



Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions

Arizona State
University



Promoting Positive Youth Development and Health in a Racist Environment

“Racism is structural, and it impacts disparities related to health, education, and criminal justice,” stated James Herbert Williams, Ph.D., Director, School of Social Work, Watts College, ASU and host of the Roundtable.

Although Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 to [reduce the achievement gap](#) between minority children and white children, Black children are still more likely to receive [lower scores on tests](#), [less likely to finish high school](#), and [less likely to enter college](#). They also have [worse employment outcomes such as being unemployed](#) and underemployed. Additionally, they are at a disadvantage in experiencing lifetime learning opportunities.

Systemic racism is also endemic in the criminal justice system where there are [more Black children](#) than children of other races. In Arizona, [a Black child is three times more likely](#) than others to be arrested and placed in juvenile justice institutions.

According to Dr. Williams, “It is extremely important to put prevention programs in place and prevent youth from entering the system. We know prevention works. But, we spend a lot less money on prevention than we do on supporting systems.”

Roundtable Discussion

In an effort to further its mission to promote health and wellness and reduce health disparities, the Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC) at Arizona State University convened a Roundtable to discuss racism and promote positive youth development. Dr. Williams stated that the goal of the Roundtable was “to discuss how to best serve African American youth, how race and structural racism is embedded in our society and how racism impacts how we do business on a daily basis.”

Additional Roundtable experts included Eleanor K. Seaton, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist and Associate Professor at the ASU Sanford School of Social and Family Dynamics and Michelle

Cabanillas, LMSW, Lead Social Worker at the Roosevelt School District in Phoenix, Social Worker at Irene Lopez Elementary School and member of SIRC’s Community Advisory Board.

Discussion

According to Dr. Seaton, racial discrimination consists of actions taken by dominant racial groups and these acts have adverse effects on subordinate, or less prevalent, racial-ethnic groups. In her research, Dr. Seaton [asked Black adolescents ages 13 through 18 about their experiences of racial discrimination](#). She found that 87% reported experiencing at least one discriminatory experience and an average of five incidents within the prior year and commented, “It is not a question of *whether* young people will experience discrimination, but *when* they will they experience racism and how they will cope.” She reported the most common way youth experience racism is that “people act as if they’re better than you.”

In a study, Dr. Seaton asked Black youth to keep a written record so researchers could better understand the racism young people encountered. Results of the [two-week daily diary project](#) showed that 97% of youth reported an average of two incidents of racial discrimination each day. Their most common experience was being stared at by strangers because of race, and the frequency with which Black American youth experienced racism increased with age.

In [one study](#), Dr. Seaton found that Black adolescent girls undergo significant hair scrutiny including unwanted touching, questions and comments about their hair. Her studies also show that racial discrimination is linked to [lower self-esteem](#), [lower life satisfaction](#), [increased depressive symptoms](#), and lower psychological well-being. In fact, racial discrimination adversely impacts almost all developmental outcomes.

When faced with racism, Black youth may be protected if they take pride in their heritage. Those who are proud of their cultural history



develop empathy for others “who don’t look or sound like us.” Further, she suggested that young people should learn about their history, participate in volunteer opportunities and become involved in a supportive affinity group.

Recommendations

In addition to encouraging youth to take pride in their cultural heritage and become better defended from the negative effects of racism, there is also a need for additional research on the effects of racism. Studies are needed to examine psychosocial factors including studies of mixed ethnic and multiracial youth as well as factors important over the life span such as gender, social class, immigrant status and youth’s every day contacts including family, school and peer dynamics. In addition, adults need to be aware they can play a critical role in supporting youth by talking with them openly about racism, listening and encouraging their participation in activities which promote positive mental health and well-being, and teaching them to be proud of their culture, accomplishments and achievements.

Conclusion

Ethnic and racial identity are important in the development of adolescents of color and may affect their psychosocial, academic and health outcomes. Ethnic identity can also be a positive force and offset youth’s perception of racial discrimination. Ethnic affirmation and feelings of belonging are associated positively with youths’ academic performance. A strong sense of racial pride can result in less drug use, less tolerance for fighting and can promote positive youth development and mental health.

While it is crucial to promote positive youth development and health and prevent children from experiencing racism and other negative outcomes, it is also important to consider the intersectionality between physical health, mental health, education, school environments and developmental outcomes.

The effects of racism can be pernicious. However, its impact may be lessened when youth are taught to honor their history, take pride in their identity, build relationships with supportive adults and engage in activities which reinforce their heritage. These behaviors can help to dispel the damage caused by racism and promote positive youth development and health.

Where to Learn More

- Collaborative for Academic and Social Learning: <https://casel.org>
- Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org>
- Embrace Race: <https://www.embracerace.org/resources>
- American Psychological Association, Racial and Ethnic Socialization: <https://www.apa.org/res>
- PBS for Parents: <https://www.pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism>
- PBS for Educators: <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/tools-for-anti-racist-teaching>
- Smithsonian Institution: <https://www.si.edu>

are less likely than others to experience depressive symptoms. It is only when a young person feels pessimistic about being Black that depressive symptoms increase.

Dr. Seaton noted the need for additional research to explore the intersection of puberty, race and gender among Black American children and adolescents as related to discrimination and mental health in order to determine “how racism gets under the skin.”

Schools are particularly important in youth development because this is where young people spend most of their time. School composition and its level of diversity and friendship networks can also play an important role in changing or reinforcing African American youths’ identity.

Schools are also important because of the role played by school social workers in working with youngsters who are affected by racism and their families. Social workers are in daily contact with youth and are in prime positions to identify obstacles, offer solutions and take concrete actions to assist children and family members in overcoming racism, stigma, inability to access mental health services and the lack of insurance.

According to experienced social worker Michelle Cabanillas, LMSW, adults have a much greater capacity than youth to bring about change. She asks, “What can we do to help youth be more resilient? What can we do to help youth build skills?” She discussed the important role adults can play to help and support youth and advocate for changes in systems which promote racism, noting that adults have experiences and skills which youth do not possess. She also cited the need for adults to provide opportunities to eliminate barriers in discussing racism and said, “It’s hard to say the word racism. Even saying the word is uncomfortable, let alone having a conversation. We need to talk about overt and concealed racism and create change. Children hear what we say.”

She recommended that youth be encouraged to develop relationships with adults in their family or friends at school from the same ethnic group. These connections could help them better understand and embrace their cultural heritage.

She also recommended that adults engage in anti-bias programs in the workplace that focus on inclusiveness and diversity training. In addition, she suggested that adults help youth to