

thing is to keep coming back, being honest with our kids about our own struggle, and asking for their help in figuring this out.

And maybe that's how this article will end. As we enter our third year of White Noise, the group focus is shifting. There are some new people joining in the Fall, some people who are stepping out. We now share a groundwork among ourselves as adults, and we share some thoughts about how to start laying the groundwork with our children. In our meetings, we laugh a lot, we freak out, we forget to bring up important things, we spend too much time talking about the easy stuff and sometimes we dip into the hard and scary things that move us all forward.

Recently, we've been talking about the aspects of our cultures that really prop up white supremacy. We've been talking about how the protestant work ethic is one aspect of white supremacy, the particular values about how we approach work and "responsibility", what gets called laziness or self-indulgent, how we think about the relationship between work, family and community. We have talked about the difference in valuing relationships and community versus valuing "getting things done." We have talked about how raising our children to code-shift is an important part of resisting white supremacy. This means being able to move across cultures and communities without losing a sense of themselves and without assuming that everyone else has to be just like them. And we are talking about moving outside of our own comfort zones in figuring these out. Meaning, not just reading books and getting together to discuss, but maybe, actually, playing; with our kids and not just alone as a bunch of serious adults.

We will continue to learn together. As our children get older and enter different developmental stages with different relationships with friends, community and self, we will need to figure out new things. And at the end of the day, we know this group is far more for us adults than for our kids. Because they will be living their lives separate from us. Their choices will be their own and their mistakes their own as well. By laying the groundwork, our hope is that we support our children to feel empowered and creative as white people to live in the whole world, with wide open eyes and a sense of accountability and celebration. And that in living in the whole world, they might be part of shifting the pattern so that there are more children with each successive generation who also truly have access to the whole world. What we have realized is that we can't take our children's privilege away but we can work to shift our collective understanding of what that privilege means.

A good basic article on White Privilege is by Peggy McIntosh:

<http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>

White Privilege: Essential Readings on the other side of Racism (an anthology) by Paula S. Rotherberg, Worth Publishers

White Supremacy Culture by Tema Okun <http://www.prisonactivist.org/archive/cws/dr-culture.html>

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White Noise is a group of white parents with white children who have been meeting for two years to learn together and support each other in ending white supremacy.

reality is that while our children are reflecting on the world around them, the people of color they are reflecting about are real people who just might not be in the mood to hear yet another person talk about their hair – even if it is a gap-toothed five year old. Everything about this work includes supporting our children to act as respectful members of communities, every single day and in every single context.

Another part of knowing your own shit is knowing your own story, all of it. What is your culture? Did you grow up in a city, a suburb, the countryside? What celebrations and rituals did you grow up with? What kind of food? Do you have a word for it? What did you learn about work? About taking care of your own family or other people? Who felt “like you” and who felt different? What is your culture?

The other piece of knowing our own shit is knowing our own understandings of race and whiteness. What did you learn about race and whiteness when you were a child? Really, spend time here. Think about the kinds of things you were directly taught and the things you witnessed. Notice what your life looks like, who the people are who surround you, your sense of why different people are different from you. Think about what it means for you to be white, to be an anti-racist. Find people you trust to talk to about these things. There is a whole bunch you can talk to your children about, and there’s a whole bunch you need to learn with other adults. Don’t stop thinking about yourself, noticing your beliefs, your reactions, your concerns. Stay with your own work.

Don’t immediately go big, stay specific. Remember those reflections our children make in public places – or sometimes private? The ones that make our insides flare up as we struggle to make sure our own shit doesn’t get in the way of our children learning? This is about those times. Example, when Luca was walking by the basketball court in our neighborhood park, she suddenly asked why only Black people play basketball. In my belly flared up things like: oh shit, that’s so racist. It isn’t only Black people that play basketball, and oh god, I have to help her understand the complexity, and on and on. But here’s the funky thing about young children: she was only describing what she saw and asking about it. It is true that when Luca walks by this playground, most of the time the people she sees are Black men. And so she wants to know why. And while the answer is complex and many-layered, there is an answer. Or there are answers that will unravel over the time of her growing up. It’s a legitimate question based on an observation. Stay specific, listen to what your child is saying or watch what they are doing. Are they in distress? Are they worried or having any kind of emotion? Is it just a question? Before making any assumptions about what your child’s question might mean, ask them about it. Refer to knowing your own shit and learning together. Keep the channels of conversation and learning open.

Here’s another example from a white friend of mine: she picked up her white grandson from his preschool. His first comment to her was: “I don’t like Black people. I don’t think I want them to be my friends”. My friend freaked out, her emotions rose up to the sky, and she jumped in immediately, asking with an anxious voice what he meant but also saying that of course he doesn’t know all Black people, and a whole bunch of other things that she doesn’t remember because her emotions were so high. And as she was talking, she saw him retreat into himself, getting quiet and logging away the information that this wasn’t something he should talk about.

And my friend kicked herself from here to the preschool and back, knowing that she had goofed but feeling overwhelmed. As she later asked more questions, she learned that her grandson’s school had just done a chapter on the civil rights. During this chapter, there was a lot of conversation about Black folks as a people or as a community. Her grandson knew Black folks but he knew them as individuals. He had never thought of anyone as a “people.” While he knew Black folks out in the world, there was only one Black child in his preschool class: a boy who, for whatever reason, teased him a lot. So my friend’s grandson put things together in a pattern in his head: “this kid is a Black kid and he is mean to me. Black kids are part of a Black people. I don’t like playing with this Black kid and I don’t want to be his friend. Therefore, I don’t want to be friends with Black people.” If you take away the sting and the legacy of racism, you’ve got to admit there’s a logic to this.

As we talked about it, my friend wished that she had just hit the pause button after her grandson spoke. She wished she had started right away with asking questions, not putting any kind of value on his words until she understood what he was actually talking about. Because now she has to undo something, one of the somethings that white supremacy depends on. She has to undo this idea that some things are not “polite” to talk about, that there is something uncomfortably emotional about talking about Black people, that grandma freaks out when you bring it up so don’t bring this kind of stuff up.

And every single one of us is going to have to undo moments like this. Because we will all make mistakes. Because we are learning as we go. We make mistakes and we will continue to make them. The important

think about race when we are among all white people. This is important. We notice that we don't need to think about or even notice race when we are around other white people.

Making whiteness visible means noticing the books we read, the movies or television shows we watch, the people in our families and neighborhoods, and the rhythm of everyday life. It's a practice for white people, just like meditation or parenting is a practice. If we don't do it constantly, we don't notice.

Learn together

Don't assume you have to already know everything before you start trying to teach your children. You know the syndrome: the perfect parent syndrome. Our kids look up to us. They ask us questions about the world around them and wait for us to share what we know. When they're young, we are all-knowing in their eyes. It can be scary to have to admit to your child that you are clueless about some aspect of the world around you.

Figuring out how to be white is something we do together with our children. We can tell them what we have experienced, our ideas and struggles and understandings, but living in the world with consciousness as a white person is not about getting it right once and then being done forever. It's about making mistakes and learning and then making more mistakes and then learning more and inch by precious inch, feeling the world open up around us.

Learning with our children is about being in process, in struggle, in family with the most important people in our lives. It is about sharing the fact that this is life-long work, that we are all learning together, and that your child has some valuable things to teach you even as you have things to share with them. That last piece is really important. The minute our kids are born, they are learning –both directly and indirectly – how to be white, which includes how to be a racist. Thandeka in her book, "[Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America](#)," states that the first act of child abuse directed towards all white children is that the minute they come out of the womb, they are being taught to be racist. So the game has already started, whether or not we ever directly address race and whiteness in our family. But kids have something we don't have. Even though they have already started learning their whiteness, it hasn't embedded itself over decades of experience. Their brains and nervous systems are still literally creating their bodies, their identities, their sense of self in the world. Much has already been established no matter when we start, but much is also open for shifting and changing.

Some of what is confusing to adults is likely to make gentle sense to children. Some of the places where we adults make this thick and complex is likely to be simple and poetic to our children. In listening to the questions they ask, the reflections they make, we can learn a whole bunch about how whiteness grows. Know your own shit. Oh lovely shit, oh layered deep old stuff which gets triggered by the innocent voices of our children. The shame of it. The guilt. The embarrassment. What do I do if my child says something racist? What will others think of me? Will they look over at me, knowing what a horrible mother I am, because my son just came out with something funky about that woman's hair, her skin, the way she talks? What will people say?

This is a big one. A really big one. As soon as we encourage our children to reflect on the world around them, to say what they are thinking and feeling and to invite conversation, well, they start to talk. And they will say things just about everywhere. And in front of just about everyone. And they will ask questions. Why is your hair like that? Did you notice that your skin is really dark? Wow, look, my mom's arm is really white next to your arm! How come all the Black kids play basketball? Did you know that your grandfather was probably a slave? Your kids will say things that are beyond what you could possibly imagine. And they should say those things. Because this is how they learn. But they are only going to learn if you are open to hearing them. Which means knowing your own shit. Here is what we mean by that: What is going on for you when you hear your kids say something that triggers your "that's racist" button? What emotions come up? What are you concerned about? What do you do when those emotions come up? We have all seen parents, when reacting to something their child has said, looking quickly around and saying, "shhhh, that's not a nice thing to say," or "Stop that! Don't be rude!!" or any number of other things. We know the feeling in our bellies when we are walking through the world, thinking about our grocery list or the drive back home, when junior says something that immediately makes us feel exposed and visible. As white people. As potentially bad parents. Raising our children to be white is about knowing our reactions and finding ways to NOT shut our children down when they ask those kinds of questions.

Of course, this is also complicated. It's a different thing to have a three-year-old making a comment about a stranger in a store, it's another thing for a 13-year-old to say it. Embedded in supporting our children to ask questions and be open to learning about the world around them, is also teaching them about respect.

Teaching them that people are not objects but individuals with feelings and complex lives. Because the

Paying attention to how our child becomes white is about a lot of things: and we already know that we don't know half of them. Sometimes it means paying attention to all of the ways in which being white gives her a kind of "get out of jail free" card, a kind of free pass into better jobs, more income, and less stress and struggle. It means watching and learning from what happens when she pops out of me, all instinct for survival and connection to mama, and starts to grow a personality and set of understandings about herself and the world. It means learning what there is to be proud of, to celebrate, about who she is in the world as a white person.

So, since this is true, we decided to get help. And while folks of color probably are smartest about what being white means, after all, they have to deal with us all of the time, they aren't the ones who have to fix this part of the crazy mess. It's up to us to figure this one out. I mean, if as white parents, we can't figure out how to help our white kids become compassionately or powerfully or collectively white, well, then who can? It's pretty much our responsibility.

Laying the groundwork

We gathered together a group of white friends, parents every one of them, and decided to form a group. We call it White Noise as a way of describing the everyday annoying distraction from thinking and paying attention that's akin to living with white privilege. Our kids are all young – the oldest is Luca and she's only seven. And we sure haven't figured everything out. But we figure it's time to bring the light in. The more we share what we've learned, the faster it's going to grow. And growing our understanding of how to raise a white child to make being white an entirely different thing, that's what we want to grow.

Right now, we call what we do "laying the groundwork." Meaning, since we have young children whose needs and questions are still more simple than complex, we figure we're just trying to help their bodies get clear about whiteness. At the end of the day, there is no single recipe for how to do this. Raising white children is really about just plain raising our children to pay attention to all of who they are. We can't protect them from anything. The best we can do is prepare them to carry the tools they need to weather the multiple storms their lives will bring them. That's why we call the work we are doing with our young children, "laying the groundwork." Our intent is to support them to experiences themselves and the world around them in a way that will feed their ability to not only do anti-racist work but also be anti-racist "from the ground up."

Making whiteness visible

Somewhere around four years old, we started to notice Luca, when describing her friends, only "raced" her friends of color. Meaning, when she was describing people to us who she knew, she described her friends of color as "Black" or "Native" but her white friends as "with red hair" or "tall." Already, at four years old, and living in a multiracial community, white had become normal for Luca. Normal in a way that means invisible. So, one of the first steps is to just plain make whiteness visible. This means making sure that all of us, when we are describing people, talk as much about white friends as we do our Black or Asian friends. But making whiteness visible is more than that.

The minute we are born, we are surrounded by information. Some of it is directly pointed out for us by the adults in our lives. Most of it goes completely unnoticed by all of us, children and adults alike. Making whiteness visible means seeking to notice the presence of whiteness in every aspect of our lives. How do we do this? We practice everyday. What does that mean? Well, one example is when we walk into a store or into a restaurant or down a neighborhood street, we ask: "Who is here?" and then we notice. Once we notice who is here, we began to intentionally wonder about why they are here. And then to notice who isn't here. And to wonder the same thing.

A story for explanation: we are out running errands and we all get hungry. We stop by a coffee shop. Right away, Luca notices, "There are only white people in here." Raquel and I both look around and see that she is right. So then we ask, "Why might there be only white people in here?" We notice that the coffee shop is in a predominantly white upper-middle-class neighborhood. So we assume that drop-in traffic is going to be mostly local. We wonder if people of color might not come by this coffee shop or this neighborhood because it might not be comfortable or because they wouldn't feel welcome or reflected back by the staff or other customers. We next wonder if there are people of color who would even be interested in this coffee shop – maybe the culture of this coffee shop is one that mostly white people are attracted to and so some folks of color are choosing to not come here, or to instead go somewhere that will better reflect their experiences. Then we talk about what it is like for us to be in this coffee shop – noticing that when we are white and we fit in with the other white people, we barely even notice that we are white. We talk about how there are different kinds of white people, but even though there are different kinds, we don't really need to

White Noise: white adults raising white children to resist white supremacy

written by Anti-Racist Parent contributor Susan Raffo of White Noise

It hit me while I was still pregnant. Standing there at the Mall of America, looking up at the huge rotunda of bright lights and countless stores, I realized something. This baby I carried inside of me, at this point no bigger than a knucklebone, was going to be privileged with a capital “P.” And with that awareness, I entered a place of contradiction. You see, I could already feel the mama-self growing in me; that place where my bear claws would live, where the desire to do anything to make this child safe, make this child whole, would growl as it grew stronger. That mama-self doesn’t feel like a choice. It’s in there, hooked around my mitochondria and woven into the DNA.

But there’s this other self; sometimes called the political self or the activist self or the stand back and pay attention self. It knows that my child — white and raised by white parents in a family where the adults have the gift of education, have choice about their work, and own their own home — is a privileged child. Every gain my mama-self wants to support my child in making will be on the backs of other children, children with mother’s whose mama-selves are just as fierce as mine but who have to fight against real monsters like hunger or violence.

And this is the contradiction that crept into my belly standing there, at the Mall of America. I felt sad, and a different flavor of fierce. Luca’s creativity, her curiosity and her passion have the time and space to be priorities when we think about raising her. We don’t have to protect her daily from violence or spend most of our time finding food. All children should have the same kind of space. Standing there in the Mall of America, my fierceness shifted and grew larger. It became less about my child and more about the community of children. In other words, my question was not “what is the best for my daughter” and more, “what is the best for all children?” How does this question affect how I parent? How do my partner and I — and all of our friends and families — raise our children in a way that honors the lives and struggles of all children?

Whiteness

Here is what we noticed right away: both the race of our daughter and the economic privilege of our family. We have enough — not a lot, but enough. And we are white women raising a white daughter. Here is the question that followed that: how do we, from the very beginning, start raising Luca to be a different kind of white? What does it MEAN to be a different kind of white? This feels about way more than having a commitment to anti-racism. It feels like being a different kind of person entirely.

As a quick aside, my partner and I have a belief system about race, racism and white privilege that assumes that the legacies of slavery, the attempted genocide of Native Americans, European colonialism and its affect here in the Americas and elsewhere in the world has created a present day moment of inequity based on skin color, language, culture of origin and so on. Within that belief system, the fact that my partner and I have light skin and ethnicities with the majority of ancestors being European gives us a kind of privilege. There isn’t the space in this article to explain what we mean by white privilege and white supremacy and racism. At the end, there are resources listed for further exploration.

So, white parents raising white children. We looked at books and blogs. We googled for magazine articles and newspaper features. We talked with our friends — white and of color — and kept coming against the same thing: there is hardly anything out there that directly talks about raising white kids to be anti-racist, to work against white privilege, to be a different flavor, an accountable and creative flavor, of white. There are resources about raising children to live in a multicultural world. There are resources about raising your children to respect difference. There are books about nonviolent child-rearing. But really thinking about what kind of white your kid might be? It’s not out there. And here’s why: most of us white adults don’t really understand what it is to be white ourselves. We sometimes have language about being Irish- or Italian-American, or about growing up on a farm, being Midwestern or from the mountains, but this whiteness thing? The ways in which being white affects our sense of who we are and the communities around us? We usually have no words.

My partner and I decided that if we’re going to raise a white child we want to pay attention to how she becomes white and how she is white. It’s the same thing as paying attention to the fact that she is a girl, that she likes to dance but isn’t so into playing soccer, that she gets shy in front of lots of people she doesn’t know. Each of these things is about her, and each is about the world around her.