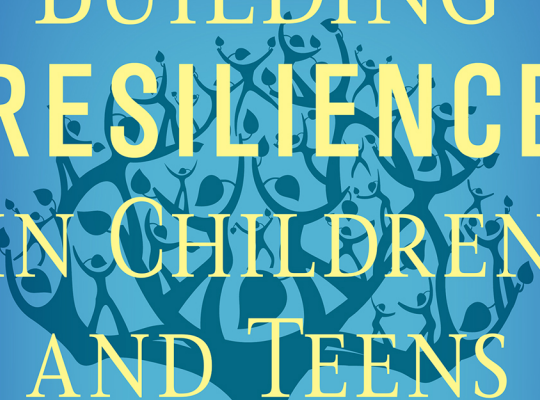


4TH EDITION

# BUILDING RESILIENCE IN CHILDREN AND TEENS



Giving Kids Roots and Wings

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## Raising Youth of Color in a Complex World

*This chapter is penned by 2 esteemed guest contributors. Dr Veronica Svetaz and Dr Tamera Coyne-Beasley are 2 of the great leaders and visionaries in adolescent medicine, and both have parented children of color and both are personal heroes of mine. Although this chapter is written primarily to guide parents raising children of color, all people can benefit from better understanding the strategies to build resilience in the context of unique challenges, like racism. Chapter 33 discusses how we all play a critical part of building a generation of good character by raising all young people to avoid prejudice, commit to respectfully caring for and about others, and working to build a better world. (Ken Ginsburg)*

All children have hopes, dreams, aspirations, and desires and need to be parented with unconditional love, reliable support, and active guidance. When we celebrate our children, and acknowledge and appreciate their strengths, they thrive. When we celebrate youth of other cultures, and acknowledge and appreciate their strengths and contributions, *we all* thrive. When we acknowledge and appreciate and value the differences that exist in all of us, since there are no 2 people alike, we all thrive. However, a particular challenge to raising youth of color is navigating the biases and discrimination they will undoubtedly encounter. While there are many biases and forms of discrimination that impact families of color, this chapter focuses on racism, which is one of the most pervasive and visible forms of discrimination people of color encounter. Racism is one of the greatest threats to developing and sustaining resiliency in youth of color. However, because they will need to navigate through racism, it is also a critical reason that their resilience must be developed and strengthened.

## **One Size Does Not Fit All**

Although we may be equipped with instinct and driven by the depth of our love, we all benefit from guidance as we parent. We seek support and wisdom from family, friends, community, and experts. We need these inputs to strengthen us in our role as coaches to our children. But how can we become the best coaches when most expert parental guidance comes prepackaged in color-blind and “one size fits all” packages despite the fact that the world is neither one size nor color-blind? The invisible but omnipresent reality is that families of color often live in the margins of our society, and that this marginalization is magnified when we receive streamlined messages, services, or programs that don’t speak to our children or work for us. Parents of color do the best with the cards we’re dealt. Parents of color might face different burdens than other families. We may have to balance a transnational family; we may still be dealing with forced family separation either through deportation or disproportionate mass incarceration. At the very least, we have to raise our children to navigate a complex world where they receive undermining messages, well-intentioned or not. And be ready to be their most fearless advocate in the face of unfairness.

## **A Parent’s Essential Supportive Role**

Parents wear many hats. As a parent of color on top of all the hats that we need to wear as an adult, the label “of color” is often more of a blanket than a hat. It covers all our roles, propels our sense of who we are, elevates our pride, and challenges us in expected and unexpected ways. There is still a look, a word, a note that can leave us reeling with mixed emotions. Times have become more challenging, so these issues are more in our face, louder, and more inevitable. This is, however, not new to us. Communities of color have a history of generations dealing with alienation. We also know that the traumatic consequences of racism’s effects have been transmitted through the generations.

### ***Check Your Agency***

Frequently on your parenting journey, you need to check your agency. Agency is the belief that one can make an impact; that we can accomplish a task. The importance of agency is particularly crucial for parents of color. Sometimes racism has its way of eroding our agency, of making us feel that our ability to conquer challenges is diminished. Our feeling that “Yes! I can master this parenting thing” might have been undermined during our journey as parents. We need to make sure that we are aware of that and not internalize negative messages we received from society in regard to our culture and ethnicity. But, if we feel the toll of holding spaces and bearing witnesses to too many acts of

bias, discrimination, and stereotyping (sometimes called microaggressions and macroaggressions), then healing is key. (The book *Mindful of Race* by Ruth King can support our healing.) Our healing is the first step in enabling us to help our child move forward in this world that we live in. We should also reach out to find or create common spaces where other parents from similar cultural backgrounds support each other. We can best meet challenges when standing shoulder to shoulder!

Our life challenges may have already made us an agent of change. So, just connect to those experiences, and remember situations where you have been resilient and “sprung back”; these experiences helped you develop your “bounce-back ability.” Use it, remember how you felt when you used it, and access that experience to coach your child into becoming an adaptable person with a survivor’s instinct and a relentless and indomitable spirit of growth.

### ***For Our Immigrant Parents: The Migration Journey***

For our immigrant parents, especially if you are at the beginning of the immigration journey, your teen may learn to navigate the new culture sooner than you. For some parents, language is a barrier, and their children (mainly their teens) will become their culture brokers. Make sure you don’t lose your position of coach, or role model. Use your cultural pride to fuel your everyday challenges and connect as much as you can with a group of parents from your same cultural background. The natural intergenerational gap that is classic among parents and teens gets wider as teens (born in the United States or not) learn the new language and how to navigate the new culture faster. Not only does this widen the gap, but sometimes this flips the natural hierarchical order in families, with parents losing their parenting agency as they feel diminished by the lack of these skills (language and new cultural navigation) and their need to rely on their teens to conquer vital processes and transactions in their new community.

Although you need your child’s support in this new cultural setting, she needs your roots to remain grounded. Your child or adolescent needs your listening, guidance, experience, and wisdom. Don’t lose the emotional protection and connection that your teens need from you! Remember, even if they learn to navigate the new culture and language faster than you, you are still the adult and the one with life experiences that allow them to sort things through and you create the safe space to develop their identity and dream for their future.

Remember, make sure you create awareness and remind yourself of the power of your journey, all the things that you achieved and conquered, and use them to fuel your agency and control, as you will also need to be your teen’s best advocate!

## Supporting a Key Developmental Task of Adolescence

A central developmental task of adolescence is exploring and consolidating one's identity—a sense-of-self. Teens have to come to terms with multiple factors that contribute to their identities. It is essential to their well-being that as their sense-of-self develops, they have a positive racial and ethnic identity. We need to pay attention to this, so we are prepared to coach them to successfully achieve this task.

### ***Ethnic Identity***

There are many identities our child can choose, and many ways they might want to belong. And one of the most important of all comes with our racial-ethnic identity. Chances are, some of you reading this are parents in a biracial or multiethnic relationship, mixing your own baggage, upbringing, values, worldview, and preferences into 1 parenting style. What a ride! And if each of you belongs to a community of color, that means you are preparing your teen to navigate into not 1, not 2, but multiple worlds. In this interconnected world, that is an asset!

If we feel our cultural identity is a central feature of our self-image and, indeed, of our lives, then we need to come to terms with the fact that our children may or may not see that identity from our perspective. It matters because we need to make room to allow our teens to navigate their journey of who they are and how they fit in their racial-ethnic world. Ethnic identity is a journey, one that needs reflective, thoughtful consideration about our world, where we belong, and what privileges come with belonging. Or not. For that, one needs a mind that can process the meaning of belonging to a group, explore the beauty of strengths passed to him from his parents and family, and decide where he fits. Usually, this is an ongoing process, and most of the time, it starts to be resolved during late adolescence. As parents we need to allow room for our children to explore this, without judging, without despair, just with safe and open hearts.

### ***Racial-Ethnic Socialization***

The process of transferring roots and traditions to children should start early, and through all types of conversations and actions, from combing hair to preparing food; from discussing and analyzing the news, to participating in a march. This whole process is called *racial-ethnic socialization*. It serves as a potent antidote to internalized racism. The best way to make sure that our young people will be able to reject negative messages they witness as bystanders, that are directed toward them, or disguised in mass media, is to have an

affirming racial-ethnic identity. Conversations about this can help young people process past encounters and make sense of future experiences. Most importantly, it will position us to address questions they will have along the way.

Racial socialization messages can be distinguished in 4 general categories.

- ✱ **Cultural socialization.** Promoting ethnic pride and transmitting knowledge about cultural history and heritage.
- ✱ **Self-worth.** Emphasizing positive views of oneself.
- ✱ **Preparation for bias.** Preparing children and youth to adapt to and operate within a racialized world, including exposure to prejudice and discrimination. This prepares youth for experiences of racial discrimination and provides strategies for coping.
- ✱ **Egalitarianism.** Emphasizing that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities.

This is an area where research has recently gained a lot of interest and traction, and it is ongoing. A series of studies measured the consequences of parents' racial-ethnic socialization messages for youth. Socialization messages that enhance cultural pride and prepare young people to recognize and deal with bias have been shown to be associated with better outcomes—better adjustment, including higher self-esteem, improved academic engagement and performance, fewer behavior problems, and reduced depressive symptoms. This means it should be part of positive parenting for youth of color. Strategies that provide youth of color with positive parental modeling and clear messages that emphasize racial-ethnic pride and promote learning about one's heritage offer powerful protection. A well-developed racial-ethnic identity may help youth of color distinguish between actions directed at them as individuals versus those directed at them as a member of their particular group.

Racial-ethnic socialization is one of the most potent forces and predictors of positive racial-ethnic identities and incorporates *political socialization*—the development of critical thinking that allows youth to recognize and analyze dimensions of power and authority. These socialization processes have been well documented among African American youth and their families, and several authors (particularly Janie Victoria Ward) have described this work as “Raising Resisters.” Ward has extensively researched this issue and written great work on how to support parents of color in this process. The word “resist” here is not used to imply that any action should be taken toward any other person or group. Rather, it is about resisting the internalization of undermining messages or evaluations. It is about the “self-creation” of a new positive and valued identity. It is about developing the ability to hear and incorporate elevating

messages rooted in accurate assessments of who they really are, rather than incorporating into their sense-of-selves' harmful messages rooted in bias or discrimination. It can involve creating an "oppositional gaze" where one figuratively looks away from destructive noise while looking toward those who will share the truth about who they really are. It is a strategy that allows each young person to become his or her best self.

All youth (and youth of color more so) need to acquire individual sets of skills, including the development of critical cultural perspectives, to positively and successfully develop. When we help youth of color develop a strong racial-ethnic identity, they are able to become agents of change in creating a just and equitable society. We can help foster the development of these critical skills and insights with the youth whose lives we touch.

## Telling Our Children the Truth

While we parents must stress the importance of personal effort and responsibility, we also recognize that this does not necessarily translate to success because of undermining social forces. By honestly sharing this with our children, we provide them with messages that decrease the potential of self-rejection and, therefore, foster their self-esteem. It will also promote the development of their critical consciousness with which they assess their world—one where they will grasp that meritocracy is not the only vehicle for success. Parents must be intentional in this effort, recognizing that our children regularly receive messages of a "color-blind meritocracy" where the ability to succeed is portrayed as linked only to their effort. We must value and promote effort, but caution that effort is not always enough in a society marked by inequity. This preparation enables youth to better navigate systems that are often blind to the forces of inequity. We can equip our children and adolescents with the critical consciousness that allows them to identify and analyze dimensions of power and authority and to effectively resist against and remain resilient in the face of barriers imposed by society. Parents, as coaches, socialize and prepare our children in positive ways by

- ✱ Intentionally instilling racial-ethnic pride and self-respect.
- ✱ Steeping them in the knowledge that they are deeply loved. The security gained from having someone absolutely and irrationally crazy about you buffers against negative forces.
- ✱ Creating spaces to talk about discrimination and bias in developmentally appropriate ways. Janie Victoria Ward shares that this "liberating truth-telling" approach has a "transformative quality"—it can create stronger

individuals at the personal level and foster a sense of belonging with peers, the community, and even in institutions and organizations within society.

- \* Instilling in youth the ability to detect racial stereotypes, and to understand the harm they inflict. In sharp contrast, keeping expectations high and praising children while providing them with new challenges adds to their self-esteem. *Young children will internalize your expectations and turn them into their own aspirations.*
- \* Teaching independence. Children who have a sense of control over their environments also feel they have the ability to influence or improve it.
- \* Letting them know it is ok to seek help and express their feelings (see Chapter 48).
- \* Promoting the development and application of critical consciousness to their examination of the content of popular and news media, especially how such outlets create messages that “obscure the truth” and contribute to the creation of “implicit bias.”
- \* Engaging in your teen’s urge to debate you on difficult issues. When we ask questions, our children learn that their opinions matter and that we care about their views. Valuing and hearing their perspectives holds particular meaning in a world where they will experience being marginalized. Above all, when we listen, we gain insight into what is important to them and with what issues they struggle.
- \* Countering the forces that promote the internalization of negative messages from critical encounters by providing positive affirmations and promoting the development of critical consciousness and agency through liberating truth telling.
- \* Countering negative encounters with alternatives by modeling and describing their own experiences (eg, through storytelling about real-life events) or coaching youth how to channel feelings of rage and hostility into pro-social action, like voting or advocating for social change.

We can acknowledge the reality of discrimination and bias, and prepare our children, tweens, and teens for negative encounters by offering concrete examples of where and how they may occur and discussing how they can best respond. This allows youth to identify what is happening, recognize their emotional reactions, and deploy the appropriate coping responses instead of internalizing the harm that comes from race-based maltreatment (eg, “AH, I wonder if this is what my dad was talking about stereotyping!” instead of accepting a negative comment as a real reflection of their actions). These encounters can include role-playing and discussion about how to assess situations and react differently



when there are situations that can turn life-threatening, and to be mindful about possible deadly consequences, such as encounters with the police.

## We Must Stand Together

If you are a white parent reading this chapter, you may be asking yourself: How can I be an ally?

- \* Expose your children to as many different experiences and cultures as possible. This can include travel to other countries or local communities, and purchasing books and movies and visiting museums that represent other cultures and diverse individuals.
- \* Examine yourself for your own biases and work to eliminate them.
- \* Discuss stereotypes with your child and dispel myths when you see or hear these negative forces. Help your children understand that all people are beautiful and strong and intelligent and worthy of love and respect.
- \* Develop new relationships and friendships. It should include advocating for or supporting a family or child who is experiencing discrimination and actively advocating for equity.
- \* Help your children understand their own family history and the experiences of their ancestors. Children with pride in their own people and secure sense of selves will more easily celebrate the differences and similarities they have with others.
- \* Expose your children early on to the reality of our multiracial society. We must not perpetuate the myth that we exist in a color-blind society. That well-intentioned effort teaches that it's best to behave as though racial differences don't exist and, therefore, denies a large piece of others' experiences. All parents should speak to their children about the realities of the ([www.embracerace.org](http://www.embracerace.org)) world we live in. Starting these conversations can be difficult. EmbraceRace offers resources to parents and teachers who want to address race with children and supports caregivers to raise children who are brave, informed, and thoughtful about race.

## The Uplifting Truth

To raise resilient children of color, you need to be prepared to discuss and counter racism and injustice whenever you see it; and they need to see you do this because they will gain personal empowerment through your modeling. All parents, including white parents, must buffer against the forces of discrimination and bias that impact youth of color directly and other youth both directly

and indirectly. All parents, regardless of color, must be aware of racism and can be a positive influence in building resilience for youth who are directly affected by racism. All of our children must hear elevating messages to be resilient, become their best selves, and celebrate their strengths and cultures. We must see our children as they deserve to be seen and build a better world where every one of them can rise to be their very best selves.

And when we all get there, we will have moved toward a better, more equitable society, where all its members can contribute fully through the uniqueness of their strengths. We learn in middle school that in nature, an ecosystem is more resilient to external challenges because of its diversity. This is the same in our communities—diversity brings different strengths that make our communities stronger. We should all rely on those strengths and, in so doing, cultivate a culture of care for all.

## Resources

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