

# 10 PROMISING PRACTICES

In Early Learning for Black Boys



**ACTION  
TOOLKIT**

# 10 Promising Practices in Early Learning for Black Boys

Education outcomes for children of color—especially Black boys—are negatively impacted by a pervasive system of racial hierarchy that is sustained by inequitable policies and practices. To improve early learning outcomes for young Black boys we must address institutional racism in early learning classrooms, programs, schools, and districts. These 10 Promising Practices<sup>1</sup> represent fundamental actions that move toward dismantling an educational system that does not work for all children and moves toward building one that does.

The 10 Promising Practices are key strategies to improve educational outcomes for young boys of color, an inclusive term intended to encompass Black, Latinx, Asian, indigenous, and other racial and ethnic identities for people of color. While the Promising Practices are universal, this toolkit highlights action steps that are specifically targeted for early learning educators to use with young Black boys and their families. We recognize that there may be differences regarding the lived experiences of Black immigrant families. For more information visit the [Migration Policy Institute](#).

We encourage you to review this toolkit and select one or more action steps to use in your preschool classroom or early learning program. Then, let us know what you did and what difference it made by sharing your experience [here](#).



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## First steps: Building trusting relationships

Key to implementing the Promising Practices is **building trusting relationships with Black boys and their family members**. Trusting relationships are rooted in listening to and learning from families.

- Invite parents and family members to tell you about the values they believe in and impart to their children.
- Understand where family culture and lived experiences can add value to learning and how those assets complement the values boys are learning in early childhood classrooms.
- Express genuine interest in getting to know families. Ask about their goals and dreams, their concerns, what forms of support they desire, and what they want their children to learn (CDE, 2021) (OSSS BoC, 2020).

**Build positive relationships** by continually communicating messages like these to Black boys and their families:

- You care about them and their well-being.
- They are safe in your classroom, and you want them to be safe.
- Their basic needs will be met at school.
- You will listen to them.
- You believe they have something important to contribute to the classroom.
- You will provide emotional protection. For example, you will come to their defense if someone says or does anything with the intention of harming them.



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#### CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE & SUSTAINING PRACTICE

## Learn about and value children's lived experience and their families' cultural assets.

#### ACTION STEP

Dedicate planned time for one-on-one interactions with Black boys, a strategy called **individuating**.

Observe, listen and be curious about what Black boys can and want to do every week. Spend less time focusing on what Black boys can't yet do or don't want to do (Howard and Howard, 2021).

#### ACTION STEP

Communicate positive messages to young Black boys that acknowledge their strengths and capabilities.

Affirm their important role as valued students in your classroom community or important members of your early learning program community. Celebrate their skills learned and progress. Elevate them continually, reinforce their brilliance, and hold high expectations. When you see the brilliance of your Black boys, brag about them to your colleagues (Howard and Howard, 2021).

Affirm and validate Black boys' abilities and efforts. Share these validating messages through one-on-one interactions and during group time discussions when their peers also hear these messages. Work consistently to engage in this practice. Black boys who are perceived as difficult to like will depend on you to engage in this practice (Howard and Howard, 2021) (CDE, 2021).

These messages can be shared through **verbal affirmations**:

*Wow, you really had to work hard on that one.*

*That was a smart way to solve the problem.*

Or use **non-verbal cues**—a warm smile, a light hug, a pat on the shoulder. Observe each child to find positive things to say:

*I see how interested you are in that book. It's wonderful to see you so engaged in reading! What is the book about?*

**If they are not in class for any reason, tell them that you noticed** and you are glad they have returned.

*We missed you when you were absent yesterday.*

*We are so glad you're back here learning with all of us!*





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#### CULTURALLY REponsive & SUSTAINING PRACTICE

**Implement culturally and linguistically responsive practices that represent the diversity of the boys of color in a program/school, including high-quality curriculum and instructional approaches that reflect the images and lived experiences of young boys of color.**

#### ACTION STEP

Create a sense of safety for Black boys as soon as they begin early learning programs.

Children must feel safe—psychologically and physically—and cared for, and classroom values emphasize children caring for one another and children feeling that their teachers genuinely care for them and their success (Howard and Howard, 2021).

Get to know Black boys better as individuals (Ispa-Landa, 2018). Questions to consider:

- What do you know about his family? His interests? His strengths?
- What family member does he talk about the most fondly?
- What is his favorite activity or area in the classroom to play or be by himself?
- What makes him scared, worried, or angry? What brings him joy?
- What helps him to become regulated?
- Does he have a favorite food? Toy? Story to tell?
- Who is he most likely to play with in the morning and/or afternoon?
- Who does he look up to?
- How does he act when you are talking to him? Interacting with him?
- How would you describe your relationship with this young boy?

#### ACTION STEP

Increase understanding that all standardized or off-the-shelf curricula must be adapted.

Bring in culturally and linguistically responsive materials and activities to ensure that content is meaningful to Black boys and their families (Meek, Iruka et al, 2020).

Provide windows and mirrors in the curriculum, so Black boys can see themselves and so they can see other people and other ways of being and living. Listen emergently to them with a willingness to influence the curriculum based on what we hear/learn (Howard and Howard, 2021).

Look often for opportunities to make connections in your classroom with Black boys' lives. Make sure you know which information boys and their families are comfortable sharing and which stories they prefer you keep confidential. Consider making this exchange reciprocal and share aspects of your own life (CDE, 2021).



Photo courtesy of Alameda County Fathers Corps

#### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

## Build meaningful, trusting and reciprocal partnerships with families of boys of color, and include parents and caretakers in all aspects of project and program planning.

#### ACTION STEP

### Involve fathers and father figures.

Encourage fathers to participate in early learning programs. Use [father-friendly principles](#) developed by Alameda County Fathers Corps. Learn about the barriers that prevent Black fathers from feeling welcome, valued, and included. Consider how to reach out and ask fathers and father figures to learn about how their boys play. Talk to Black fathers about the important people in their son's life. Ask Black fathers and father figures how they want to be involved and then follow their lead to include them in as many ways as possible. Involve Black fathers and father figures in leadership training and family engagement (OSSS BoC, 2020).

#### ACTION STEP

### Disrupt deficit language and deficit approaches. Talk to families about their children's strengths and their hopes and dreams.

Successful family partnerships require educators to reject deficit-based beliefs, stories, stereotypes, and myths about parents and families. Trusting relationships begin with a belief that all families want their children to do well in school and that families make important contributions to their children's learning (CDE, 2021) (OSSS BoC, 2020).

Invite families to be partners in the creation of an educational plan for their child. This can simply be a list of shared goals, values, desires, or outcomes for the child.



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#### FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

## Secure community partnerships to support boys of color and their families.

#### ACTION STEP

Identify community resources—especially early childhood intervention services—and support teachers’ access to those resources when needed.

East Bay resources for more information include:

- [First 5 Alameda County](#)
- [BANANAS](#)
- [Regional Center of the East Bay](#)
- Oakland Starting Smart and Strong ([OSSS](#))
- Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) [African American Male Achievement](#)

#### ACTION STEP

When resources are limited, brainstorm how to bring together internal and external partners.

Consider partnerships with community members, advocates, allies, and co-workers who can share ideas and materials.

To engage in a meaningful way with internal and external partners, staff must take the lead to provide them with data and other information and resources they need to be effective. All parties must operate from a foundation of common values and a common vision. Efforts must be mission-oriented and data-driven.



# 5



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## TEACHER ANTI-RACISM & RACIAL JUSTICE

### Build educator knowledge of structural racism, oppression, power and racial equity,<sup>2</sup> and how these factors disproportionately affect boys of color.

#### ACTION STEP

Improve knowledge of structural racism, oppression, power, privilege, white supremacy culture, colorism, implicit and explicit bias, the harms of labeling, and how these factors disproportionately affect Black boys.

Build awareness of the history of racism and its impacts. Make it personal when possible, hearing stories from personal connections.

Create a library of anti-racist books, videos and resources in an effort to foster your professional development and that of the other adults in your program.

Attend trainings that unpack topics of equity, racism, oppression, privilege, or power that provide strategies for combating systemic issues.

#### ACTION STEP

Provide professional development that includes information about children's stages of racial identity development.

The American Academy of Pediatrics states, "Racism is a socially transmitted disease passed down through generations." In 2020, the American Public Health Association declared, "Racism is a public health crisis or emergency," due to the negative health impacts it can cause. These bold statements are indicators of the negative impacts racial discrimination can have on a child's mental health and self-identity (Henneman, 2014) and that racism can be a mechanism through which racial disparities occur in child health (Patcher and Coll, 2009). This reinforces the importance of developing an awareness of young children's racial identity development as a key strategy for improving racial equity and justice in ECE environments. Research shows that babies as young as three months have demonstrated a preferential response to faces of certain racial groups (Sullivan, Wilton et al. 2020).





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#### TEACHER ANTI-RACISM & RACIAL JUSTICE

**Strengthen educators' self-awareness of positionality (social categories of identity); their cultural values, assumptions and beliefs; and their understanding of the role that conscious and unconscious bias plays in their work with young boys of color.**

##### ACTION STEP

Commit to self-reflection and think about the messages you are consuming and sharing about Black boys and men.

Examine what you are consuming and why you are consuming it. Interrogate television shows, music, and movies. Be mindful as an educator about what you are communicating on social media. Are you retweeting, liking, and sharing negative news about Black boys?

Reflect on your own positionality and lived experiences in relation to race. What are your earliest memories of race? What thoughts come up for you? What feelings come up for you related to these memories? Share your memories with other educators.

Self-reflection is a continuous process of taking time to think about the way you feel, the intensity of these emotions, and the way these feelings might be impacting how you react to others, how you perceive them, and how you treat them.

##### ACTION STEP

Provide teachers with ongoing support to reflect and dialogue about their practice in a caring and encouraging environment.

Find time for reflective dialogue with a supervisor or colleagues to discuss plans for responsive changes to curriculum, instruction, and the environment to support individual Black boys who have specific behavioral and emotional needs (CDE, 2021).

One key factor associated with increased early childhood education expulsions and suspensions is teacher stress (Gilliam, Maupin et al. 2016). When we are stressed or when we don't practice self-awareness and self-reflection, we might react to children's behaviors—hitting, biting, running away—in strong ways that reinforce our implicit racial biases (CDE, 2021).



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#### TEACHER ANTI-RACISM & RACIAL JUSTICE

## Learn and use evidence-based strategies to interrupt conscious and unconscious bias.

#### ACTION STEP

### Address racism when it surfaces in classrooms.<sup>3</sup>

Model for children how to disrupt harmful stereotypes where generalizations are made about individuals based on their race or ethnicity (CDE, 2021).

Tap [resources for talking to young children about race](#).

#### ACTION STEP

### Have courageous conversations with staff members who are harming young Black boys.

Speak up when you see something wrong. This is especially encouraged for white educators. White educators who remain silent in the face of racism are missing an important opportunity to create social change. Silence equals complicity. It will take bold educators to begin this paradigm shift. Teachers of color cannot be the only educators advocating for Black boys (Livingston, 2020).

#### ACTION STEP

### Make an explicit intention to address and unlearn your biases.

Strengthen understanding of the role that conscious and unconscious bias plays in work with Black boys and their families (CDE, 2021) (OSSS BoC, 2020).

Implicit bias plays a role in all human behavior. These biases are communicated to us in many ways from conversations with friends and family, through jokes we hear, or in our consumption of various forms of media. These biases are grounded in long histories of racism in societies all around the world. You can test your own implicit bias online through the [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#), a user-friendly virtual tool.

Try the [Mindful Reflection Tool](#) (CDE, 2021).

Shift from a deficit to a strength-based mindset in work with Black boys. Share information on anti-racism and anti-bias with colleagues.

The National Child Welfare Institute has developed a [myriad of racial equity resources](#) to confront implicit bias, implement system changes, and work to achieve racial equity within their organizations and across systems, including, a tool called, [Equity in the Center Awake, Woke and Work: Building a Race Equity Culture](#).



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#### SYSTEMS EQUITY CAPACITY

## Collect data to identify progress made on equity goals for Black boys and disrupt inequitable outcomes before they occur.

#### ACTION STEP

Create opportunities for Black boys to share stories of their own strengths, interests, and goals. Invite them to speak about program or equity goals and progress.

Create many opportunities for Black boys to be narrators of their own experiences and prioritize collecting these qualitative data in addition to quantitative data (Safir and Dugan, 2021).

Using art as a medium is another way to capture stories while also offering a time of connection. Children can be guided through their stories with questions such as, *Are you in this picture? What are you feeling? What will happen next? What event happened just before or after you drew this picture?*

#### ACTION STEP

Ensure principals and administrators understand the limitations and problems with tools developed to rate quality in early childhood classrooms and programs. These tools often leave out indicators that explicitly address equity (Meek, Iruka et al, 2020).

Include equity metrics in observations and evaluations of teachers and their classroom practices. Do not rely on single sources of data, such as Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) or Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) scores, to rate quality. Acknowledge limitations of these measures including that they do not measure bias.





Photo courtesy of Tandem

#### SYSTEMS EQUITY CAPACITY

## Audit existing policies, procedures, and practices through a racial equity lens in order to build programs, schools, agencies, and systems that improve outcomes for boys of color.

#### ACTION STEP

Create explicit policies, procedures, and classroom norms to prohibit harsh discipline in early childhood programs, including restraint and seclusion, corporal punishment, exclusionary discipline, and pushouts.

Provide teachers with support including professional development on this topic (Meek, Iruka et al, 2020).

Research local, state, or federal laws that prohibit harsh discipline in early childhood education settings, such as California AB 752 (Rubio), and support policy creation and implementation.

Consider an annual review of programmatic policies and training modules.

Learn about your local, state, and congressional representatives. You can write to them to advocate for a particular issue in early childhood.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education wrote a [Policy Statement on Expulsions and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings](#), which provides recommendations for preventing and reducing suspensions and expulsions.

#### ACTION STEP

Advocate for funding for culturally responsive and evidence-based social and emotional supports.

These supports include early childhood mental health and intervention programs, counselors and psychologists; social-emotional curricula; and professional development opportunities that are grounded in anti-racist, social-emotional learning, including the development of a positive racial identity (Meek, Iruka et al, 2020).





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#### SYSTEMS EQUITY CAPACITY

## Use trauma-responsive, resilience building, and healing-engaged approaches and practices to inform relationship-building, policies and procedures, instruction, and communication.

#### ACTION STEP

### Change the conversation about behaviors.

Acknowledge that all behavior is communication. Learn about stress-related behaviors and use language that is more child-centered, trauma-informed and empathy-based (CDE, 2021).

Refrain from using the term “challenging” when describing behavior. This is deficit language and assumes the child’s behavior is purposeful. Try to understand the behavior in the moment by pausing and asking yourself if the behavior may be a result of a trauma trigger or memory. Or in another instance, the child’s behavior may indicate that they are at risk for or diagnosed with a disability (CDE, 2021).

Research shows that preschool teachers expect more disruptive behaviors from Black children, even when no challenging behaviors are being displayed (Gilliam, 2016). This is a result of implicit bias. (See p. 4 for tips on addressing bias.)

Practice self-regulation and/or de-escalating techniques that will help ground adult frustrations and support a calm and loving response towards the child. Strive to create an environment that communicates to the child a feeling of safety and predictability (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz, 2019).

Talk with the child’s caregivers to ask about the types of behaviors demonstrated at home and the strategies used to help calm or soothe the child.

According to Cohen and Kaufman (2000), mental health consultation “in early childhood settings is a problem-solving and capacity-building intervention implemented within a collaborative relationship, ... typically an early care and education provider and/or family member.” (Alkon et al., 2003).

#### ACTION STEP

### Ensure that early childhood practitioners are provided with ongoing support to implement policy and program changes effectively.

To eliminate harsh and exclusionary discipline practices, for example, this may involve educators engaging in reflective dialogue with a supervisor or colleagues. It may mean setting aside time to plan for responsive changes to their curriculum, instruction, and the environment to support individual Black boys who have specific behavioral and emotional needs (CDE, 2021).

# Endnotes

- 1 The 10 Promising Practices reflect key strategies for improving educational equity for young boys of color. They are drawn from a review of educational research, interviews, the [ROCK Project](#), OSSS BoC “Promising Practices Portfolio” and the California Dept. of Education “*Creating Equitable Early Learning Environments for Young Boys of Color: Disrupting Disproportionate Outcomes.*”
- 2 According to the [Center for Social Inclusion](#), racial equity is both an outcome and a process. As an outcome, racial equity is achieved when race no longer determines one’s socioeconomic outcomes; when everyone has what they need to thrive, no matter where they live. As a process, racial equity is applied when those most impacted by structural racial inequity are meaningfully involved in the creation and implementation of the institutional policies and practices that impact their lives. When racial equity is achieved, then (1) people, including people of color, are owners, planners, and decision-makers in the systems that govern their lives; (2) past and current inequities are acknowledged and accounted for, and people—particularly those most impacted by racial inequities—are provided the infrastructure needed to thrive; and (3) everyone benefits from a more just, equitable system.
- 3 Howard, T., & Howard, J. SRCD Webinar, [Supporting Boys of Color from an Equity Perspective](#), 2021.

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## Tell us your stories

We want to learn from you. Share your feedback and implementation stories with us by completing and submitting this [survey](#).