

Tulane researchers studying impact of hair and skin discrimination on children

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bbronst@tulane.edu

504-352-2534



The Tulane School of Social Work and the Department of Psychology are teaming up on a survey that focuses on race-based trauma from colorism. (Photo courtesy of the Tulane School of Social Work)

A team of Tulane University researchers has launched a study to better understand how children are affected by skin and hair-type discrimination as they develop into adulthood.

Researchers from the Tulane School of Social Work and the Department of Psychology in the Tulane School of Science and Engineering are conducting an [anonymous online survey](#) asking adults to recall childhood experiences of acceptance or rejection based on their skin tone and hair type.

[Marva Lewis](#), an associate professor of social work and the principal investigator of the study, said that while colorism and hair-type discrimination are pervasive and widely depicted in the media, little research has been done on the socioemotional impact of such experiences on children.

“On one end of the spectrum, we’ve seen insensitive and demeaning talk about what the skin color of the children of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle would look like,” Lewis said. “On the other end of the spectrum, we’ve seen a celebration of hair in the 2019 Academy Award-winning animated short film ‘Hair Love.’ ”

Lewis is an expert on the legacies of historical trauma of slavery, racism-based stress and racial disparities in the child welfare system. Her research centers on the prevention of child abuse and neglect and strengthening the parent-child bond using a community-based parent education curriculum called “Talk, Touch & Listen While Combing Hair.”

The research team includes Bonnie Nastasi, a professor of psychology and co-principal investigator, along with Larissa Parrott, a licensed social worker, adjunct instructor and doctor of social work candidate at Tulane.

The survey, which will be open through May 31, focuses on colorism, racial resentment, childhood hair type, tender headedness, adverse childhood experiences and parent acceptance. Titled [“A Pilot Study of Childhood Experiences of Race-based Trauma from Colorism: Messages of Skin Tone and Hair Type,”](#) it is open to all people over 18 years of age, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Data gleaned from the study will address the research question of how early experiences of acceptance or rejection based on colorism shape adults’ recognition of the impact of colorism on children.

Researchers hope the study will help build community support networks among parents and benefit future research on the use of daily routines to support parent-child bonds. They said it will also help social workers and other mental health providers better engage parents, caregivers and teachers to understand the lasting

psychological impact of negative messages surrounding children's physical features.

In addition, the study could expand policy on the issue, including efforts like the [CROWN Act](#) — Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair — which was created in 2019 to ensure protection against discrimination in the workplace based on hair style and texture and first passed in the California legislature. Currently, campaigns exist to pass similar legislation in nearly every state, and the CROWN Act is in effect in the City of New Orleans.

“It is important to have this understanding in all spaces in which we operate – our families, our schools, our workplaces, our activities, and our governments,” Lewis said. “Our goal is for people to recognize how racism hurts children. And, that’s a hurt that may last a lifetime.”

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Marva Lewis, an associate professor of social work at Tulane