is being used, in a manner of speaking. Meanwhile, it's also true that kids are so cute and compelling that the likelihood a child at a rally is going to attract media attention is high. Kids can seem like they're something of a prop—a way to get extra attention and so, again, being used in a way that should make adults uncomfortable.

I appreciate these concerns and believe the dilemmas are worth taking seriously. And yet the notion of "having an opinion" is not as clear-cut as adults might sometimes think. Many of my nineteen-year-old college students don't really have their own opinion yet. With any luck they'll be sorting this out for

years to come. They will come to their own opinions only by being exposed to and engaged with a diverse array of perspectives over time—hopefully with good support. But I still encourage them to go vote.

Meanwhile, parents are always modeling the concrete implications of our values and beliefs for our children. A six-year-old might tell you she believes in kindness. She surely got that belief (and reinforcement for it) from somewhere else. She also might not yet know quite how to use a belief in kindness to concretely negotiate a conflict with an unkind child at school or take some sort of concrete action in response to this belief. This child learns what it means to put the value of kindness into action only as she watches adults in her life model responses to challenges, conflicts, pain, difficult decisions, and uncertainty. Adult behavior turns the abstract value of kindness into concrete practices.

Protest is precisely this type of modeling. Believing in justice is not, in and of itself, an action. Protest is a concrete expression of the belief in justice. It turns the abstract value of justice into a concrete practice. Doing something with our bodies, voices, and in the presence of others is one way we live out our commitment to the value of justice. If we don't model this value it remains at the level of abstraction.

Meanwhile, having our children actually participate in the specific social movements that are unfolding is meaningful to them and to these movements. There's no arguing that Black children played hugely significant roles in the civil rights movement. And, of course, I already suggested that participa-

tion in protests is also a powerful way to expose our children to the realities of our local and national racial environments. Participation in protest forms their justice-conscious schemas in deep ways. A central message they begin to internalize is that actual, real people are resisting injustice and speaking up for a better world—that this is something people can, and do, *do*.

Early in life is the time to bring our children into spaces where they watch us, with others, model available and appropriate responses to injustice. The earlier in their lives that they witness and feel the energy and connection of people gathered to raise our voices together and insist things must be changed, the more we build their sense of agency that change is possible.

Obviously, each parent needs to discern for themselves the best choices to make for their children in regard to specific participation or not. I truly don't believe there's one right answer to these questions. But I do believe that asking ourselves honest questions about why we are reluctant to bring children along is important work for us to do as well. Sometimes we may need to rethink the reasons behind our resistance and make sure it keeps us standing on firm antiracist ground.

Resourcing Dissent

The galvanizing connections that can happen when we engage in protests and rallies aren't just useful for our children. They're critical support for us! To that end, a number of activist groups have become larger and powerful in recent years, including groups thinking specifically about white people's role in racial justice and in raising antiracist children. As a result

there are activist initiatives conscious about formats for resistance that invite the participation of children.

Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) is a national group composed of local chapters, for example, that engages in many different types of organizing and activism across the nation. SURJ emerged in 2009 in a commitment to bring more white people, in particular, into active support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Members of SURJ have created kid- and parent-specific forums that are robust. These provide significant opportunities for parents of white children to connect and build their capacity. These forums include resource sharing as a way to disseminate models and tools as we try to parent for racial justice. They also include sharing real examples of protests and actions initiated by children and youth, or created with them in mind.

For example, in the last few years, the San Francisco chapter of SURJ sponsored a multimonth action called Wear It Out Fridays. A youth-led initiative, SURJ supported students who would wear Black Lives Matters T-shirts to school every Friday, talk with others about why they were doing so, and try to increase the numbers of students willing to do the same.

Another resource was created by Black women activists after the 2016 presidential election. The Safety Pin Box came

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into existence when Marissa Jenae Johnson and Leslie Mac recognized that many white people were bemoaning the state of the nation after the election. Many of these folks were expressing a desire to be in solidarity for justice, but did not have prior experience engaging in antiracist activism.

In the United Kingdom after the Brexit vote, many citizens started wearing safety pins on their clothing to symbolize their dissent from the racial hostility many argued was central in the vote for Brexit. The safety pin signaled that the wearer wanted to be seen as an antiracist and, thus, “safe” person. After the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, a number of Americans began to wear or debate the efficacy of wearing a safety pin—for similar reasons.

Johnson and Mac wanted to push those thinking about wearing a safety pin to take action. This, they believe, is what is really needed in a climate of racial hostility. So branded with the moniker “Effective, Measurable Allyship,” they created the Safety Pin Box, which they describe as “The subscription box for white people who want to be allies in the fight for black liberation.” Each month a box arrives containing strategies, tools, educational resources, and concrete actions white people can take to grow their antiracist commitment and their skill set.

In summer 2017, the Safety Pin Box unveiled an eight-week summer series for kids. The box set focuses on teaching kids “1) that we need to talk about race and not be afraid of the conversation, and 2) to think about whiteness critically rather than passively accept its privileges.”² The lessons are designed to

bring parents and kids into a journey together. The topics include conversations and exercises oriented around the following—

- **Me:** What does my race mean for me?
- **My Family:** What does race mean for my family?
- **My Community:** How does race affect those in my community and how do I help?
- **The World:** What is Black Lives Matter and where do I fit in?

—and includes resources specifically aimed at enabling children to get active and express their dissent from injustice.³

The Safety Pin Box is a resource worth utilizing on its own terms, even beyond the kids series. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers may find it a valuable way to grow our own antiracist understanding and skill set—especially if activism is not something we’ve been part of before. But the kid series is particularly brilliant. It’s an excellent tool to help us build racial dialogues into the rhythm of our family conversations on a consistent basis. If we’ve never done that before it can help us begin.

Analyzing the resources to which we can turn to engage our children carefully is an important step in building support for race-conscious parenting. The vast majority of resources intended to engage children in regard to race focus on growing their awareness of and openness to differences. We need resources that are specifically designed, instead, to teach our kids about the power and possibilities of dissent. SURJ and the Safety Pin Box are these kinds of resources.

Justice will not arrive in the United States without massive dissent. Yet so much parenting and schooling and socialization of children focuses on teaching them to do what adults tell them and follow the rules. If we run up against a cultural tendency to be color-blind when we're trying to see and name race, we also run up against a cultural tendency to conform when we need massive dissent from how things are if our commitments to justice are going to be visible. Creating experiential opportunities to make such messages about rule following more complex for our children is key.

The ability to even question *laws* was behind the way we taught our daughter E. to think about immigration. She spends days of her life hearing from us that she is supposed to follow the rules. But now a rule is being used to incite hostility and sometimes violence against people who are racially marginalized. Dissenting from the law, then, is critical for enabling her to reject anti-immigrant discourse.

Similarly, we made sure our children saw images (at the time) of San Francisco Forty-Niner Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem. When US women's soccer player Megan Rapinoe later followed suit to express solidarity with Kaepernick's dissent, we made sure they saw this as well. We also told them that people were pretty upset with Kaepernick and Rapinoe about these actions.

About this time we were headed as a family to a national women's soccer game. I let both my kids know ahead of time I would be kneeling during the "Star-Spangled Banner." I told them their participation was up to them, and they could choose

to kneel or stand. But I made sure they knew why I planned to kneel. Visible dissent, sometimes without words, matters when injustice is pervasive. Our kids need to know this.

These types of experiences aren't all that different from encouraging our kids to ask a critical and suspicious question of their teacher about what they learned at school or from going with them to school to talk to the teacher together. The experience of dissent, of which activism, actions, and protest are a part, enables them to feel the power of standing with others, the challenge and elation of deciding to speak up even when one is alone, and the moral muscle-building that results when we stand up and stand out and say, "This is wrong and we expect better."

Our kids may not end up making the particular types of protest we choose their own. In fact, more likely, they will lead the way with increasingly creative forms of protest. But by engaging them in various kinds of resistance now, they experience and witness dissent as a value. Such observations are deeply informative of their consciousness and their consciences in ways that cannot be overestimated.

Taking Things On at School

Last, but by no means least, it's worth closing out this discussion by returning to the issue of school. We must be prepared to engage our children's schools.

Consider this: if it's difficult to talk openly about race as parents, if the cultural pressure to engage in color-blind approaches is constant, if we don't always know how to go

beyond “embrace all differences”—imagine how much more difficult any of this is to do as a teacher. Even if a specific teacher embraces the basic principles of race-consciousness (which some do, but many do not), the pressures teachers face if or as they try to implement such an approach are significant.

Imagine all the white parents who might express concern or even anger when a teacher starts talking about whiteness and complicating George Washington’s history! In 2017, journalist Isolde Raftery published an article that showed the e-mails teachers in Seattle Public Schools received from white liberal parents, for example, when the district sponsored a day focused on Black Lives Matter.⁴ The anger was intense.

Educating for racial justice takes a brave and deeply empowered teacher. For teachers to be and remain empowered they need vocal and supportive antiracist parents who give them cover and enable them to teach in ways that run up against these broader cultural currents.

Meanwhile, we parents need teachers to be brave and empowered for justice. Our valiant racial justice efforts at home and with kids in our communities are going to be undone, countered, and assailed in their lives at every turn. Good and courageous as our parenting may be, we are only one influence. Our children spend more time in environments outside the home with each passing year of their lives.

Furthermore, our children’s learning at school is only partially about what they are formally being taught by other adults. It’s also about the countless unsupervised hours they spend learning from their peers (and, vicariously then, from

peers’ families). So attention to racial learning from school and the racial climates at school are among the most important kinds of attention we can pay. We need to be particularly ready to support and complicate and, when needed, challenge and intervene.

Engaging antiracist commitments at school stands to accomplish many outcomes. Doing so can impact the school’s larger environment, making commitments to and questions about antiracism part of the ethos at school. It makes us visible and thus potentially impacts our relationships with other parents there, including with parents of color who experience all kinds of racialized challenges in public school systems. It especially stands to do so when we identify where such parents are already at work engaging the racial climates at school, and step in to support these existing people of color-led efforts first.

And, of course, our children are always watching us. Thus, this is terrain in which we engage in some of the most important and explicit modeling about what it looks like to take a stand for justice in order to impact systems within our spheres of influence.

Having said that, taking up matters at school is almost always difficult. For as many years as I have been doing this work and for as positive, supportive, and wonderful a school as my kids have, one year when one of them came home wearing a feather headdress at Thanksgiving I was really nervous about voicing my distress.

Before talking to her teacher I had to repeatedly practice what I wanted to say. I imagined myself speaking gently and

envisioned myself as a player on the same team as her. I thought carefully through my explanations about why a headdress was so problematic in case she didn't immediately see the problem. I practiced my ideas aloud with other adults.

In this particular case, it turns out I didn't need all of that. The conversation went beautifully and the results were effective. My daughter's teacher told me not only had she not been the person who had had the kids make headdresses, but that she had experienced some discomfort about it. She hadn't stopped it, however, because the person who had, had been working really hard and on her own. It felt inconsiderate to step in, then, after the fact and say no.

I appreciated that difficult dilemma. And while it didn't make it okay, I had to admit that I have myself, many times, responded similarly for similar reasons. I've let something pass I knew was wrong. Our dialogue didn't end up making my daughter's teacher defensive or alienating me from the school. On the contrary, besides enabling her fortitude to say headdresses would not be made again in her class, my speaking up enabled her to get more in touch with her desire to not allow something to go forward next time she was uncomfortable. It enabled me to remind myself I have to constantly recommit to doing that as well. In addition, I learned that my child's teacher was open and willing to engage in ways that grew my respect for her.

It's actually not at all uncommon for one white person breaking silence to free others up to do the same. I've learned more than once in my life and in a variety of different contexts

that facing my fears and taking on a racist or racialized incident often pays off in ways I didn't imagine it could. It doesn't always happen that way. But it often happens that way.

So when we consider our children's school contexts, it can be useful to assume first that our children's teachers and administrators are on our team and are going to be responsive. We can imagine that other parents share our concerns and longings, and approach them in that spirit. Challenging racism is never easy and it does not always yield the outcomes we are aiming for. But at the same time, we need to know that our verbal, visible, and constructive engagements for justice may very well reveal allies and coparticipants we wouldn't have recognized had we stayed silent or unengaged.

Resistance is a moral value and a lifelong practice. Dissent is a moral value in the context of injustice. Antiracism is a difficult, but utterly humanizing journey. These are not the final words or areas of life in which we need to be courageous journeyers with our children. But these are stories to ponder and postures to try. They are practices to explore and queries to make. As we seek to create a world that is just, we can raise white children who not only learn to long for racial justice, equity, and fairness, but who grow deep commitments to and capacity for calling these into existence. This is a journey with many ongoing unknowns. But it is a journey worth recommitting to every day.

Takeaways

- ✓ The more we engage our children explicitly about racism and racial injustice, the more often we will find ourselves impressed by their understanding and readiness to act—in spite of the fact that their hearts might be broken by it.
- ✓ Parents of white children can—and must—step into the unknowns, chart what is mostly still uncharted, and become resilient participants alongside parents of children of color who are already at it and have long been so. A racial justice movement is alive and strong in this nation, and it needs all of us to be *all in*.
- ✓ The hopes embedded in a commitment to race-conscious parenting require us to allow our children to be vulnerable and feel the ache and hurt of the harm that injustice causes. We may want to insulate our kids from it, but the humanity of even the youngest of our children is directly tied to their ability to identify with that suffering.
- ✓ Standing up for justice in the United States requires a willingness to challenge relentlessly circulating myths about this nation's history and “heroes” that are simply not true. We must teach kids that it's always worth asking whether there is more to the story, and help them connect the dots.

- ✓ If we want white children to be able to ask, challenge, and intervene when injustice is happening, they have to develop the recognition that people in authority positions and with power aren't always correct.
- ✓ It's not at all uncommon for one white person breaking silence to free others up to do the same. Our verbal, visible, and constructive engagements for justice may very well reveal allies and coparticipants we wouldn't have recognized had we stayed silent or unengaged.