

# Talking About Racism in Child and Family Advocacy

Framing Strategies

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# Contents

Introduction	3
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## Recommendations

<b>1</b> Plan your communications around solutions that address racism and its effects	6
<b>2</b> Talk about racism consistently	7
<b>3</b> Expand people's understanding of what 'racism' means	8
<b>4</b> Strategically select the way you position racism and its effects	9
<b>5</b> Build the sense that change is possible	12
<b>6</b> Talk about tackling racism as the right thing to do – and focus on doing it for the right reasons	13
<b>7</b> Explain how racism shapes children's environments	14
<b>8</b> Strategically advance conversations about racism in the face of efforts to suppress them	15

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Concluding Thoughts	17
---------------------	----

---

Related Resources	18
-------------------	----

---

About FrameWorks	19
------------------	----

# Introduction

In a truly just society, no child lives, learns, or plays in environments that expose them repeatedly to things we know are harmful. Our commitment to children therefore involves a commitment to ending racism and its harmful effects, so that all children, regardless of race or ethnicity, have a full and just opportunity to reach their full potential.

As scholars and movement leaders of color have long observed, we can't dismantle racism without talking about it. And as racial justice advocates and activists deepen our awareness of how racism affects children, adolescents, and families of color—and how racism is rooted in the public systems that shape families' lives—more voices for children want to speak directly to the impact of racism. This is particularly urgent and necessary when it comes to child welfare systems and adjacent institutions, where the path toward justice necessarily involves replacing punitive institutions with radically reimagined approaches.

We need these conversations to have maximum impact. That means we need to be able to talk about racism in ways that not only reach more child welfare system leaders and people with power, but also resonate in oppressed communities that face an intense concentration of involvement with child welfare agencies. We need ways to build a multiracial movement for child wellbeing—while ensuring that this movement is led from within the communities that child welfare systems were designed to control through coercion. We need strategies that help us to reduce resistance when it stalls forward momentum, and that generate productive friction when it's the best way to spark change.

Accomplishing any one of these goals isn't easy, much less advancing them together. It becomes easier if we tap into insights from framing research to inform our strategy. FrameWorks Institute's body of social science research includes studies on framing racism in sectors like public education and public history. It includes a major initiative to track how American culture is changing in the current moment of social upheaval, as well as a rapid-response data collection effort to guide anti-racist responses to the manufactured controversy over race-related content in schools. It includes insights gleaned from numerous studies of how to talk about racial and ethnic disparities in early development, adolescent development, foster care, and the youth justice system.

This research helps us to pinpoint and predict the specific challenges we may face when leading public conversations about racism and its effects on child wellbeing. It shows us, for instance, that while the 2020 uprisings for racial justice helped to build Americans' understanding of systemic racism, a narrower understanding of racism as personal bias still shapes attitudes in powerful ways.\* The definition of a problem influences our thinking about solutions. It's harder to make the case for deep structural change when people assume the problem really lies within the hearts and minds of racist individuals.

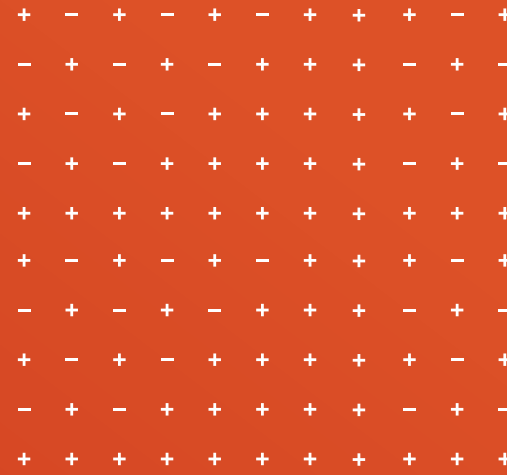
Many people in the US – especially, but not exclusively, white people - lack an understanding of racism as a systemic, structural construct grounded in the false notion that whites are a superior race. This leads to oversimplistic thinking about what should be done – channeling attention to solutions like fostering interpersonal or cross-cultural goodwill. It also leads to intense frustration and dissatisfaction with solutions that are seen as mismatched to the problem as people have defined it. People who think of racism as a set of outdated, hostile attitudes see large-scale change as unwarranted and inappropriate. People who think of racism as a pervasive ideology see the lack of large-scale change as further evidence of racism's pervasive influence. The overall dynamic leaves too few hands to take up the difficult work of dismantling racist systems. Reframing racism is therefore an essential part of the work of ending racism.

This brief was written for leaders in child welfare, family wellbeing, or child/youth development who are doing important anti-racist work or moving toward adopting an anti-racist strategy. This guidance offers ways to communicate more effectively on issues like structural racism, racial and ethnic disparities, racial equity, and a vision for an anti-racist future. The recommendations are best suited for efforts to build public understanding as part of policy advocacy or systems change, and especially relevant for public-facing channels such as mass media, social media, or organizational content that may reach many people. They offer ways to activate people who may not be currently participating in this conversation and educate or inform people who are disposed to support anti-racist efforts but don't know how to engage.

The strategies we recommend are not designed for – and may not be well-suited for – deeper trainings designed to surface or shift participants' personal beliefs and practices around diversity, equity, inclusion, white privilege, white supremacy, or anti-racism. Nor are these strategies designed to mobilize individuals to take specific time-sensitive behaviors, like voting, protests, or other direct actions.

They are, we believe, incredibly useful for driving longer-term shifts in mindsets with greater power and pace. From home visiting to family permanency to transitions from care, new possibilities are emerging in the places where child welfare advocates have been cultivating progressive perspectives for years. Framing—the way we position ideas—has helped clear the spaces and till the soil for these new realities to take root. As the field seeks to lead a more public conversation about the impacts of racism on children and families—and about how racism structures the systems that children and families interact with—intentional framing will help those conversations be more productive.

\* FrameWorks Institute. (2022). How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project.



SECTION TWO

# Recommendations



# Recommendations

## 1. Plan your communications around solutions that address racism and its effects.

Building solutions into our framing establishes an important foundation for progressive, change-oriented, hopeful attitudes. Just as importantly, solutions-oriented framing prevents us from being satisfied with merely “building awareness” on an issue that demands action.

Leaving solutions out, on the other hand, comes with unnecessary and unacceptable risks. When we highlight a major social problem like racism without also helping people see the possibilities for meaningful and tangible change, we risk sparking fatalism and feeding a cycle of cynicism. We may also cause distress. It’s never easy for people who experience racism to be reminded that their children are in harm’s way, especially if we leave the impression that there’s little to be done about the situation.

Moreover, when we make concrete suggestions, discussion is more likely to focus on the merits of our proposal, rather than getting bogged down in dead-end debates over whether racism “still” or “really” exists.

When we raise the topic of racism in child welfare and related systems, there are many ways we can plan our communications around solutions, not just problems:

- Talk about what we can and must do to actively promote child wellbeing in communities facing racism.
- Give examples of specific actions that legislative bodies, agencies, or jurisdictions could take to eliminate racism and its effects from children’s environments.
- Champion programs and policies that work to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities, not only create “overall” improvements.
- Lift up examples of what has worked elsewhere. Show how anti-racist approaches work, and the results they bring.

Although the solutions in a communication will vary according to context, there are general framing principles we can use to make any proposal more persuasive. See the sidebar, “Helping People See Structural Solutions” for more detail.

### Instead of “all problem, no solution”

Institutional racism contributes to the disproportionate involvement of Black and Indigenous children and families with the child welfare system. This system—which purports to protect children—in fact metes out traumatic experiences like investigation, surveillance, and family separation. The toll on our communities is simply devastating and a prime example of government oppression.

### Try “naming solutions right away”

We need to do more than acknowledge institutional racism in the child welfare system—we need to end it. One essential change is to move away from anonymous, centralized reporting systems. This approach sparks disproportionate numbers of unwarranted investigations into Black and Indigenous families’ lives. By continuing it, we are tolerating and perpetuating racism in our systems.

## Helping People See Structural Solutions

Solutions-oriented framing pushes us to create a more streamlined, more powerful case for change. When it comes to framing the solution itself, keep in mind the characteristics that help people visualize new directions and feel more confident in the journey to get there:

*Collective:* Lift up solutions that expand people’s ideas of what can happen at the institutional, community, state, or national levels. Avoid using “education,” “training,” or “awareness” as examples. When used as messages, these solutions reinforce the narrow mindset that racism lives primarily in individual attitudes and actions, which obscures the need for structural change.

*Concrete:* Offer real or realistic examples of what we can do to stop racism from affecting children. Give examples that help people imagine what a proposed approach would look like in practice. Tell memorable, relatable stories that depict an anti-racist approach in action. Name and explain the “active ingredient” that makes it work.

*Conceivable:* Even if the direction you are proposing is transformational, it can help to talk about it as imminently feasible. While it’s neither honest nor necessary to make change sound easy, it is important to frame solutions as within our reach.

*Clear:* Use familiar, everyday vocabulary—not jargon. Explain key concepts. Shorten sentences. Look for places to add images that help people visualize the solution you have in mind.

## 2. Talk about racism consistently.

Consistently make racism—not race—the antagonist in the story.

This means talking consistently and directly about racism as the problem to be solved, rather than substituting negative effects of racism such as concentrated poverty. While racism and poverty are related, they should not be conflated. It doesn’t take much for people to misunderstand the connection, assuming that poverty is the result of poor choices, not power dynamics. And if our framing gives audiences the option to settle into a “race-neutral” conversation about how class and poverty affect children and families, people are less likely to engage in a less comfortable examination of racism and white privilege.

Centering racism also means avoiding framing the challenges facing child welfare in terms of changing demographics. When we suggest that the reason to address race-related issues is because of increasing racial or ethnic diversity in the US, we may leave the impression that racism is only an issue that requires attention in certain places or under certain circumstances. Making the story about a perceived “increase” in racial, ethnic, or linguistic diversity may also add fuel to racist narratives about whites being “replaced” by people of color.

**Instead of “mentioning racial disparities”**

One in three children in the United States will be part of a child welfare investigation by age 18. Every three minutes a child is removed from their home and placed in the foster system. Black children are almost twice as likely to experience investigations as white children and are more likely to be forcibly separated from their families. As a result, more than 200,000 children enter the foster system each year. Though black children represent about 14% of the total child population, in 2018, they represented 23% of all kids in foster care.

**Try “explaining how racism causes disparities”**

Because of rigid reporting rules that spark unnecessary investigations, one in three children in the US will be part of a child welfare investigation by age 18. Worse, in many states, “maltreatment” is not well-defined. This creates a system that relies on hasty, subjective judgments by overburdened investigators. When an institution works like this, it’s all too easy for racist stereotypes to influence investigations and their outcomes. This helps to explain why Black children are more likely to be forcibly separated from their families than white children.

### 3. Expand people’s understanding of what ‘racism’ means.

While more Americans than ever understand that racism shows up in our institutions, this systemic mindset is still emerging. Many think of racism as individual attitudes and actions. For this reason, it is important to talk explicitly about systemic or structural racism.

Don’t elide or glide past systemic racism with phrases like “racism in all its forms.” Instead, try the phrase “the many ways racism shows up in society – in personal interactions, in culture and the media, and in our institutions and systems.” Consistently modify the term *racism* by using phrases like *structural*, *systemic*, *cultural*, and *interpersonal racism*.

It is also critical to explain what you mean by these terms. Plain language can be a helpful way to ensure that the ideas are clear to everyone, not just those who are already familiar with this vocabulary.

Using simple definitions for different manifestations of racism can be effective:

*Racism shapes society in many ways. They fit together, but it can be helpful to think of them separately, so we are better equipped to spot them and resist them.*

- **Structural racism:** *Our society’s systems and institutions often work in ways that protect or benefit whites, but hamper and harm people of color. This is structural racism. Structural racism shows up in public policies, institutional practices, and social norms. It shapes the ways our politics, economy, and society work.*
- **Cultural racism:** *Often, widely-shared words or images suggest that people of color are all the same, or emphasize only bad traits. Or, they connect white people to good traits, showing white culture as the ideal. This is cultural racism. Cultural racism shows up in media, ads, and other things we all see and hear in public. Cultural racism is a major way that white supremacy - the false idea that whites are a superior race - gets circulated in society.*
- **Interpersonal racism:** *Interpersonal racism takes place in everyday interactions. It happens when people speak or act in prejudiced, biased ways against people of color. Sometimes interpersonal racism is obvious. Other times it can be subtle. Sometimes people experience it directly; at other times, we witness it. Either way, it is harmful.*



## 4. Strategically select the way you position racism and its effects.

From the firm commitment to talk about racism, be flexible about how to talk about racism. Just as different approaches to understanding racism offer us different perspectives on how to change systems, they also offer different affordances and limitations for how to change minds. Depending on the audience, objectives, or aspects of the communications context, the language and core argument of one approach may be more effective than another.

Strategically select a way of talking about the impact of racism that works for your objectives. In this section, we summarize some of the frameworks that mission-driven organizations often use to think about racism or racial disparities, and offer a brief analysis of how these approaches work when used in public-facing communications.

- **Talking about the levels of racism** can be helpful when audiences are not yet familiar with the ideas of institutional or structural racism, or when explaining initiatives that are taking action on multiple levels. It can also be helpful when you are intentionally focusing on one manifestation of racism – say, interpersonal racism – but wish to be clear that you’re not denying or minimizing other aspects of racism.

The “levels of racism” concept can be expressed in gentle ways that reduce resistance from whites or, alternatively, in ways that chip away at the white privilege of feeling comfortable in public conversations. Introducing the concepts of structural and cultural racism can be helpful when vocal (white) opponents are likely to mischaracterize racism-related efforts as unnecessary because they perceive “friendly” relations across racial/ethnic groups. It can also equip communicators to introduce the concept of white supremacy as a pervasive cultural dynamic, reducing the risk that audiences will assume it refers only to the practices and beliefs of extremist white nationalist groups. (See our example of how to do this in the section above.)

The levels of racism framework is primarily descriptive, which has both affordances and limitations (pros and cons). It builds essential understanding and provides a useful analytical lens, which can be helpful when the messenger must adhere strictly to evidence-based, factual statements. One limitation is that the levels of racism framework does not offer a sense of direction or lend itself well to messaging that mobilizes or energizes supporters. Simply put, it is often better for education or “level-setting” than for advocacy.

When talking about the levels of racism, take care not to come off as pedantic. Be explicit about the purpose of explaining the levels. You might say that the goal is to define terms before using them, to start with a shared vocabulary, or to provide an opportunity for people to clarify or share their own understanding of the terms. Also be sure to use language that is as simple and clear as possible. Relying on expert or insider terminology signals that the conversation is only for “the choir” and may fail to convey the meaning you intend.

- **Framing a problem as a racial equity issue** can be helpful when the messenger must adhere to a data-driven message. It also works well when the context asks you to define or solve problems within a narrow scope, which is often the case when working from within a public system.

Racial equity framing comes with the risk of activating us-versus-them thinking or zero sum thinking. It can also be easy to end up emphasizing only the scope of racial disparities to make the point that the issue is structural, or serious, or both. Avoid this trap. When messages over-rely on stark statistics, they typically minimize attention to solutions and leave out cause-and-effect explanations, and often end up reinforcing negative stereotypes about communities of color.

- **Framing initiatives in terms of targeted universalism** can be powerful when an issue affects multiple social groups, because it allows for both common cause and tailored approaches. The idea of a shared, universal human need or experience can be a powerful, unifying motivator. It can also help to overcome resistance to racial equity efforts by foregrounding the idea that when we ensure that our systems work for the people they haven't always worked for, they typically work better for all of us. This can help to drive change in contexts where vocal opponents (typically white people in power) are likely to mischaracterize racism-related efforts as harmful, divisive, or unfair.

One limitation of a targeted universalism frame is that other racial justice advocates may be alienated, disappointed, or simply unmotivated by a stance they view as unnecessarily indirect or designed to protect whites' feelings. Another limitation of this strategy is that it does not lend itself well to situations involving egregious acts of racist abuse or violence.

- **Talking in terms of anti-racism** can be helpful when potential supporters are passively maintaining or otherwise implicated in racially biased systems. It focuses attention on racism, not just race, and locates the problem in policies that create racial disparities. As a result, this frame lends itself well to interpersonal, cultural, and structural work. And the word anti-racist is powerful by itself: in research FrameWorks conducted in summer 2021, most research participants hadn't heard the term "anti-racist education," but responded favorably.

The main limitation of anti-racist framing is that the term (and thinkers associated with the term) have been singled out by conservative activists who are seeking to suppress multiracial organizing against racism. In contexts where legislation or regulations have restricted conversations about racism, this frame can be difficult for some messengers to use.

**Table 1: Common frameworks for talking about race and racism.**

This table summarizes four racism-related frameworks that nonprofits and public agencies have applied both internally and externally, and points out when each framework might work best to position work to advance fairness and justice for people who have been racialized and minoritized.

<b>Approach + Example of Key Thought Leader</b>	<b>A Core Argument, Summarized</b>	<b>Describing work this way can be helpful when...</b>
<b>Racial Equity Glenn Harris, Race Forward</b>	When we see disparities and disproportionalities between whites and other racial or ethnic groups, we need to examine the causes and take appropriate action to eliminate disparities and advance racial equity.	Framing the problem as a racial disparity can be helpful when the messenger must adhere to a data-driven message or define and solve problems within a narrow scope.
<b>Targeted Universalism John A. Powell, Othering and Belonging Institute</b>	We have shared goals – like healthy child development and safe communities. To reach those universal goals, we need to take a targeted approach to moving different groups toward the goal.	Framing initiatives in terms of targeted universalism can be helpful when vocal opponents are likely to mischaracterize racism-related efforts as harmful, divisive, or unfair, or when an issue affects multiple social groups.
<b>Anti-Racism Ibram X. Kendi, Center for Antiracist Research</b>	Anti-racism is a process of actively identifying policies and practices that create or widen racial inequalities, and then taking action to change them to be just.	Making a case for an anti-racist approach can be helpful when well-intentioned people are passively maintaining racially biased systems.
<b>Levels of Racism, Dr. Camara Jones</b>	We are used to thinking about racism as a personal belief, but it's more accurate to think about racism as a system that operates on different levels: internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and structural.	Talking about the levels of racism can be helpful when audiences are not familiar with the ideas of institutional or structural racism, or when vocal opponents are likely to mischaracterize racism-related efforts as unnecessary.

## 5. Build the sense that change is possible.

We need big, bold action to stop racism from undermining children’s potential. But calls for major change can be tricky to get right. Depending on the framing, anti-racist ideas can come off as extreme or utopian—or they can feel important, right, and necessary.

We need to energize and mobilize people to support a big vision without leaving the impression that we’re asking for the impossible.

We can do this by emphasizing how much we can achieve despite difficulty—not how much people have to abandon or sacrifice. Balance “bold and necessary” with “feasible and possible.”

For the most part, look forward – describing what we can do now and what our efforts will achieve. Acknowledge historical injustices that have harmed children and families of color, but don’t leave the impression that our past limits what we can achieve in the present. Likewise, don’t suggest that racism is permanent or indelible. Instead, talk about racism as a system that has been created by people– and therefore, can be changed by people.’ (See the sidebar Metaphors for Anti-Racist Efforts for examples of how to do this.)

### Metaphors for Anti-Racist Efforts

When we compare our efforts to eliminate racism to a process that involves changing a system with discrete parts, we build the sense that the task is possible. This framing technique works best when we develop the metaphor over a few sentences.

**Building/Dismantling:** “Racism is a system that is built from policies, practices, symbols, and beliefs. This system influences the environments where children are born, develop, and grow, and results in racial disparities. To dismantle racism as a system, we must identify, remove, and replace its components.”

**Design/Redesign:** “Racism is a system that was designed to give power to some and deny it to others. We know this design is unjust - just look at the effects it has on children and adolescents. We must work tirelessly to adjust and readjust our systems until every setting is tuned toward justice and dignity.”

\* We first encountered this way of framing racism through Dr. Christine Ortiz of Equity Meets Design.

## 6. Talk about tackling racism as the right thing to do – and focus on doing it for the right reasons.

When discussing racism, frame with intrinsic values that draw on moral authority - like justice, human dignity, or fairness across places – rather than instrumental values that base the case on some sort of enlightened self-interest. (See the sidebar Fairness Framing for examples of how to phrase different definitions or models of fairness.)

Using intrinsic values involves a shift from framing strategies that have served the early childhood field well, like framing in terms of shared prosperity or “we all benefit.” We recommend this shift because economic justifications do not tend to move the public on race-related issues. Moreover, they often prompt affected communities and advocates to question the motivations of the communicator. If economic data—like return on investment—is essential to the topic, treat it as a supporting detail, not the main argument.

### Fairness Framing

While it can be helpful to frame conversations about racism and anti-racism in terms of fairness, it is important to express fairness in ways that work. When we offer an explicit explanation of what we mean by fairness, we can short-circuit unproductive understandings like the assumption that to be fair, we must treat people uniformly, or that to be fair, we must reward good behavior and punish unwanted behavior. The type of explanation we offer may vary by context or topic. Here are ways to translate different conceptions of fairness in ways that resonate broadly.

*To translate a ‘targeted universalism’ concept of fairness, try this:* “We need to ensure that every family has access to what they need to support healthy development for children in the earliest stages of life, when the architecture of the brain is being established. This means recognizing and addressing the ways that racism shapes families’ experiences and environments.”

*To translate an ‘equity’ concept of fairness, try this:* “Every child should have the opportunity to get off to a strong start and have the support they need to thrive. To achieve this, we need to address the social problems, unfair practices, and unjust conditions that stem from systemic racism. These impacts of racism undermine healthy early development, when the architecture of the brain is being established.”

*To translate a ‘social justice’ concept of fairness, try this:* “A just society ensures that no child - regardless of the color of their skin - is exposed again and again to things we know are harmful. To fulfil the ideal of justice for all, we have an obligation to tackle unhealthy conditions and barriers to early development that, due to our policy choices, affect communities of color more severely.”

*To translate a place-based concept of fairness, try this:* “A child’s early opportunities to learn, grow,

and develop shouldn't be based on the place where they live. Yet our current policies mean that neighborhoods with many white families have fewer environmental toxins and plenty of options for safe play and quality early learning. Meanwhile, neighborhoods with many families of color are likely to have too much pollution and too few childcare providers to go around. As a matter of basic fairness, we must ensure that every residential area is a safe, healthy, stimulating place to raise a child."

## 7. Explain how racism shapes children's environments.

Talk about racism—whether structural, cultural, or interpersonal—as a harmful or adverse aspect of the environments where children and adolescents learn and grow. Craft explanations and use concrete examples that show the connections among unjust policies, racial disparities in children's environments, and child and youth outcomes.

Connecting racism to the science of early brain development can help to create a sense of urgency. Just as advocates for child wellbeing have become skilled in describing how adverse experiences such as abuse or neglect “get under the skin” and affect children physically, we can develop fluency in talking about racism as a substantial stressor in the lives of families of color. Explain that because children develop rapidly and their early experiences lay the foundation for future health and wellbeing, we must act with a sense of urgency to confront and dismantle racism.

When the topic turns to adolescents, it is important to strike a balance between recognizing environmental influences and acknowledging that young people are actively shaping their own identities and play an important role in anti-racist movements. There is room for a developmental story. Talk about how a strong, healthy cultural identity is an essential part of healthy development, or point to the fact that as adolescents mature cognitively, they begin to understand the complexities of race and racism in new ways. We must also make room for young people of color themselves to take the floor, telling their own stories of racism and anti-racism.

Because racism is a system that causes most harm to people of color, and a system that has been resisted primarily by communities of color, these examples and stories must be at the center of our communications. Yet, if we leave white people out of the story altogether, we reinforce the misperception that racism is a problem that only affects those who are racialized, and we miss opportunities to build the sense that whites have a moral and ethical responsibility to engage in anti-racist efforts. Look for appropriate moments to highlight the ways that racism affects children who are white—either by conferring privilege or preventing healthy development—and bring in examples of how anti-racist efforts can equip white children to play a healthy role in a more just, inclusive future.

### Structural Racism Can “Overload” Families

The metaphor of an overloaded vehicle helps the public to appreciate our shared, social responsibility for conditions that affect families – and to see that a public response is required to prevent negative outcomes.

To extend this metaphor to the topic of racism, talk about specific effects of racism as additions to the weight that families of color carry. Below is an example of how to do this.

*Just as a truck can only bear so much weight before it stops moving forward, challenging life circumstances can stall families' abilities to provide the supports children need to grow, develop, and thrive. The effects of racism add to the load that families of color must bear. Discrimination in employment and lending add to financial strain, housing insecurity, and hunger. Racial stereotypes and outdated policies make it more likely that families of color are scrutinized and sanctioned by child protection agencies, immigration agencies, and other systems, adding the fear and stress of family separation. These are just some of the systems-level factors that shape the environments where children of color develop. We have an obligation to offload these weights and stop them from being added in the future – and to add supports for families and communities who are already burdened by them.*

## 8. Strategically advance conversations about racism in the face of efforts to suppress them.

With the national conversation about anti-racism reaching an ever-wider swath of Americans, conservative organizers and political operatives have sought to dilute and pollute the discourse by co-opting, mischaracterizing, and politicizing the language of scholars, advocates, and activists.

Take the word “equity,” for example. Since 2021, conservative activists have homed in on this word, mischaracterizing it as a telltale sign of efforts to indoctrinate children with a leftist, anti-white worldview or suggesting that it indicates paternalistic approaches to addressing the needs of people of color. Other words have been politicized in similar ways; take a look at the list of eighty-plus terms listed in widely-used model legislation to require school boards to suppress racism-related content in schools.\*

While there is no one-size-fits-all response for winning such language wars, there are emerging best practices for countering disinformation and general principles that can guide strategic responses. A shared framing strategy can help to cut through the chaos of manufactured controversies and return public attention to problems that really matter.

\* <https://citizensrenewingamerica.com/issues/model-school-board-language-to-prohibit-critical-race-theory-2/>

- **Consider the impact of terms that divisive voices have politicized.** Think about the type of idea the term represents: is it helpful or harmful? If it is a helpful idea (think: *equity*) continue to circulate it or a close synonym. Be sure to pair the term with clear explanations of what it means and why it is important. If the idea is harmful (think: *fake news, critical race theory*), don't repeat it. Talk instead about the intent and impact of the harmful idea, such as the erosion of trust in journalism or the suppression of important educational content.
- **Don't engage in dead-end arguments over the "correct" definitions of terms.** It's tempting to refute inaccuracies or logical fallacies with facts and evidence point-by-point. Don't take the bait. A myth-busting approach can have a polarizing effect on public opinion. Focus instead on advancing *your* main messages and ideas. Fact-check sparingly.
- **Remember that your audience is usually those who are hearing about a manufactured controversy, not those who are stoking it.** When facing vocal opponents with strident views, your audience is typically not the immovable opponent or source of disinformation, but the quiet supporters, the undecided, and people who have not yet been engaged in the conversation. Your framing should advance the core ideas you want people to engage with and demonstrate that you are the more reasonable party in the discussion.



# Concluding Thoughts

Public thinking and discourse about racism won't change overnight. The cultural barriers to change are deep. We live in a society that accepts racial segregation as a fact of life, and sees hierarchy and division as part of human nature.

Advocates for child welfare and wellbeing have unique contributions to make to the essential conversation about racism. Because we come from a place of care and concern for children, we can build on this to reach sectors and audiences who may not yet be attentive to the impacts of racism. Because we work with or within systems that directly impact children and families, we can tackle the institutional practices and policies that maintain and perpetuate racial and ethnic disparities and harm. And because child welfare systems are often seen as sites and symbols of racism by communities of color, our efforts to transform them into child wellbeing systems can have an outsized effect on the nation's understanding of what it looks like to reorient systems from racism to anti-racism.

With strategic, thoughtful framing, we are better equipped to advance this work with the power and pace it demands.

# Related Resources

## Talking about Racism and Early Childhood Development

The science of early childhood development is poised to contribute in meaningful ways to the ongoing public conversation about racism and the need to dismantle racist systems. To be a productive voice in that conversation, it is imperative that communications are optimally framed. This brief offers guidance from the FrameWorks Institute and the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child for how to connect the science of early childhood development to the reality of racism.

### [Advancing Anti-Racist Education: How School Leaders Can Navigate the Moral Panic about 'Critical Race Theory'](#)

This brief offers guidance for fostering productive dialogue in the face of manufactured dissent – and for reclaiming space, in both rhetoric and reality, for equity-focused efforts, anti-racist history education, and culturally affirming instruction. It is designed for school system, district, and school leaders looking for ways to communicate more effectively on these issues.

### [Framing Racial Equity in Adolescence Messaging Strategies for Social Change](#)

This resource offers guidance to advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and journalists working in the youth space to communicate more accurately and effectively about the impact of racism on adolescent development.



## About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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# Talking about racism in child and family advocacy

Framing Strategies

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