



If we don't talk to children about how to think and feel about racial differences, they will come to their own conclusions—often inaccurately and in ways that may perpetuate discrimination or internalized racism.

Writing as Activism

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“Neutrality means accepting the way things are now.” ~ Howard Zinn (1991)

Each new day finds us living in an ever-polarized world where everything feels politicized, requiring people to take a side. While issues are generally not binary, remaining neutral is ultimately a type of action in the end, especially in the context of important issues like racism and book bans. As a pediatric psychologist and as a marriage and family therapist, we are expected to remain neutral with our patients and to not express our personal opinions. However, we are also trained to understand the detrimental impact of neutrality in relation to topics like trauma and discrimination.

The scientific literature has shown that by six months of age, infants can notice differences in skin color and hair texture. By two, children will point out differences in skin

color. By three, children may be forming judgments about people based on racial differences. And by five, children show many of the same racial attitudes that adults hold (Belli 2020). Furthermore, we know that adults play a critical role in shaping children's understanding of race, whether the messages parents send are explicit or merely modeled by them.

In her 2017 TEDx Talk, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum describes how her three-year-old came home from his day care center and asked if his skin is brown because he drank too much chocolate milk—another child in class had told him this. She told him that his skin is brown because he has something called melanin and that, while everyone has some, he is the student in his classroom with the most. At the same time, she worried about the child who made the statement about chocolate milk and what his understanding of race was. If we don't talk to children about

how to think and feel about racial differences, they will come to their own conclusions—often inaccurately and in ways that may perpetuate discrimination or internalized racism.

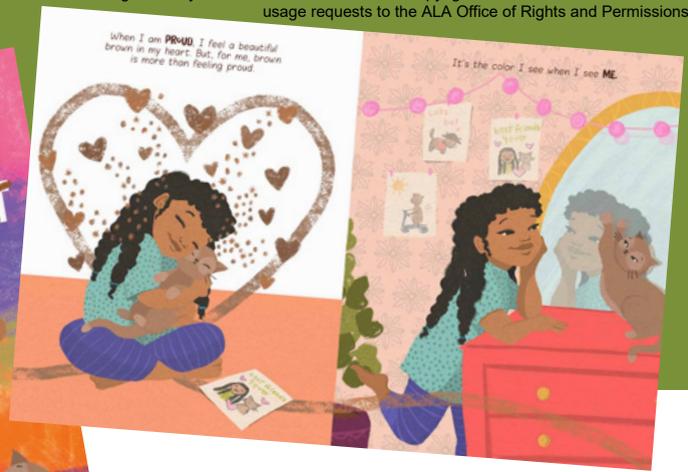
For us in particular, the topic of race and racism is one that has influenced our work greatly. We have witnessed firsthand the impact of discrimination on young patients and how it affects the way they perceive both themselves and their world. Moreover, we were shaped at a young age as Middle Eastern Americans who experienced discrimination in a post-9/11 world when hate crimes toward the Middle Eastern community in the U.S. grew exponentially.

During the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd, we felt an urgency to help children who may be in need of guidance and support in dealing with race and racism. We wanted to meet

the opportunity by using our skills and experiences to give children a resource to cope and even thrive in a society that is not yet free of discrimination. We understood that many children may not be exposed to much about racism beyond perhaps hearing about values related to treating everyone equally no matter how they look. Additionally, we knew that parents often avoid conversations on the topic due to discomfort, whether based on their personal experiences of racism or because they want to take a neutral stance or a colorblind approach. However, research has shown that avoiding the topic or taking a colorblind approach can instill a negative or taboo view of race (Williams 2011), and is a missed opportunity to promote positive and prosocial values. Taking a colorblind approach also means choosing not to see race and choosing to believe that everyone is treated equally, but this is inaccurate and unrealistic.

We wondered and worried about the experiences of children and families. How were children from communities of color understanding what was happening? How were parents and caregivers talking to them about racial trauma? What were ways parents and caregivers could build their child's resilience after a traumatic experience like discrimination? We found writing to

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be our form of activism and our way of answering these questions, while educating people about anti-racism and building pride and resilience in young children of color everywhere.

We wrote *The Proudest Color* (Familius 2021) to help parents, caregivers, and educators immerse children in learning how to counteract negative and harmful messages of discrimination. Our perspective is rooted in the evidence-based practices of racial socialization. Therefore, when the main character of our book, Zahra, experiences discrimination at school, her parents remind her of all the incredible people who share her skin tone and have done incredible things in the world. Research has shown that when adults instill cultural and racial pride in children it can serve as an effective buffer against the impact of discrimination (Hughes and Chen 1997). The goal of *The Proudest Color* is to be an engaging, gentle, and creative way of teaching children about race, racism, and emotion identification. Our hope for our book was that parents and educators would use it as a jumping off point for having enriching and supportive conversations with children.

Children's books have always been powerful and reliable tools for engaging children about such critical topics. To young ones, these

books are magical and are often very formative. The books we read in the library growing up have shaped us, fueled our passion for books, and led us to become authors. However, we are dismayed that what books are stocked on library shelves has become the center of a controversial movement. In the wake of Black Lives Matter demonstrations, in recent years schools, educators, and children's books have become focal points for those seeking to ignore and erase the problems of our country through book bans and oppressive legislation that aims to restrict educators, even threatening legal consequences. Recently the *Washington Post* described the book banning movement as "unprecedented" (Natanson 2022). A word that had been primarily used to describe the pandemic for the last several years of reporting was now being used to describe book banning! We are certainly living in extraordinary times, and we must consider whether being neutral is truly in the best interest of those we chose to nurture, protect, or heal.

As clinicians we are empathetic to the struggle in which librarians find themselves engaged, and we can understand how daunting it must be to have to make decisions that could upset library stakeholders. But, we believe that in times of uncertainty, reflecting on one's original motivation for entering a profession can be helpful. Librarians serve as

curators of content and knowledge for little minds, and the work they do resonates for generations. Providing a space for learning for even one child who feels that their skin tone is somehow wrong or bad is a worthwhile cause, despite any immediate blowback. School librarians have a unique opportunity to help shape and support future generations with books written about the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” ~ James Baldwin (1962)

Dr. Sheila Modir and Jeff Kashou, *Middle Eastern Americans (Iranian and Palestinian) and clinicians, advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and work toward building resilience in children.* Sheila is a pediatric psychologist at a children’s hospital. She earned a combined doctoral degree in Clinical, Counseling, and School Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and her Master’s degree in social welfare at UCLA. Jeff is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, and a manager of clinical product and service design for a mental health tech company. His Master’s degree from Pepperdine University is in clinical psychology. He has previously served on the Board of Directors for the California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. They coauthored *The Proudest Color* and are donating their proceeds to the ACLU and other nonprofit organizations that promote racial justice. Together they have advocated at the state and federal level for better mental health care policies, in addition to doing international work with the Red Cross to support refugee asylum seekers in Belgium. They also consult on film and television productions, including those of Disney and Freeform, to ensure that mental health is portrayed responsibly. Find teaching resources based on *The Proudest Color* at <<https://theproudestcolor.com/resources>>.

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