

Tulane University researcher awarded \$3.4 million NIH grant to help families have ‘Color Brave’ discussions against racism

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Having “the talk” is a task shouldered by millions of Black families each year as parents try to protect their children from racist experiences, including the possibility of being unfairly profiled by the police.

What would happen if critical and honest conversations about race, racism and eliminating discrimination were also a rite of passage for white parents and their children? The National Institutes of Health has awarded a \$3.4 million grant to a Tulane University researcher to find out.

David Chae, director of the Society, Health and Racial Equity (SHARE) Lab and associate dean for research at Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, was awarded a grant to develop an app that guides parents in having “Color Brave” (as opposed to colorblind) conversations with their children. The goal of the app is to provide lessons that help white parents cultivate anti-racism in their kids. The app will engage parents and children from kindergarten up to second grade throughout the country.

“Rather than focusing on mitigating the impact of racism on communities of color, it is important to lessen its perpetration in the first place and also increase awareness of structural forms of racism that impact the places people live, the quality of education that people receive and the amount of money people make,” Chae said. “Our intervention has strong potential to influence the development of more productive racial equity frameworks among children, building partnership and support for policies that are crucial for racial equity, and cultivating a culture of anti-racism to address health inequities.”

Around 70-80 percent of white parents think that these conversations are important —and that they should have them — but many don’t know how to talk to their kids about complex issues involving race, Chae said.

Children’s attitudes about race and racism can be shaped early by multiple factors, including what they see reflected in television and other media, witnessing how members of racial groups are treated in various settings, and through explicit instruction, both formal and informal education practices. Chae hopes the app can help parents overcome their reluctance to have difficult conversations about race and enable their children to resist internalizing racist societal views.

“The first module in the app will educate parents about why it’s important to talk to their kids about race and racism,” Chae said. “One of the reasons that some parents give for not talking about race and racism is the belief that their kids are too young. We dispel that because kids actually have a very strong sense of right and wrong. Kids do notice race starting from age 2, if not earlier. And they also begin to assign values to racial groups as well.”

Despite the persistent lack of conversations about race and racism in families, many parents still believe that they are significant. One study found that 81% of white mothers felt it was important to discuss race with their children, although less reported having done so, and only a third could recall a specific conversation.

Chae’s project will involve advocacy groups, teacher-based organizations, and members of the community, among others, who will be part of a racial equity network which will provide direction for the study and provide critical feedback regarding what topics should be included in the learning modules. They’re also running focus groups with parents and interviewing one-on-one with parents and kids. The app is already in development and will be downloadable on multiple platforms.

“I think the most direct positive impact of this intervention will be on the kids themselves, but parents will also be impacted through the process of teaching, and their kids will learn to become anti-racist partners,” Chae said. Ultimately, he hopes the app will reduce the perpetration of racism, and that the effects will spread to others to increase broad support for policies that advance racial equity. “There’s research showing that when low-prejudice kids are paired with the high-prejudice kids, levels of prejudice in high-prejudice kids go down. I think this investment has a potential to yield long-term societal benefits in addition to some short-term benefits as well.”

The study will also include researchers from Northwestern University, San Diego State University, Tufts University, and the University of Illinois Chicago.

The grant is one of 11 recently announced through the NIH Common Fund's Transformative Research to Address Health Disparities and Advance Health Equity initiative. This research is supported by the NIH Common Fund under award number U01OD033242.