

Head Start Heals: Episode 1 – Talking to Children About Race

Dr. Neal Horen: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Head Start Heals podcast series. I'm Dr. Neal Horen, co-director of mental health at the National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness. Our goal here is to help Head Start leaders and staff address key issues you may be facing so we can all help children, families, and communities heal.

Today, we'll be talking about how Head Start and Early Head Start staff can talk with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers about race. I'm pleased to be joined today by Dr. Rosemarie Allen, who is the president and CEO of the Center for Equity and Excellence in Denver, Colorado.

We're here with Dr. Rosemarie Allen, friend of the program, somebody we've so enjoyed working with over the years. And the topic of race has, obviously, been in the forefront after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and so many others. But I think a lot of us in the Head Start/Early Head Start world are wondering like – how do we have those conversations? And how do we talk about race with children and families and with our staff? So, we asked Dr. Rosemarie Allen to be with us. And we're so thankful. Rosemarie, I know how busy you are because I think this is what you're spending a lot of time doing is talking with folks about this, but I just want to thank you so much for taking some time to join us today.

Dr. Rosemarie Allen: Thank you. I'm so glad to be here. And you're right, Neal, that this is the conversation and topic of the day. And I hope it continues to be so.

Dr. Horen: Yeah, but let's maybe start with what I would say is a simple question and I'm sure is way more complex, but why is it important that we talk about race with young children?

Dr. Allen: One of the things we have to understand is that young children notice race very, very early. They notice the race of their caregivers and prefer same-race caregivers in infancy. By the time a child is 2 years old, they already are experimenting with implicit bias, and by the time they're five and six, they have the same level of implicit bias as the adults in their environment.

So, what's happening is that children notice difference, and they talk about difference. At about 3 years old, they're beginning to classify objects. They categorize objects and categorize things that are different, the same, what belongs, what doesn't. And because we don't talk about race, they begin to categorize people and place value on people based on the racial cues they get from their environment. And a problem with that is that there is no check-and-balance system. The adults aren't talking about it. The children see it. They see who's preferred, and then they rely on their own devices to categorize people based on different skin tones, different skin color. So, we have to talk about it so that we're providing guidance to children as they begin to place a value on the color of skin.

Dr. Horen: So, you mentioned implicit bias, and I like to pretend that I'm smart and know things. But I always like to just check in and make sure my understanding and everybody else's understanding is exactly what you intended it to be. So, when you talked about implicit bias, what does that mean?

Dr. Allen: Implicit bias is this unconscious process that we actually go through to categorize people. We have no idea we're doing it. And that's really the way we size people up every time we meet them, and it's a result of a lifetime of messages that are recorded on our inner recording from infancy. So, for instance, if your mom held you at 5 months old and was walking from her car to the house and a big dog ran up on you and terrified your mom, she may have held you very, very tight. And a result of that is this message that's now recorded on your inner recording that dogs are dangerous. And, as an adult, you may have an intense fear of dogs, and you don't know where it came from. That also happens with people and how we perceive their difference. And we have these reactions and responses to people, and we don't understand why, but it's based on the messages that haven't been recorded that's now part of our unconscious thinking.

Dr. Horen: That's super helpful, and it suggests, if those recordings are getting made so early – that I sort of know the answer to the question, but I'll ask it anyway. We can talk about race with infants and toddlers. How do we do that?

Dr. Allen: Very casually. You have a daughter. Think about when she was 3 years old. Three-year-olds, 2-year-olds – they notice everything. I taught 3-year-olds for five years. “Teacher, you wore those shoes yesterday. Why is your hair different? Your breath smells like coffee. How come your skin is black? Your hair is curly. Mine isn't.” They notice. We can talk to them very casually about the differences they notice. But what happens is that adults are very uncomfortable talking about race. So, they send this message it's not OK. So, for instance, a child came up to me in a supermarket. I was coming down an aisle, and he rounded the aisle in full run, almost bumped into me. And he went, “Hey, you're black.” And I said, “Yeah, I am, and you're white with blue eyes. Well, my eyes are brown.” He goes, “My eyes aren't brown. They're blue.” I said, “I know! My eyes are brown.” And, about that time, his mom came up, and I was so happy his mom wasn't there when he said “you're black” because I fear that she would have shushed him. We shush children because of our own discomfort. But the way you can talk to them when they notice, “Well, her skin is brown. I don't like brown.” Then you can say, “Well, what color is your skin? Do you like brown the color or the skin? Tell me more about this. Let's talk about it.” But usually, they begin to notice before they place the value on. “How come his hair looks like a sponge? Because his hair has very tight curls, and your hair has no curls at all. Let's go find a book and look at. Let's look for curly hair and straight hair. And then you can even have a poll. Let's say, “Well, how many have curly hair? How many have straight hair?” And you just make it a part of the everyday learning environment. But in order to do that, we have to be very comfortable because if not, we're going to silence children and leave them to their own demises.

Dr. Horen: So, are there ideas? Are there concepts that are not ...? Because you're saying you're going to sort of work it casually, which of course is going to take somebody who feels pretty comfortable and confident. But are there things that maybe you shouldn't be for Head Start-age children really be bringing into that conversation?

Dr. Allen: Absolutely. What you want to do is start with like and difference. Make sure that your classroom, your home, your environment is full of diversity – people from all over so – that questions can come up very casually. And then, of course, you want to honor people and who they are, but you have to remember the age level you're working with. So, for 2- and 3-year-olds, you can talk about race and you can talk about racial inequities, but you have to talk to them about it at their level.

So, a 3-year-old has a great sense of fair. What's fair? What's good? What's right? What are the rules? And when you talk about justice and intervening and making sure people are treated fairly, then you can help the child to empathize. How would it feel if someone treated you that way? It is very important, however, to not sympathize because when you teach children to sympathize, you create a hierarchy, and what we don't need is another racial stratification where white children feel sorry for people of color, but you can weave it into your everyday discussions. I live in a very affluent area. My children go to school here. They had books at home, and they had books at school. So, a very natural conversation would be, in some schools, children don't even have books, or they don't have computers. Is that fair? And if it's not fair, what are some of the things that we can do about it? So, you talk about fairness and you talk about action. What you don't want to do ... First, you don't want to teach children to sympathize, and you don't want to scare them to death. You don't want to say, the police killed George Floyd and people are mad, so that's why they're rioting. That's the wrong conversation for young children. But you can say that there are people, because of the color of their skin, who's not treated fairly and it's really unfair. And when people are not treated fairly, sometimes they get mad and they make different decisions. Some people decide to protest so people can hear their voices, and some people decide to do some other things that aren't consistent with who we are as a family, but it's because they're angry, so we don't judge it. So, there are different ways based on grade level and age level developmental stage.

Dr. Horen: It's interesting, Rosemarie, because as I listen to you and, I put myself in the position of transportation – I'm the bus driver, front office staff. And I think, well, I could have casual conversations about alike and different. But then, as you're talking – the more and more you talk, the more I'm like, yeah. But if something comes up, I'm just a teacher. I just use air quotes on a podcast that no one's seeing. “But I'm just a teacher, and how am I supposed to know what to say?” So, are there things that might come up where you'd say, these are the kinds of things that children may raise. We don't know what the conversations at home are and things like that. What are some things

that children might bring up that might be sort of challenging, and we want to help people be ready for, I guess, is the question?

Dr. Allen: That is such a great question, and Neal, you touched upon something I believe so strongly in, and that's creating a treasure chest of ready responses. If you don't know what you will say before you get to that moment, you're going to be neutralized. You just stop.

I remember I was giving a parent a tour of a child care center where I was working, and one of my white little girls, 4 years old, walked up to – the parent was black. She walked up to me and said, “Rosemarie, why are you walking with that black lady?” I honestly had no idea what to say, except I thought it was funny because she recognized that that woman was black but not me. Right? “Why are you walking with that black lady?” And I said, “Well, she's here to see if she wants to bring her child here to play with you and be your friend.” She goes, oh. And just for good measure I said, “You know I'm black, too, right?” And she went, [Gasp] “You are?” I don't know what she was thinking. Your treasure chest should be full of things like, “Yes, that looks different. Yes, our skin is all different colors and they're all beautiful.” Or when you have that reaction that, “I don't like brown skin. I don't want to play with her.” And you talk about, “You know what brown skin is? Brown skin just means that she has more melanin, you have less melanin, but underneath our skin, we're all the same. And that's why we don't judge people based on how they look or the color of their skin.” And just develop these ready responses and focus on what the child is really saying without that anxiety that they mentioned raised.

I was playing with a child in the block area, and she was assigning roles. And I came over and she goes, “Oh, good, Rosemary, you want to play? Yes. OK. Well, let me see. You're black so you can be the gorilla.” And I thought, “OK, I'm going to go with this.” And I said, “Well, I don't want to be the gorilla.” She says, but you're black, so you have to be. I said, “But I don't want to be.” And she goes, “Then you could be a monkey.” And I said, “OK,” and then she went to the next child and said, “And you're brown so you can be a bear.” She got to the next kid and said, “But you're pink so you can be a flamingo.” The next one, “You're green so you can be a frog.” Now, while I'm trying to figure out in my head how I was going to address the race issue, she was simply looking at our clothing. So, you don't want to overthink. And sometimes to a child, you can say, “I don't understand. Tell me more.”

I was observing one of my students reading a book, a little white child on the right, a little black child on the left. She was in the middle reading the book, and the little black girl said, “Oh, she's beautiful,” talking about the character. And it was my student teacher, she kept reading, and the little black girl said, “I wish I could be like her.” And my student teacher said, “You're beautiful, too.” And the little girl said, “No, I can't be beautiful because my skin is brown.” And the little white girl said, “Well, I'm beautiful because my skin is not brown,” and my teacher froze in that moment.

She stared at the book, wishing me away I'm sure like, “Oh, my goodness, Rosemarie is here.” And I'm trying to use this telepathy, you got it. You know what to say. We've talked about it. Come on, come on, come on. And she finally sighed deeply, closed the book, and said, “Your skin is brown, and it is absolutely beautiful.” And to the little white girl, “And your skin is white and you're absolutely beautiful, but not because your skin is white,” which was very important. Let's put our skin together. It's all different, and it's all beautiful. Little black girl wasn't having it, and then she talked more about, “We're different, we're beautiful, you can be anything.” And finally, the little girl was still kind of, OK. She said, “Well, look at my teacher. Her skin is black and, isn't she beautiful?” And I'm like, “Put me on the spot, will you?” But after that, the teacher who is a white middle-class woman said, “How did this happen, and how can I prevent it?” And we took a tour of that classroom – not a single picture of a beautiful black girl anywhere. Took a tour of the school – not a single picture.

So, when you make sure that your classroom is very diverse, it makes it easier to have these conversations. Will something come up and you not know how to answer it? Absolutely. But the more you engage, the more you write down those ready responses, so next time, you'll know exactly what to say.

Dr. Horen: So, in my imagination, Rosemarie, you've got a treasure chest that's like out of some Hollywood movie, just overflowing, and mine's with Pop-Tarts and Milk Duds. So, what about with infants and toddlers? What do I

need to put in my treasure chest if I'm a Head Start teacher or Head Start staff? How do I address this with the infants and the toddlers?

Dr. Allen: To remember representation matters, so it's the exposure. And we know that children are looking and seeing and discovering, and exploring, everything. So, you want to see pictures of different people of color and please, please, please, not just athletes and entertainers, but very positive role models of people of color. In your environment, you want to have dolls and other pictures, other supplies and equipment of color, people-color paint so that 18-month-old can play with paint that looks the color of his skin and then that looks the color of the teacher's skin.

And then you want to talk very casually about race and about hair. This is the age where they're learning about texture, too, to talk about curly hair. And when you touch it, it bounces back, and what does that feel like, and what do you think? And then you want to be respectful because there are some cultural norms about not touching hair. And just to talk to the children about race and differences casually as you do numbers, squares, and letters.

Dr. Horen: So, all of that makes me feel like, OK, well, here's some good concrete, realistic ways for our staff to talk about this. I could also imagine them parents or families saying, our children are too young to talk about this. So, how do we help families understand why we want to build these treasure chests, why it's important for us in our early Head Start programming, in our Head Start programs to be talking about this and not waiting until children are older or are waiting until families feel more comfortable with it?

Dr. Allen: Your approach is everything. What you're talking about is a difference. We don't ask parents if they want their children to learn their colors or their shapes or numbers, and this should be so embedded in your curriculum that it's not a separate conversation. You can talk about some words of the day and how this happened, and I loved one of my son's preschool teachers – they used “Way Back When,” the storybook curriculum. Do you remember that? And they would send a sheet home that summarized the book, questions that we could ask. But we could do that in preschool. We can talk about; we read a book. Let's talk about race, and we noticed all the differences, shades of brown and this and that, and you may have some parents who began to ask questions.

So, you can do it first and ask later, or you can say, this is the book that's coming up. Would you like to attend a parent information session so that we can talk about the book and how that's happening. And a parent may say, “Why are you choosing this book. I am not sure my children are ready.” One of the things that I've done with reluctant families is that I've shown them Anderson Cooper's "Children and Race" so that they could see, outside of just me telling them, how early children noticed race and without talking about it, we reinforce racism.

And I don't think there's a parent alive that wants their child to be reinforced in terms of becoming a racist. So, helping them understand, children notice. They notice, and right now, the slate is clean in terms of putting value on race. And don't we want to guide it, rather than to leave it up to them to get a lot of misinformation?

Dr. Horen: So, how do we do that? So, what about the families, like yeah, I think we should be talking about it. I don't know how to talk about it. What should I do? If those families really are wanting, they're hungry for: How do I start the conversation?

Dr. Allen: And I think it would be great, and I know that some Head Start programs, they send home little weekly packets with a book and activities. We can do the same things for race talk with questions and the answers in the back of the book for teachers and parents. So, to say, “This is our book of the week. Here is, for those of you who are interested, we have several extra copies.” These are some of the things that you can highlight and talk about as you're reading the book. These are some of the questions you can ask your child, and these are some of the responses if your child asks a question. So, we can have a really prepared lesson for the family. But we could also encourage families to do what we've talked about. You know, when you go to the supermarket, and your child sees someone, sees an African-American person and they say, “How come they're black?” And you can very casually come up with those answers. “People are all created differently, and we have so many varieties. Some people are brown, dark brown – really, really brown – pink, and beige. His skin looks more like bronze. Well, we could say

your skin is.” People of color want to be seen and valued and honored. The little boy at the supermarket wasn't the first one to say, “Hey, you're black.”

And our karate school, one of the children said, hey, how come there's so many black people here today? Focus also on the question, not that it's race. “Oh, my god. It's race, what am I going to say?” The question was, how come there are so many black people here today? So, many black people were there because my son and I, the only black people in our karate school were testing for our brown belts, and they came to see us.

So, the answer is, Clarence and Miss Rosemarie are going to be getting their brown belts. They're going to be testing today. I wonder if they're here to see them. They might be their family or friends. Let's ask. So, the key is to not shy away from it.

Dr. Horen: Well, a couple of things. One, I didn't know that you had achieved certain levels in karate. So, I'm going to have to be a little bit more careful in what I say to you. Two, I think that those are really interesting because as I'm listening to you, my mind is already moving towards: What are we doing now? Now that children may not be actually in their program, or they may not be going out to karate ... And I know it's going to vary tribal nation by tribal nation, state by state, community by community. But are there ways in which to sort of get out these things if the experience is now, you're sitting in your house with your family almost 24/7?

Dr. Allen: And the key is to make sure you diversify what you're doing. For music, and your child's favorite music, to look up the artist, talk about it. You know how surprised you are to hear a voice or hear music and then the person looks so different? What a wonderful game. “Oh, my goodness. Listen to that voice. I'm going to guess what they look like. Let me see if that's right.” And that's just normalizing accepting of differences, and then if the child is older, 6 or 7, wonder why, notice and wonder why. I had a person I had been talking to on the phone, and they came over to do some filming. I imagined her in my head as a size six, blond, in her early 30s. That's the way bias works. We just make stuff up about people. She came over. She was none of that, and you wonder, “Wonder why?” And because we were doing some things about bias, I told her. And she said, I wonder if it's because of my voice because people always think I'm younger.

So, you could ask your children, what do you think their skin color is? Just as casual as, what are they wearing? And then you look up the artist and you go, “Were you right? They're wearing jeans, but their skin's not brown, their skin's white.” You see how you normalize that?

And then there was a Time Magazine article that talked about – the name of the article is, “Is My Baby Racist?” And it talks about how many well-meaning white families expose their children to diversity but never talk about diversity. So, they expose their children to Dora the Explorer but never talks about if she has an accent, where does she learn Spanish, is she Hispanic, her skin is brown just like Juan's, and I wonder if they are from the same place and speak the same Spanish. They never talk about and explore those issues.

So, even at home, as you're watching TV and there is diversity there, talk about all those levels of diversity. Race is just one, but sometimes we're more comfortable talking about poor children than we are about black and brown children and what's happening. When my son was little, only black child at his school, he came home and said, “How come everybody at my school has yellow hair and blue eyes? How come I don't?” Talk about not having a ready response. And I think quick, think quick, think quick, and I said, “Well, I'm your mom, and you came from me. And I have brown skin and brown hair and brown eyes, and your dad has brown skin and brown hair and brown eyes, and you look just like us. And if you had yellow hair and blue eyes, then you wouldn't look like us, and you came from us. Oh, satisfied him; that was the end; never asked it again.

It's complicated these days because of transracial adoptions, but you can still talk about her birth family may have been this and that, but this family is the one that she lives with who loves her and takes care of her. Just at every opportunity, bring it up: television, video games, screen time, taking a walk in your neighborhood. Neal, when I walk in my neighborhood, I know I'm one of the very few black people that my neighbor's children see. And even if their parents don't speak, I always do. I want them to be comfortable seeing me and talking to me because so many people shy away and create that fear, which results in implicit bias.

Dr. Horen: So, I can imagine that there are staff within programs who want to start those kinds of conversations, and I'll be specific here. There may be white staff who want to start more conversations about race. How do they do it in a way that is a good sort of first step amongst themselves and staff?

Dr. Allen: Neal, the best way in the world is to be authentic, is to say, "You know what? I am watching this civil unrest, and I realize there's so little I know and say, I have no idea even what some of the terms are. It used to be implicit bias. Now, I hear this new thing called anti-racism, and now I hear about systemic and institutional racism, and I don't even know what that is. I want to learn more. I want to talk. What can we do? And that can happen at a team meeting. Let's Google how to get involved in anti-racism and see what books they recommend, and maybe we can start with a book club." And then we can let parents know, and if they would like to have their own book club. And then as a team – because you know your relationship with families – as a team, somebody might say, "Yeah, so-and-so came in the other day and said police kill black people." And somebody else might say that "the police took my daddy away." Or you might have children of those who are protesting. But this is a time that you can talk to families, too. "Your son told me that you all were protesting, and I really want to talk to him about it. What are your conversations? I'd like to follow up in the classroom." But the reality, when we talk about practicing cultural humility, this is a big part. And I like to call cultural humility the practice of not knowing, suspending judgment, and being in the role of learner.

Dr. Horen: Yeah, and somebody might not know and may actually appreciate being informed. It's certainly something that, for me, it's been helpful forever for people to sort of say, "Did you know x?" and for me to be open to that idea, particularly when I have a good relationship with that someone. And so, it sort of begs this question because I think that when we think about Head Start and Early Head Start, we talk about how Head Start heals, and it's really about those strong trusting responsive relationships between parents and staff and parents and their children, children, and providers. The second, set safe, consistent, predictable, nurturing environment. Boy, if anyone's ever talked about it in more eloquent terms, I'd like to meet them because you've sort of laid this out so nicely.

The question is really, how is talking about race going to support some of that healing?

Dr. Allen: I saw a meme that captured it beautifully. It said, "You do not have the right to teach black children if you are afraid to speak out against the injustices that they live with." How can you begin to heal a community without addressing the number one factor that impacts their lives? The children that you're working with, children of color, especially black children, on every indicator of child well-being, they're at the very bottom. And we know that it's because of institutional and systemic racism.

If we can't talk about race, then how can we really impact their lives? Most white people don't know that people of color talk about race every day. When I wake up and look in the mirror, I don't see a woman. I see a black woman, and it determines what makeup I wear, what earrings I wear, how I fix my hair, everything about me so I can be presentable and acceptable in the dominant society's view of who I am.

I have done this work for a very long time. In the past few months, more than ever, I am considered the racial equity for our local news programs, so I have a segment every week. And one week, I'm up at 4:00, and I'm doing the segments very early. I can finish my segment, smile, close the camera, and burst into tears. What I realized is that I have been compartmentalizing this. I'm talking about it as if I'm not impacted by it.

My son is a protester, but I'm just talking as if I'm removed. Your children and families are not removed. It is impacting them, and if you're not willing to talk about it, then what's your purpose? I know Head Start and Early Head Start are really involved in the emergent curriculum. So, if this is what's emerging in their lives, and you're not talking about it, what are you actually teaching to? Does that make sense?

Dr. Horen: Makes a lot of sense. I can't thank you enough. I really appreciate you joining us today.

Dr. Allen: Thank you. It was a pleasure and an honor. I appreciate you.

Dr. Horen: For more information about talking with children about race, check out the links to resources in the podcast notes. Thanks for listening to the Head Start Heals podcast from the National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness.