

Online Report for CNN Anderson Cooper 360° Special Report “Kids on Race: The Hidden Picture”

March 5, 2012

Background

The previous CNN AC360° project on race (‘Doll Study’) was a re-examination of the classic “Doll” study conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s in which young African-American children, particularly in the South, when given a choice between a White doll and a Black doll, preferred the White doll. Children also assigned more positive traits to the White doll and even thought that teachers would prefer the White doll over the Black doll (Clark & Clark, 1947). On the whole, African-American children preferred a same-race doll. Yet, a portion of African-American children thought that the White doll was preferred by the teacher, and also thought that this doll was more attractive. Rather than focusing on children’s self-esteem (as the Doll Studies of the 1940s and 1950s did) current child development researchers view the findings as revealing young children’s awareness of status and race, and the differential preferences that exist in society about race and social relationships (Aboud, 2003; Nesdale, 2004).

In 2010, CNN AC360° revisited this test with the goal of determining the status of children’s racial beliefs, their attitudes and preferences, as well as skin tone biases at two different developmental periods in young childhood. While few age differences were found across the two age samples, the pilot demonstration revealed that among the young children interviewed (mean age 5 years) European-American students tended to select lighter skin tones more than their African-American peers when indicating positive attitudes and beliefs, social preferences, and color preferences. While this research provided an indication of how children associate different traits with different skin tones, the “Doll Study” did not explore how these associations translate to everyday interracial interactions in children’s lives.

Current CNN AC360° Special Report

The current CNN AC360° project was designed to take advantage of new research methodologies that have been developed to understand the complexities of race in the context of peer relationships, friendships, interactions in the child’s world, and specifically in the school context. The current project uses research methodology based on previously published work by child development experts in the field (Levy & Killen, 2008; Killen & Rutland, 2011). This research program is grounded in decades of research on children’s friendships and social development, and specifically examines what children and adolescents think about situations involving children from different racial backgrounds.

Prior Research Findings in Child Development

Research from this framework has shown that children and adolescents rely more on shared interests, such as sports or hobbies, to decide who can and cannot be friends, rather than basing friendship decisions on race alone. This is demonstrated in studies where child participants are shown illustrations of familiar situations at school and complete measures to assess if they use race as a factor for making judgments about: (1) if the children portrayed in the pictures can be friends, or (2) if they have shared interests (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006, 2010). An indirect way to assess this is to ask children to make judgments about whether someone has positive or negative intentions in an ambiguous situation in which there is no one “right” answer (Killen, Sinno, & Margie, 2007; Killen, Kelly, Richardson, & Jampol, 2010; McGlothlin, Edmonds, & Killen, 2007). Research has shown that sometimes children do take race into account when making judgments about peer interactions.

Attributions of Intentions: When do Children Attribute Negative, Positive, or Neutral Intentions to Others?

One factor that has been shown to influence children’s friendship choices or decisions has to do with how they interpret everyday encounters on the playground and at school. A common problem for children (and adults) has to do with how individuals sometimes make mistakes about someone else’s intentions when a situation has some ambiguity in it. For example, if I see two boys outside and one is on the ground looking hurt, what do I think happened? I might think that the child nearby pushed the other child down, or I might think that the child nearby will help him up. I don’t know what really happened or what will happen, but I use various pieces of information to infer the intentions of the children involved. Misinterpreting others’ intentions is a very common source of conflict for children (Child A: “He pushed her down!” Child B: “But he didn’t mean it!” Child A: “Yes, he did!”). Extensive research in child development has shown that children often make errors when reading the cues from other people, and sometimes “see” negative intentions in situations that are actually accidental in nature (see Kenneth Dodge’s research on attribution judgments; Crick & Dodge, 1994, Dodge, 1986).

Recently, it has been shown that race is one piece of information that children use to form expectations about others’ intentions. When children see an interracial interaction, they have expectations about positive, negative, and neutral intentions of the people involved. What is not yet known is how children and adolescents think about interracial situations among peers when the situation is ambiguous. Who do children think has positive, negative, or neutral intentions when it is hard to tell what really happened or what will happen next?

Thus, in the current CNN AC360° project, in addition to asking children about whether two children from different backgrounds can be friends, and whether parents would want them to be friends, children were asked whether the intentions of a child in an ambiguous situation would be positive, negative, or neutral. The situations that were shown to children (as depicted in illustrated picture cards, see below) were composed of two students at school, one who was ethnic majority (European-American) and one who

was ethnic minority (African-American). In half of the illustrations, the African-American child in the picture card was the possible transgressor, and for the other half of the situations, the European-American child depicted in the picture card was the possible transgressor (or wrong-doer). Young children participating in this interview were shown situations in which one child was on the ground in front of a swing set looking hurt and the other child was standing nearby. African-American and European-American adolescent participants were shown similar ambiguous scenarios that were adjusted for age and context (the setting was a school hallway for adolescents, and outside at recess for young children).

Cross-race Friendships

A major theory in child development is that having friends of another race or races helps to reduce prejudice in childhood (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Killen, Henning, Kelly, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006, 2010; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006,). This is because having a friend from a different racial background (referred to in child development research as “cross-race friendships”) helps children to acquire social skills such as empathy and perspective-taking. This finding has been shown to be the case in research with adults as well (Page-Gould, Mendoza-Denton, Alegre, Siy, 2010).

The CNN AC360° project was designed to examine whether children’s opportunity for interactions with kids from different racial backgrounds, referred to as interracial contact (in school environments), would be related to their views about everyday encounters with other students in familiar school situations.

CNN AC360° Questions about Children and Race

The primary research questions in the CNN AC360° show were:

1. Do children with opportunities for interracial contact view interracial peer encounters, in which someone did something that could be intentional or accidental, differently from children who do not have these opportunities for interracial contact?
2. Does this change from early childhood (age 6) to early adolescence (age 13)?
3. Are there differences for children from racial majority and minority backgrounds?
4. Do children think that peers from different racial backgrounds can be friends, and how close can these friendships be?
5. What do children at these ages think about whether parents would approve of friendships among children of different racial backgrounds, and how much approval will they show?

Methodology

The methodology involved interviewing a large group of children from different racial backgrounds who attend schools that vary by racial diversity and asking children what they think about peer situations at school that are interracial and involve intentions that are ambiguous (positive, negative, or neutral). The CNN AC360° project was also designed to determine whether children think that interracial peers can be friends, and whether parents want them to be friends. Experienced child development researchers, trained at the University of Maryland by Professor Killen, interviewed all children. Open-ended discussions developed by the CNN AC360° team about what race means to children were also included in the interview sessions.

Participants

As shown in the table below, 145 children aged 6–7 years and 13–14 years were interviewed. Of the 145 children, 72 were between 6 – 7 years of age, and 73 were between 13–14 years of age. There were 37 students in majority European-American schools, 58 in schools with ethnic diversity (African-American and European-American), and 50 who were in majority African-American schools.

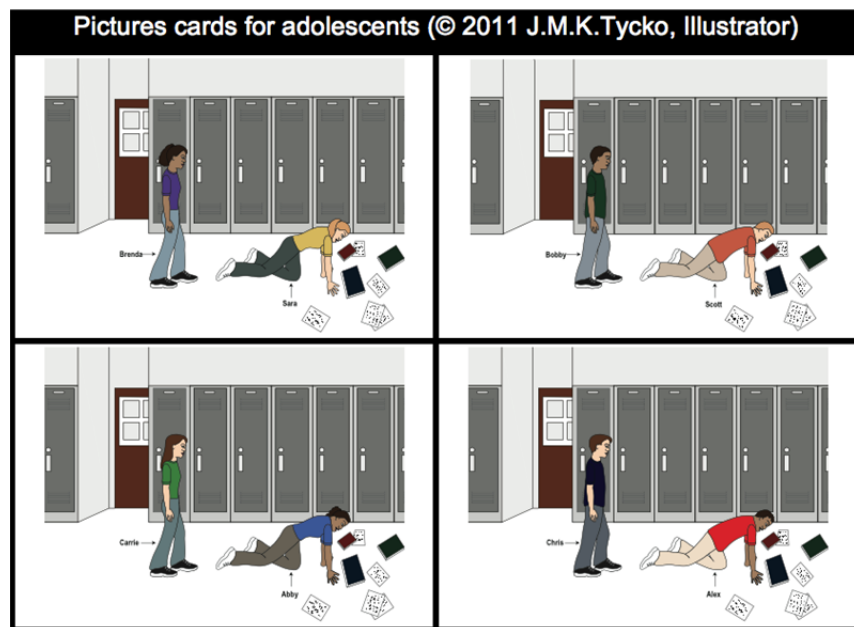
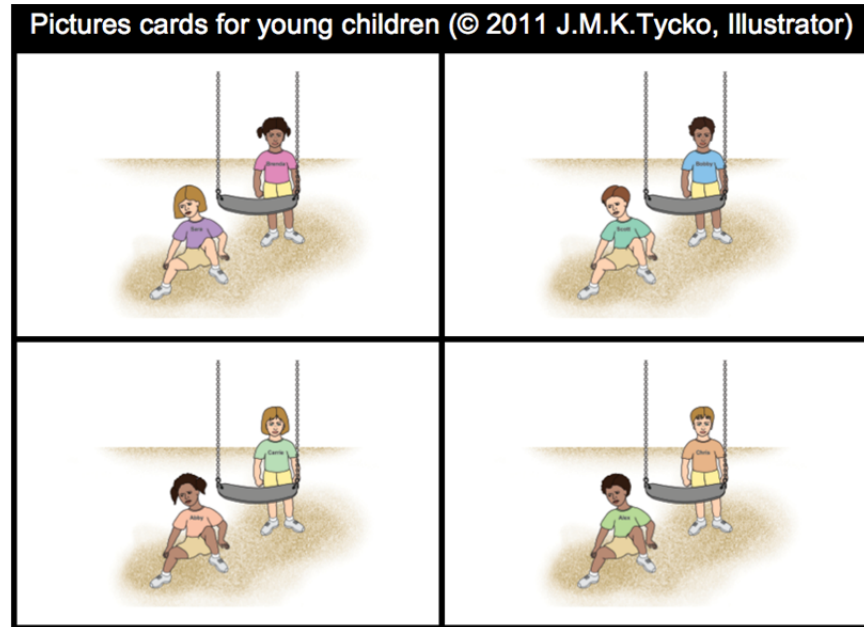
The criteria used to identify schools were as follows:

- Nationally representative: schools were in two or more regions of the United States.
- Socioeconomic status: all schools were from a similar income level based on state-provided information about the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch. While a direct measure of children’s household of income was not measured, by selecting schools between 12% and 53% of students enrolled in the free and reduced lunch programs we were able control for socioeconomic status as a potential factor affecting responses.
- Majority Black Schools: more than 60% of students were self- or parent-identified as “African-American,” “Black” and or “of African descent.”
- Majority White Schools: more than 60% of students were self- or parent-identified as “White,” “Caucasian” and/or “European-American.”
- Racially Diverse Schools: no one racial or ethnic group was a numeric majority (or represented < 50% of total school population).

Picture Cards for Testing Children’s Evaluations of Peer Encounters

For the structured interview assessment, children were asked about two types of encounters: potential pushing and potential stealing. In addition, children were asked general questions about their interests and hobbies to create a comfortable rapport and to keep the interview focused on school activities broadly defined. For this report, only the responses to the picture about potential pushing are included (as the findings were similar across the two contexts). For the current project produced by CNN AC360°, the focus was on the information that children think about and use to decide if peers can be friends, and why. Do children think that two peers from different racial backgrounds can be friends, and do they think that the parents of these children want them to be friends?

All children were shown two versions of a situation that could be interpreted in many ways, but could possibly be a situation in which one child has pushed another child off a swing, as shown below. There were two versions of the pictures by gender (boys were shown pictures of boys and girls were shown pictures of girls). There were two versions of the pictures by age (one for young children and one for adolescents). These pictures cards were based on previous studies with children (McGlothlin & Killen, 2006, 2010) and adolescents (Killen, Kelly, Richardson, & Jampol, 2010).



Design Table of Students, Schools & Demographics:

School Composition & Student Race		6-7 yrs	13-14 yrs	TOTALS
Majority European-American Schools	European-American	12	15	27
	African-American	5	5	10
Diverse Schools	European-American	14	15	29
	African-American	15	14	29
Majority Ethnic-Minority Schools	African-American	19	16	35
	European-American	7	8	15
TOTALS		72	73	N = 145

Design: 2 Age (6, 13 years) X 3 School Composition (Diverse, Majority Ethnic Minority, Majority European-American) X 2 Racial group (African-American, European-American).

Measures

All students were asked three primary questions with follow-up questions regarding each main issue:

- 1) What is happening in the picture? Is it good, bad, or neutral? If good or bad, how good or bad (on a 6-point scale)?
- 2) Can the two children in the picture be friends? If so, how close could they be (on a 6-point scale)? And why?
- 3) Would the parents of the children in the picture like it if they were friends? If so, how much would they like it (on a 6-point scale)? And why?

Following the structured interview (designed by the researchers), children who mentioned the issue of skin color or race (indicating that they noticed variation in the skin color of the illustrated characters) were asked whether it mattered that the children in the pictures had different skin color (or were of different racial backgrounds) for how they thought about the situation. The post-interview dialogue, developed by the CNN AC360° team, provided an opportunity for children to discuss their own experiences with race as it plays out in their daily lives. Responses during this portion of the

conversation, though unstructured, were vital to this show, because they presented a qualitative lens on how race operates in children's everyday evaluations of others and in their understanding of their own peer interactions. The goal was to promote a positive discourse working within all participants' levels of comfort, giving them the freedom to discuss race as it relates to them personally, or to convey that it is not relevant for them on a personal dimension.

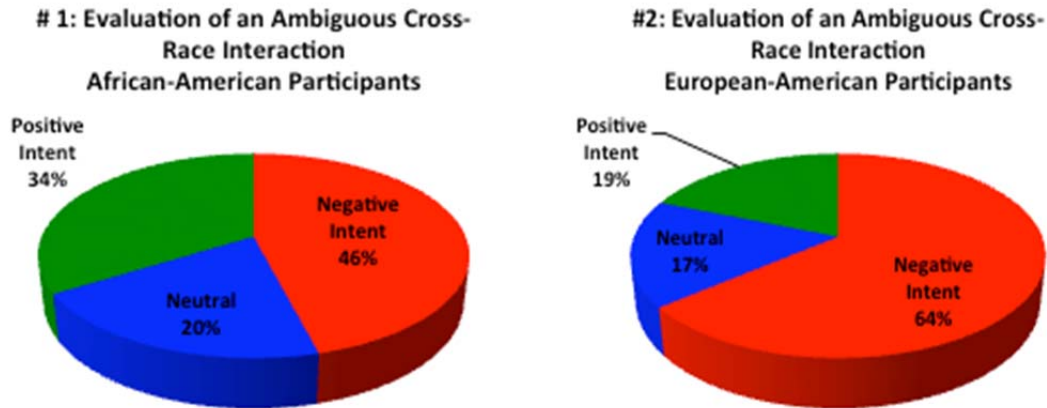
Results

For each question, children's answers will be presented below according to the main variables of interest to this program, which include: 1) the age of the child, 2) the child's racial background, 3) whether the child had contact with children from other racial backgrounds at school, and 4) whether the child had a preference for those who looked like themselves with respect to racial background. Pie charts are included for illustration purposes.

First, a positive and surprising result was that children did not *systematically* view the child who looked like them in terms of racial background as being more positively motivated than the child who was from a different racial background. In fact, children rarely used the race of the potential transgressor (the child in the picture who might have pushed the other child) to decide if the he or she was doing something good, bad, or neutral. However, this does not mean that children were "color-blind", or that race did not have any role in their responses. Children's and adolescents' interpretations of the cross-race encounter, decisions about whether the children involved in the encounter could be friends, and thoughts on whether parents would approve of the friendship did show race-based judgments.

Q1. How do children and adolescents interpret cross-race interactions?

As shown in pie charts #1, and #2, European-American children on average viewed interracial interactions more negatively than did African-American children ($F(1,139)=4.83, p<.05, \eta^2 = .03$), meaning that European-American children were more likely than African-American children to think that an ambiguous everyday situation involved some negative intentions on the part of a potential transgressor.



However, this negative interpretation of the cross-race encounter was much more prevalent in younger children than in older children. As shown in pie charts #3 and #4, younger European-American children were more negative about what happened than were African-American children ($F(1,141)=7.48, p<.01, \eta^2 = .05$), but this was not the case for European-American and African-American adolescents, who were more similar to each other in their initial assessments of what went on during the ambiguous situation.

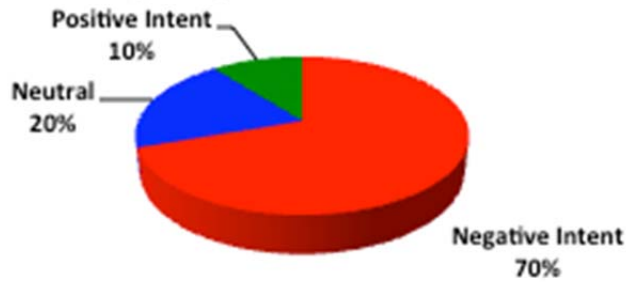
When some children evaluated the cross-race interaction, they described how their personal experiences influenced their evaluation of the scenario. For instance, an adolescent African-American boy at a majority African-American school said that he thought that race played a role in why one child was mean to another:

“Because like some people get bullied because of their skin, the way they look. I’ve been bullied for like the way I look and the way of my skin at my previous school that I went to. And they just kept on bullying me and I didn’t like it. I just asked them to stop over and over again and then I tried not to break like but I couldn’t hold on anymore.”

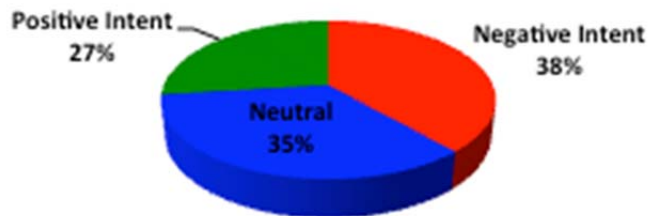
Other children, referenced principles of equal treatment more broadly, when indicating that the interaction between the two children was positive. For instance, a European-American adolescent girl at a diverse school said:

“It’s about what’s on the inside not on the outside. If someone’s a mean cruel person, it doesn’t matter what they look like. They’re probably not the best choice for a friend. But if someone’s a nice, caring person, again, it doesn’t matter what they look like.”

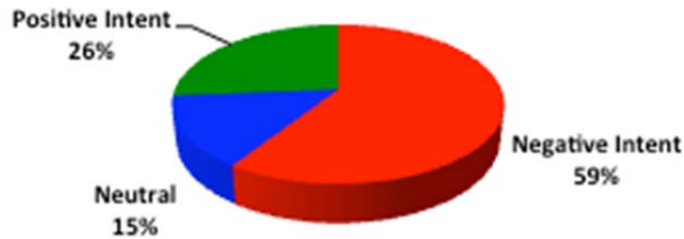
**#3: Evaluation of an Ambiguous Cross-Race Interaction
Young European-American Children**



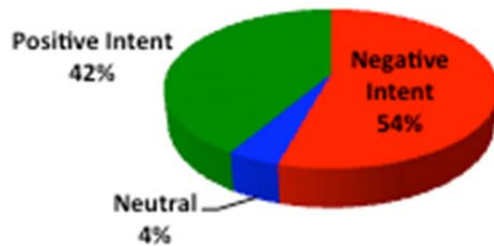
**#4: Evaluation of an Ambiguous Cross-Race Interaction
Young African-American Children**



**#5: Evaluation of an Ambiguous Cross-Race Interaction
European-American Adolescents**



**#6: Evaluation of an Ambiguous Cross-Race Interaction
African-American Adolescents**

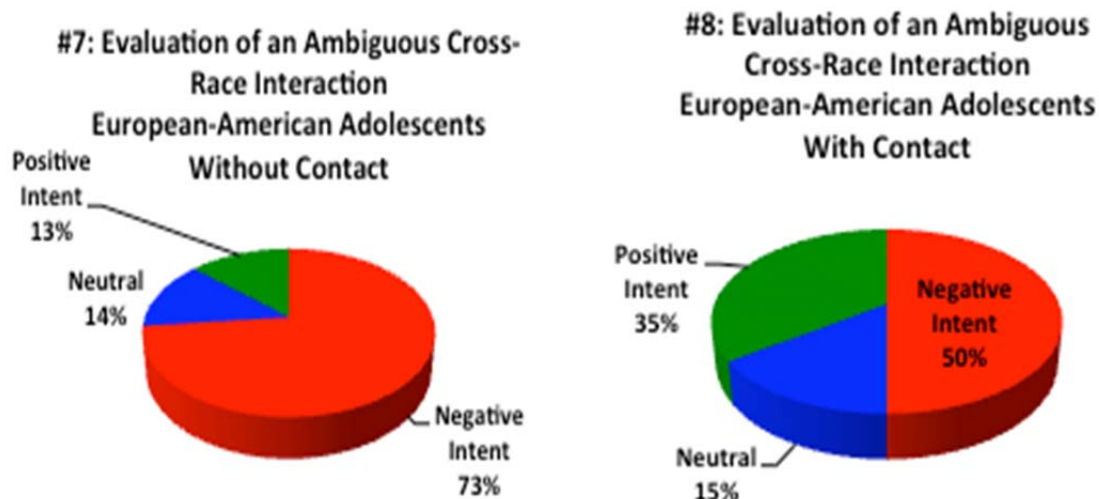


Analyses revealed the positive impact of school diversity on children's interpretations of the ambiguous pictures. Students with opportunities for everyday contact with peers from different racial backgrounds in their school environment were more positive about the encounters than were students without this type of exposure and experience. As shown in pie charts #7 and #8, European-American adolescents with interracial contact at school were more positive than were European-American adolescents without this type of interracial contact ($F(1,67)=5.66, p<.05, \eta^2 = .07$), meaning that the racial diversity of adolescents' school environments was an important factor influencing how they interpreted ambiguous everyday situations.

As they discussed their school experiences, students also acknowledged the powerful role that teachers can play in influencing children's perceptions and encouraging positive interactions. For instance, teachers can address instances of racial inequality.

As one European-American adolescent boy from a diverse school said:

"Yeah there are always people that step in and say 'Hey you need to stop,' and the teachers try to prevent it as much as possible."



In child development research, children are sometimes found to attribute more positive intentions to people who are the same race as themselves (regardless of whether they attribute negative intentions to people of other races). This positivity towards the participants' own racial group was found in younger European-American ($F(1,66)=10.68, p<.01, \eta^2 = .13$) and African-American children ($F(1,66)=8.01, p<.01, \eta^2 = .10$) when they were asked to say whether the potential transgressor (or wrong-doer) in the picture was doing something good, bad, or neutral. While 24% of all participants did evaluate potential transgressors of their own race more positively relative to

potential transgressors of a different race, no statistical conclusions could be made based on the race of the participants (i.e., whether this positivity towards the participants' own racial group depended on the child's being of African-American or European-American background), since there were very few participants within each racial group that displayed this preference for their own group.

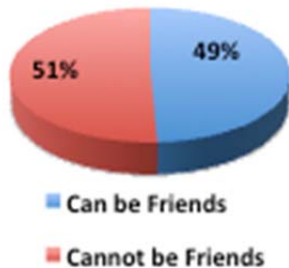
Q2. Can the children from different racial backgrounds depicted in the pictures be friends?

A positive and hopeful finding was that younger children thought that the two children of different races could be friends more than did the adolescents who were interviewed ($F(1,136)=6.66, p<.05, \eta^2 = .04$). As shown in pie charts #9 and #10, younger children were more likely to think that the two children portrayed in the picture could be friends (49%) than were adolescents (35%). However, the adolescents were particularly attuned to how sharing common interests can help children of different racial backgrounds to become friends.

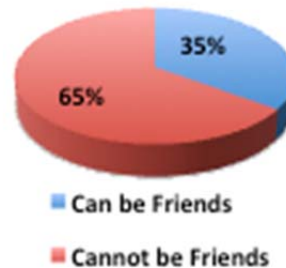
For instance, a European-American adolescent girl from a diverse school said that race did not matter when picking friends because:

“If you have things in common with someone you're often more friends with them than not... if you like soccer and someone else likes soccer, you're gonna become friends no matter what they look like.”

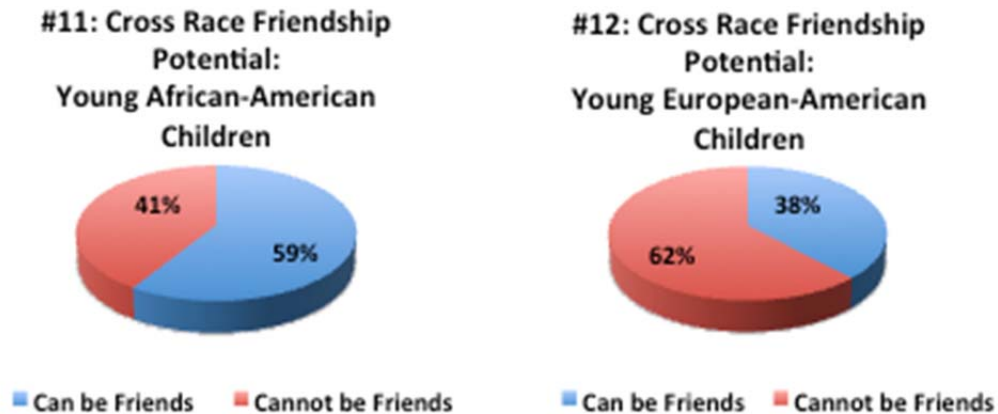
#9: Cross Race Friendship Potential:
Young Children



#10: Cross Race Friendship Potential:
Adolescents



The race of the student interviewed contributed to this optimism in young children, ($F(1,138)=4.91, p<.05, \eta^2 = .03$). As shown in pie charts #11 and #12, younger African-American children were more likely than younger European-American children and adolescents of both races to view cross-race friendship as possible. In fact, the African-American and European-American adolescents were not different from each other; the majority of adolescents thought that the individuals in the pictures would not be friends (63% and 67%, respectively).



Another encouraging finding was that young African-American children were optimistic about cross-race friendships whether they experienced interracial contact in their school environment (40%) or not (42%).

For instance, as a young African-American girl from a majority African-American school said:

“I don’t care what color they are, I just pick my friends.”

Interestingly, European-American students in majority African-American schools were more positive about cross-race friendships (60%) in comparison to European-American students in diverse schools (33%) and European-American students in majority European-American schools (24%) ($F(2,63)=3.67, p<.05, \eta^2 = .10$).

Q3. Do parents approve of cross-race friendships?

After students expressed their opinions about what was happening in the ambiguous situation and whether or not the two people involved could be friends, they were asked whether or not they thought that the parents of the children in the picture would want them to be friends (indicating their approval of cross-race friendships). As shown in pie charts, #14 and #15, analyses revealed that European-American students who experienced contact with others of a different race perceived parents to be more approving of cross-race friendships than did European-American students without this type of frequent interracial contact ($F(1,136)=5.50, p<.05, \eta^2 = .03$).

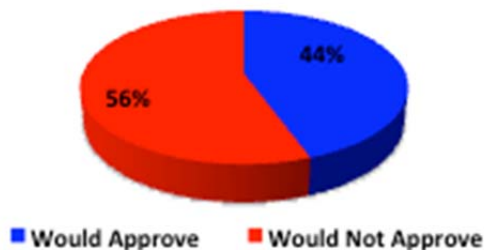
As an illustration of this point, a young European-American boy from a majority European-American school, who had not experienced much contact, said that it would be hard to ask his mom if he could have a child of a different racial background over to play at his house because:

“All the people in my family are White and not many people that my mom knows or dad knows are Black or Brown.”

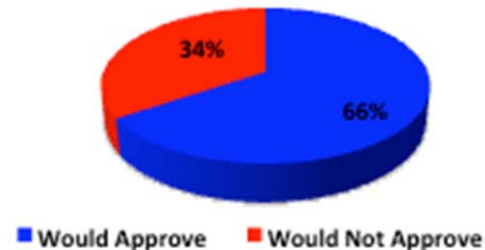
As another example, a young African-American boy from a majority African-American school said that he could not be a friend to someone who was from a different racial background:

“Because my mom wouldn’t want them to be a different colored friend.”

#14: Perceived Parental Approval of Cross-race Friendship: European-American Participants Without contact



#15: Perceived Parental Approval of Cross-race Friendship: European-American Participants With contact



The positive influence of a diverse school environment was again shown in the findings for adolescents ($F(1,66)=4.05, p<.05, \eta^2 = .05$). European-American adolescents with contact with students from different racial backgrounds were more likely to think that parents would approve of cross-race friendships (71%) than were students who did not have contact with students from different racial backgrounds (47%). Students also acknowledged the impact that parents can have on children.

For example, an African-American adolescent boy at a majority African-American school said:

“I think kids would like pick up what their parents are teaching them.”

Finally, adolescents recognized that the level of intimacy of a relationship might impact their parents’ decisions.

As one adolescent European-American girl from a diverse school said:

“I have a friend who, her mom is fine with her being friends with someone who is a different skin color, but she wouldn’t want them dating.”

Implications

Several key findings emerged from this project, which was based on child development research and designed for dissemination by CNN AC360°. The results of these

interviews have widespread implications for parents and teachers who want to encourage positive race relations in childhood and adolescence. A brief summary of the results of this project is presented below, followed by a discussion of the implications of these findings for children's everyday lives and interactions with others:

- 1) Children who have frequent contact with other children from different racial backgrounds in their school environment view cross-race interactions more positively, are more likely to believe that cross-race friendships are possible, and expect that parents will approve of cross-race friendships, when compared with children who do not experience this type of interracial contact.
- 2) Young African-American children start off with a positive view that children from different racial groups can be friends, but this lessens with age.
- 3) By adolescence, most European-American and African-American students view cross-race friendships as unlikely.
- 4) However, interracial contact is especially important in adolescence, as European-American adolescents who experienced interracial contact at school were more positive than those without interracial contact in their interpretation of ambiguous everyday situations (as mentioned in point one above). These same European-American adolescents (with frequent interracial contact) perceived parents to be more approving of cross-race friendships.

Because cross-race friendships are so important for helping all children to grow up with less bias and prejudice, as well as less anxiety about interacting with someone from a different racial background, it is important to communicate how parents and teachers can promote positive interactions and facilitated messages about making friends with others from different racial backgrounds (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; McGlothlin & Killen, 2006; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Prenovost, 2008). This project measured children's perceptions of parents' views on cross-race friendships. Other research has looked at what specific things parents and teachers can say and do to encourage interracial friendships and to help their children to look beyond stereotypes.

The Teaching Tolerance program at the Southern Poverty Law Center (www.tolerance.org) provides a wealth of materials for teachers and parents to use for discussing these types of issues with students (for teachers) and children (for parents).

School environments can provide optimal conditions to promote cross-race friendships, and to help children think about the possibility of having friends of different racial backgrounds, even if the school itself is not racially/ethnically diverse. There are many ways that this can happen. Research has shown that the optimal or best conditions that help to reduce prejudice are those when parents and teachers encourage and support dialogue about the importance of getting along with people from different backgrounds, and when friendships with children from different racial, ethnic, religious, and friendships are possible.

Even when schools do not have racial diversity in the composition of the children enrolled, teachers can read children books with characters who have friends from different racial backgrounds. Because children are aware of race at an early age, it is important for adults, parents and teachers to generate positive discussions about race, culture, and history. A “colorblind” approach is not always helpful because children are not colorblind (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). They notice that people look different very early and adults can help children to understand what it means and when it matters.

Summary

The school environment is an important place where children learn about other groups, acquire attitudes and hear messages, both direct and indirect, about race and friendships. Opportunities in schools for friendships can help children to challenge societal stereotypes, and to establish positive relationships with others from different racial, ethnic, religious, and nationality backgrounds. This is essential for developing a fluency and proficiency in how to engage positively with others of different backgrounds. These skills are important not only personally but also globally, as immigration patterns in the United States diversify our cities, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and families.

Children today grow up in a complex society, surrounded by mixed messages about race, ethnicity, culture, and nationality. The results of this project represent the attitudes, opinions, and decisions of 145 children and adolescents who are working to interpret these messages. Race is not the exclusive determinate of children’s decisions regarding who is helpful, who is harmful, who can be friends, and who parents would encourage to be friends, but it is *one* factor that children use as they interact with others in the common contexts of their daily lives. Children are sensitive to the messages about race that they receive and interpret from the people around them. Knowing this gives parents and teachers the important opportunity to promote the kinds of personal experiences, like cross-group friendships, that give children the chance to challenge stereotypes so that they can move towards the type of positive social relationships based on understanding that define a true respect and value for diversity. With increasingly heterogeneous social communities, it is essential that children are best equipped to develop social skills that enable them to interact with other children from different backgrounds and to become positive members of their communities and cultures as they attend school and enter the workforce. Through a multifaceted effort societies can become fair and just communities with equal opportunities for all its members.

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