

# Raising African American Youth in a Racially Unjust Society

by Oronde A. Miller

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The tragic killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida this February sparked months of protests and media coverage because the local police department refused to arrest and charge George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch coordinator who killed Martin. After weeks of increasing pressure to intervene, law enforcement officials finally arrested Zimmerman and charged him with second-degree murder.

Details of the case suggest that Zimmerman profiled Martin. Based on Zimmerman's reports, he made judgments based on Martin's race, height, appearance (wearing a hooded sweat-shirt), and the path he took walking through the community. Also, according to Zimmerman, Trayvon's characteristics matched those of other young men he had implicated in recent burglaries. Zimmerman saw someone he thought fit the profile of someone up to no good.

We often hear about killings involving police officers and unarmed black men, but this case involved an encounter between two private citizens. Still, the justification for using deadly force is the same. The officer or citizen accuses a "suspicious individual" of doing something he perceives as threatening, and thus must defend himself using a lethal weapon.

Every day African American men and youth are subject to snap judgments that have the potential to lead to life and death encounters, and inevitably leave them with the feeling of being unfairly targeted, profiled, and harassed.

## Children See What's Going On

Racial dynamics are critically important for parents to understand, precisely because they speak to a broader pattern of profiling that has historically shaped public perceptions of, and reactions to, African American men and youth. Parents who want to prepare their boys for successful adulthood need to familiarize themselves with these dynamics to

minimize the likelihood that their son will become another victim of tragic circumstances.

I remember a few racially charged episodes from my childhood. One time my father was pulled over for an alleged traffic violation in Dearborn, Michigan. During the 1980s, Dearborn was a racist community that openly discouraged African Americans from even driving through, but we frequently traveled there on our way to my grandparents' house.

What I remember most from that experience is the tense interaction between my dad and the officer. Dad didn't appreciate being stopped for no good reason, and the white officer didn't seem to appreciate our presence in general. Immediately afterward, Dad talked about how unfair the incident was, how unfair things can seem with police officers (or people who use their positions of authority unfairly), yet also how to respond in these situations so that things don't escalate.

More recently, I was pulled over for an alleged traffic violation while making a family visit to Washington, D.C. I was noticeably angry and frustrated with the officer, and quickly recalled my childhood experiences when my two children started asking questions: What was going on? Why were we stopped? Why didn't the officer answer my questions and seem so mean? Why did another officer have her hand near her gun? Why didn't we get a ticket after the officers took so long to look at my license and registration?

My son and daughter were a bit shaken up and said it didn't seem fair. We had a long conversation about interactions with police officers, abuse of police power, and what could happen if law enforcement officials felt we were not cooperating. I talked to them about abuses of power by people in positions of authority, how a great deal of the abuse arises through unfair targeting, and how African Americans have historically experienced similar injustices.

## Helping African American Children Make Sense of Their World

The discussion I had with my children is consistent with discussions African American parents all over this country have with their children from a very young age. I started talking with my children more specifically about racial injustice and oppression when they were about six. While we don't have these conversations daily, there is no shortage of opportunities to talk about race and society these days.

Not all encounters between African Americans and law enforcement officers or others in positions of authority involve racial prejudice. Still, African American children's developmental and socialization experiences, especially those of boys and young men, makes them aware of this very real and defining dynamic. Discussions with our children must strike a balance between acknowledging a child's natural inclination to challenge unjust circumstances and reinforcing the need to employ strategies that will help children and youth stay safe in potentially dangerous situations.

Parents need to remind black teens or young adults how their very presence can make some people uneasy. There are messages we need to convey about how their clothing choices, ways in which they speak and interact, and how they conduct themselves in general can make a difference in how they are perceived and treated in public.

When pulled over or singled out for some perceived rule violation—in school, on the road, in a public place—black youth and men need to apply basic strategies. Their hands should be visible, and they should avoid movements that might be viewed as threatening or as resisting. Even if the situation is patently unjust, black youth should be respectful of the authority figure, and comply with the person's requests as long as the person doesn't violate their civil rights. A primary goal is to survive the encounter so they can challenge the injustice moving forward.

I tell my children and other young people that, in general, we should always "have our affairs in order." We should carry an ID, have the right documents in our car, avoid being associated with trouble at school, maintain eye contact with authority figures (without staring them down), etc. Some people will use any rationale they can to justify their unjust actions.

These are not scripted or textbook conversations. They usually happen whenever parents witness something, see news reports, hear that someone we know has had a bad experience, or when racism in African American life otherwise gains public attention. I make clear to my children that these dynamics are unfair, and that they have an increasing responsibility to challenge these injustices as they grow older. I have observed that children who are more exposed to these conversations tend to be much better fortified to deal with and get through racist and race-related experiences as adults.

### White Parents and Black Children

White parents of African American children, whether through adoption or other family configurations, need to provide the same life lessons, even though their childhood and adult experiences were and are very different from what their children will experience. They must study African American historical perspectives and personally challenge white privilege. They must help their children understand the realities of being black in today's society, and take seriously their children's reports of mistreatment. They must watch not only for obvious instances of racism, but also for more subtle micro-aggressions that take a toll on black youth—like clerks who follow them in stores, people who move away from them on buses or benches, people who clutch their bags or purses more tightly when they come around the corner.

This task can be very challenging, even painful. Many white parents of black children (African American or from other nations) want to believe that their community is not racist and will accept and celebrate the children as valued additions to the family. They expect their peers, the children's teachers, and others to have the same regard for their children as they do. When these ideals are replaced by a very different reality for their children, parents have to make some hard choices about associating with relatives or friends who treat their children unfairly and recognize how racist or insensitive behaviors and statements can traumatize their children.

Moreover, parents must be willing to challenge instances of racial injustice, insensitive comments, and other racially motivated micro-aggressions. Sometimes this means calling people out for what they've said or done, explaining why their words or actions were problematic, or

otherwise holding them accountable. Our black children need to know that we see and celebrate the fullness of their humanity, that we care about them, and that we are willing to stand up for them and protect them from injustice. They need to know that they are not alone, or invisible, in their experience.

When parents fail to offer positive and productive examples of how to deal with these sorts of damaging racist dynamics, children can feel isolated, abandoned, and unprotected. In addition, they will not gain the skills and strategies they need to interpret and respond to negative racial and cultural encounters in healthier and less hurtful ways.

White parents must also accept that there are lessons and aspects of their child's reality (namely racial identification and cultural fluency) that are best taught by those who share the children's racial and ethnic heritage. For that reason, white parents should surround their black children with images, expressions, and people who can naturally help develop the children's racial and cultural identity, understanding, and world view.

At home, parents should keep open lines of communication about race, ethnicity, and culture and how those factors affect their children's experiences. When very public discussions about race take place, parents must create opportunities to hear their children's perspectives, and learn how they experience race and racism. Over time parents should create a rela-

tionship in which their children feel comfortable and supported in sharing and being affirmed in this central aspect of their humanity. They also need to hear what's happening so they know when and how to intervene or respond.

### Racism Is Alive and Thriving

Whether we like it or not, and whether we individually feel prepared to respond or not, racism is still very real and affects all our children's daily life experiences. We are all affected by the sickness of racism in our society, more than many people realize. We all have a responsibility to challenge these dynamics.

Sometimes there are specific messages, skills, and lessons that we can impart to our children. Sometimes, however, the best we can offer our children is our example of how to develop healthy relationships, how to challenge unjust dynamics and circumstances in life, and how to acquire new skills over time. We can model a process of continued growth, continued understanding, and ways of protecting our children from those messages, people, and experiences that might undermine or threaten their healthy growth and development.

As parents, we will not always be right or have all the answers. We can, however, create the space and experiences our children need to understand and appreciate the fullness of their humanity, and develop the skills they need to become healthy and successful adults.

This doable work begins with us! ♦

**F**unny, caring, and talkative, 14-year-old Jayde (born April 1998) enjoys socializing with friends at the Boys and Girls Club, playing volleyball, going to movies and restaurants like Olive Garden, window shopping at the mall, and singing in the church choir. She is especially fond of country music and artists Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood, and says her favorite song is "Jesus Take the Wheel." When it comes to movies, Jayde liked the *Twilight* series and is now following *The Hunger Games* saga. At home, she likes to watch television shows like *Criminal Minds*, *Charmed*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and anything on Disney Channel. She also has fun dancing and singing along to songs. This fall Jayde is looking forward to starting high school. She wants to join the volleyball team, become a member of the student council, attend prom, and take on more responsibilities. In the future, she intends to go to college, and would like to run a business that helps abused and neglected animals find permanent homes. In the meantime, Jayde needs a permanent loving family who is patient, understanding, and dedicated to helping her reach for her goals. She would like a family who is active in the community and at church, has older children, and will facilitate contact with Jayde's birth mother and sister. Learn more from Amanda Dixon in Arizona: 602-930-4465; adixon@aask-az.org. ♦



Jayde