6

RACIAL PARENTING DURING POLITICAL DISRUPTION

Childrearing is contested because people think it matters. Whether it's political theorists writing about the perfect state, political actors trying to change policy, pundits discussing pressing political issues, or everyday Americans parenting at home, the kids are the future folk wisdom is widespread. This means that in addition to spending time thinking about how to raise their children to be safe, secure, and happy, parents appear to also think strategically about their kids' political education.

What informs the choices these parents make as they introduce their children to the political world? We propose that in times of contention—or, what some sociologists have called "unsettled times" (Swidler 1986)—childrearing is prone to swift changes that reflect ideologies and tool kits proposed by political entrepreneurs, including social movement activists. These entrepreneurs push ideas, frames, and repertoires of action that we expect filter down to and affect childrearing. While the kids are the future folk wisdom provides a foundation for why childrearing might be connected to political goals, we expect that social movements and unsettled times together can generate new socializing patterns and priorities among parents.

We take as our case the second half of 2020: a time marked by a global pandemic and widespread Black Lives Matter protests.[1] This was, by all accounts, an unsettled time. COVID-19 swept across the globe in the early part of the year, leading most U.S. states to issue stay at home orders by April of 2020. Children were sent home from school. Daycares closed. Parents attempted to work while caring full time for their children. A presidential campaign waged on in unconventional ways while meanwhile, the death toll rose, with Black, Latino, and Indigenous Americans much more likely to contract and die from COVID (Gadarian, Goodman and Pepinsky 2022).

In the midst of this, on May 25, 2020, a bystander videotaped the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by Minneapolis police officer,

1 Parts of this chapter's empirical work were published previously by the authors. See, "From Protest to Child-rearing: How Movement Politics Shape Socialization Priorities" in *American Political Science Review* and "Black Lives, White Kids: White Parenting Practices Following Black-Led Protests" in *Perspectives on Politics*.

Derek Chauvin. The video showed Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes following an arrest. Chauvin continued to kneel even after Floyd repeatedly gasped, "I can't breathe," called for his mother, and lost consciousness. The video evidence of Floyd's murder came shortly after Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville police in her own apartment and Ahmaud Arbery was chased and killed by three white men while jogging in Georgia. These killings occurred after a decade of recurrent protests in cities across the country after police killed Oscar Grant in Oakland, Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Eric Garner in New York, Rekia Boyd in Chicago, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, and many others. After George Zimmerman was acquitted of killing Trayvon Martin in 2013, many of these protests drew on an emerging "Black Lives Matter" framing, which served to connect individual instances of police violence to a larger, coalescing social movement.

In the Summer of 2020, Americans across the country poured into the streets as part of this broader social movement to protest racial inequality and violence. Though some protesters had previously joined in BLM protests, during this unsettled time the movement drew in new participants to produce the largest protest movement in American history (Buchanan, Bui and Patel 2020). An estimated 15–26 million people attended protests in the summer of 2020, with 500,000 people protesting on June 6 alone.

Actors in the Black Lives Matter movement used rhetorical frames and social media platforms to push a progressive racial project that highlighted White responsibility for inequality, anti-racism concepts, made policy demands for reparations and police defunding, and called for protection of civil rights (Anoll, Engelhardt and Israel-Trummel 2022; Garza 2014; Smith and King 2024; Tillery 2019). As most social movements do, BLM sought to "make some behaviors socially inappropriate and others newly appealing," while exposing Americans to a repertoire of actions aligned with its normative demands (Amenta and Poletta 2019, 280). This included tips and tools about how to introduce children to racial politics through books, discussion, and diversity exposure, as demonstrated in Chapter 5.

We consider whether White parents of school-aged children responded to this combination of forces in their socializing behaviors and priorities. We focus on White parents for several reasons. Previous scholarship suggests that White parents talk to their children less about race than do non-White childrearers (Abaied and Perry 2021; Ayón, Nieri and Ruano 2020; Hagerman 2018; Hughes and Chen 1997; Nieri, Yoo and Tam 2024; Sullivan, Eberhardt and Roberts 2021; Underhill 2018). This tendency to be "race-mute" reflects White people's location atop of the racial hierarchy, which allows many White people to benefit from their racial group membership without acknowledging it (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Haney López 2006; Waters 1990). In contrast,

decades of research shows that non-White families make explicit socialization overtures in efforts to help their children navigate race in America (see Hughes et al. 2006, for a review). Our data from the previous chapter confirms this conjecture: non-White parents spend more time planning their conversations about race with their children than do White parents.

This status quo situation may mean that salient political events like social movements are particularly important for changing how White people think about race socialization. By forcing issues onto the political agenda, creating new norms, and providing specific tips and tools, social movements may activate new practices among those otherwise likely to avoid them. In settled times, Whites and other groups will rely on habits and traditions to fill their race socialization practices; but in unsettled times, new ideologies and political projects introduce alternative ways of being (Swidler 1986).

We show that during this period of widespread protest, amid an ongoing pandemic, White parents shifted their behavior in ways consistent with movement goals. Scholars have long asked when and how social movements matter (Amenta et al. 2010; Shuman et al. 2023). Our findings suggest a new way social movements may achieve their aims: by shaping how parents introduce their children to the political world.

WHITE PARENTS AND RACIAL SOCIALIZATION IN 2020

To understand how White parents approached the topic of race in their parenting during this moment of disruption, we take a multimethodological approach including survey data, validated consumer patterns, and open-ended questions. We start with the survey data. In early December 2020, roughly seven months after the height of the protests, we fielded a survey via Lucid Marketplace to a nationally diverse sample of 1,083 non-Hispanic White parents with at least one only-White school-age child. We refer to this dataset as the *Racial Parenting Survey*.

We asked parents whether they had done a range of race-focused behaviors that reflect the tips, tools, and frames in the Facebook data from Chapter 5 and which are shown by others to matter for racial attitude development (Apfelbaum et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2021; Katz 2003; Smith and Ross 2006). Over three batteries, respondents reported whether they had made choices to diversify children's environments, made purchases with race in mind, and/or attended educational or political events related to race, such as bringing their child to a BLM protest. Respondents were asked to consider their actions "since May 2020," anchoring their self-reports to a specific time period and a critical event: the release of footage of George Floyd's murder and the

subsequent nationwide protests. Both question wording tactics can help improve the accuracy of recall (Krosnick and Presser 2010).

In total, respondents reported on ten different types of activities listed in Table 7.1. These activities capture a range of high- and low-cost behaviors, as well as variation on the publicness of the action. We organize the measures by whether they capture private *in-home* actions involving consumption patterns around race-based books, toys, and media or they focus on *public-facing* actions, which are community-oriented and publicly observable, like taking a child to a protest or community meeting focused on issues of race.

Table 7.1 shows the percentage of parents who report engaging in each of these actions during the second half of 2020—a period that begins with the death of George Floyd and encompassed many months of widespread BLM protest activity. The data show that fully 70% of White parents report engaging in *at least one* of our ten reported measures. Most commonly, parents report pursuing media choices through books and television that feature non-White people (approximately 40% for both). Many, too, report buying or borrowing books that support specific messages of the Black Lives Matter movement: they discuss discrimination (26%), teach parents how to talk about racism with their children (20%), or celebrate the history and successes of non-White people in the United States (32%).

Parents also report engaging in more costly and more publicly visible actions. Nearly a quarter of parents report helping their child make a yard sign supporting the Black Lives Matter movement,[2] 19% say they took their child with them to a protest, and 18% claim to have made conscious changes to their children's schooling, daycare, or after-school play options as a way of trying to pursue more racial diversity. Still, as the costliness of the behavior rises, fewer parents report engaging in it—an important validity check on self-reported actions.

This single snapshot in time suggests that during this period of political disruption when parents were receiving new messages about the importance of race socialization, White parents took steps to diversify their child's environment and involve them in political activity with issues of race in mind. But, maybe none of these behaviors were new. As a first test to determine whether parents *changed* their childrearing during this period, we asked parents to consider their actions further back in time.

When parents reported that they had done a particular activity, they were then asked if they had ever completed this action prior to May 2020 during their child's lifetime. We use these questions to sort respondents into three categories. *First timers* are those parents who

2 Yard signs were a commonly adopted approach to support the movement during this period and could be seen in neighborhood yards and windows throughout the summer and fall of 2020.

Table 7.1: Parenting Behaviors, May-Dec 2020

	% Who Have Done This
In-home	
1. Watch media because it featured non-White people	41
2. Buy/borrow book, toy, etc. because it featured non-White people	40
3. Buy/borrow book about outgroup history and figures	32
4. Buy/borrow book about discrimination	26
5. Buy/borrow book about how to discuss racism with child	20
Public-facing	
6. Anti-racism parenting workshop or workshop w/ child	24
7. Made a BLM sign with child	23
8. Attend community meeting about issues of race or policing	20
9. Attend BLM protest with child	19
10. Change environment for more diversity	18
Did none	30
Did at least one	70
Did at least two	56
Did at least three	42

engaged in at least one activity for the first time between May and December 2020; they may have previously taken other activities, but they took a new action during this time period. *Repeaters* completed at least one activity between May and December 2020 but none of the actions they took were new. Finally, *never doers* reported doing none of the activities between May and December 2020. We sort respondents into these three groups for in-home and public-facing activities separately, meaning it's possible to be, for instance, an in-home repeater and a public-facing first timer.

Figure 7.1 shows the distribution of our sample across the categories for both variables. Taking in-home activities first, parents are fairly evenly divided across the three groups. Thirty-seven percent of respondents took actions during this period, but only actions they had previously taken as well. More interestingly, 31% of our sample report taking at least one in-home action to race socialize their children in

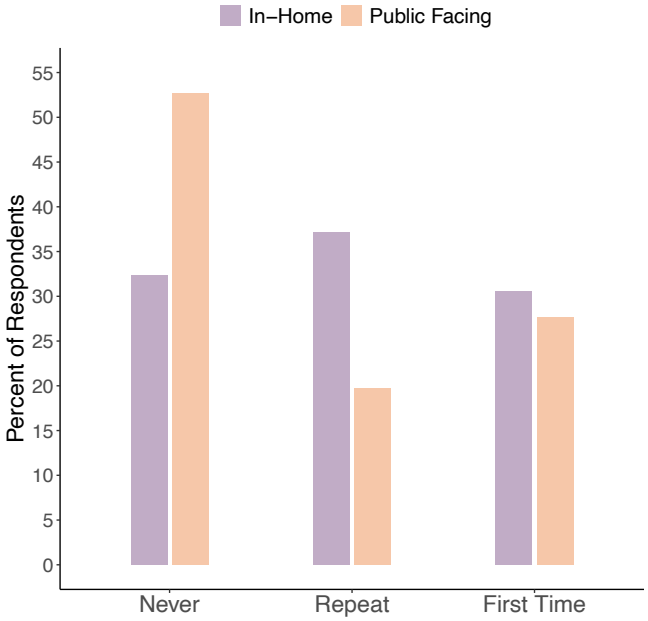
line with Black Lives Matter goals for the *first time* during this period. That is, they tried something new. This equates to up to roughly 15.9 million American parents of White children seeking out new toys, books, games, or media for their children specifically because they featured themes relevant to the BLM movement for racial equality.[3] Among these first-timers, the average number of in-home acts was 2.5 (out of 5). Further, 84% of these parents report that the reason they took a new action was *because of* BLM organizing after George Floyd's murder.

Turning to public-facing actions, our White parent sample skews toward *never doers*. Fifty-three percent of respondents reported doing none of the public-facing actions we measured in the approximately half year in question. Another 20% reported having done these actions during this period and also at some time in the past. But, again, over one-quarter of respondents (28%) were first-timers: they brought their child to a BLM protest, made a BLM sign with their child, sought out community meetings and anti-racism workshops, or even changed their school or daycare for one with more racial diversity in the six months immediately following George Floyd's murder—and they'd never done so before. Moreover, these are actions that others have shown can have a lasting effect on children's political orientations and racial attitudes (Brown et al. 2021; Raychaudhuri 2018). Among first-timers, parents engaged in on-average 2.29 public-facing acts and again, 84% report taking a new action *because* of Floyd's murder and surrounding events.

A significant proportion of White parents report that they changed their behavior in response to the movement. But our theory more broadly suggests that parents' responses to political events are likely conditional on predispositions. In prior work we've shown that this is the case (Anoll, Engelhardt and Israel-Trummel 2025). Democratic parents are significantly more likely to take both in-home and public-facing actions during this time period. Further, we've found that Democratic parents were significantly more likely to take a new action for the first time. Beyond predispositions, our prior work has also shown that the movement and pandemic both provided opportunities for parents to take new actions. Parents who lived near a higher share of peaceful BLM protests were significantly more likely to take on new public-facing actions for the first time. Similarly, parents who had COVID-induced reductions in their employment were more likely to take in-home and public-facing actions, perhaps because they suddenly were spending more time with their children and had more opportunities to engage their children in political action. Together, these results indicate that the political environment shaped parenting

3 This estimate comes from data accessible via IPUMS on the number of non-Hispanic White households in the 2020 Census who had one or more of their own children in the home.

Figure 7.1: Distribution of Parents Across Action Types



choices during this period of disruption, and White parents took on new race socialization behaviors that aligned with BLM movement goals.

IS THIS ALL JUST VIRTUE SIGNALING?

White parents reported undertaking new conversations and actions with their children in 2020 following the widespread protests. But, self-reports have well-known challenges, including faulty recall and sensitivity to social expectations. Perhaps parents in our survey didn't actually buy a new book for their children or take them to a protest; perhaps, instead, they simply felt that it was the socially desirable response to report that they had. That is, maybe our reports of race-conscious parenting during this period are not valid reports of behaviors that actually took place, but instead are ways for respondents to virtue signal—to communicate that they are "good" people with the right values, rather than faithful reports of actions they took.[4]

4 One answer to this question is that virtue signaling in-and-of itself can be evidence of movement effects. Prior studies of White parents consistently show a reluctance to talk about race openly, suggesting that White parents felt no pressure to report race-conscious parenting with their children before 2020 (Abaied and Perry 2021). If our increased reports of progressive race parenting are solely the product of virtue signaling, that would still be an indicator that norms around racial socialization have changed dramatically—connecting the movement goals to parents' beliefs about childrearing. A shift in norms in the wake of the protests would be evidence that the

We look to other data to validate respondents' self-reports. Parents commonly reported buying or borrowing new children's books on themes related to race or with non-White characters in the six months after the George Floyd protest; the Facebook data also suggest this was a common topic in parenting groups at the time (see Chapter 5). We turn to consumer data to see if these types of books increased their sales in the wake of the protest movement, which would validate parents' self-reports.

The New York Times provides weekly bestseller lists that report the top ten books that week in a given category. We use the young adult hardcover and children's picture books lists to examine the kinds of books that occupy the bestseller list in 2020 before George Floyd's murder compared to afterwards. In total, 64 books appeared on the young adult hardcover bestseller list and 85 books appeared on the children's picture books bestseller list in 2020.

We use information from Amazon and Goodreads to assess each book's content (Goncalves et al. 2024). For the young adult books, we coded each book for whether it features: 1) a non-White main character, 2) a Black American main character, 3) themes of racial or ethnic discrimination, 4) themes of antiblack discrimination.[5] For children's picture books, we code for three indicators: 1) whether the book features a non-White character on the cover, 2) whether the book features a Black character on the cover, 3) whether the book touches on themes of race broadly (racial discrimination, inclusion, belonging, etc.).[6]

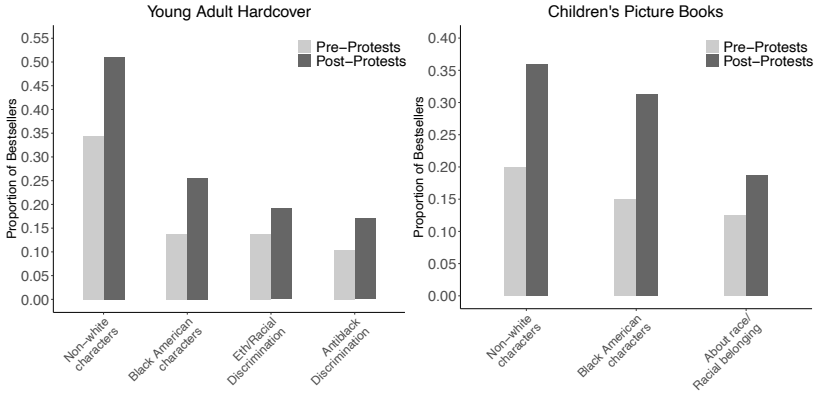
We then calculated the share of books on the bestseller lists in the pre- and post-protest periods that fell into each of these categories. Figure 7.2 displays the results. The left panel shows that about 35% of young adult hardcover bestsellers in the pre-protest period had a non-White main character. After the protests, the number rose to 51%. Further, this jump is largely attributable to an increase in Black main

protest changed White parents' beliefs about what others expected of them, *even if White parents were not changing their actual socialization practices.*

5 Using only the summary content means that likely some of our books received a false negative: they in fact did have a Black main character, or touched on themes of racism, but didn't mention it in the summary content. This, we think, makes our test a restrictive estimate of change. Our method also approximates the information that most purchasers have about a book when they buy it.

6 Summaries of children's books provided less information than young adult books, and introduce the use of pictures as a primary element of the book. Our coding scheme reflects these differences in the genre. Second, we note that categorizing characters' race based on the cover image is fraught given that race is not always communicated clearly by phenotype. Still, our process of categorization captures the process consumers might go through as they consider book purchases. Finally, for the third category, we did not code books that communicated ideas about inclusion generally as a 1; we only counted books that openly talked about race. For example, Kristen Bell and Benjamin Hart's book *The World Needs More Purple People* offers "a wonderful message about embracing the things that bring us together as humans" but does not talk about race. However, it is coded as having non-White and Black characters on the cover.

Figure 7.2: Changes in Proportions of 2020 New York Times Bestsellers



characters on the bestseller lists. In the pre-period, 14% of books had a Black main character compared to 26% in the post-protest period.

Similarly, the share of bestselling young adult books dealing with issues of ethnic or racial discrimination increased by about 5 percentage points in the post-protest period. Again, the increase seems mostly due to an increased share of bestsellers focused on antiblack discrimination after the protests. In the pre-protest period, one in ten books touched on antiblack discrimination compared with 17% in the post-protest period. It is worth noting that none of the books in either category that touched on ideas about race seemed to communicate conservative racial ideologies. Book sales were consistent then with Black Lives Matter goals, pushing primarily race-progressive socialization content, and align with parents' self-reports about consumption.

Turning to children's picture books, we see a very similar pattern. Before the widespread protests, one-fifth of bestsellers featured non-White characters on the cover. After the protests, 36% of bestsellers had non-White characters on the cover. Again, this seems mostly driven by an increase in Black characters, which went from 15% to 31% of bestsellers. Lastly, we see a similar increase in the share of bestselling children's picture books that explicitly touch on race. In the pre-protest period, 13% of books dealt with these ideas compared to 19% in the post-protest period.

Considering a few examples can be instructive. The young adult book, *I'm Not Dying With You Tonight*, co-written by Kimberly Jones and Gilly Segal, tells the story of a Black student and White student who are suddenly thrust together during a race riot in their town. The book was not on the bestseller list in the pre-protest period, despite its publication date in 2019. After the protest, it spent three weeks on the young adult bestseller list. Alexandra Penfold and Suzanne Kaufman's picture book *All Are Welcome* (2018) shows a diverse group of children at school and "lets young children know that no matter what, they have a place, they have a space, they are welcome in their

school." It spent 12 weeks on the children's bestseller list during the post-protest period—its longest stretch of time on the list since its publication two years earlier.[7]

These data from the *New York Times* bestseller lists serve to validate parents' self-reports. White parents in our survey said they engaged in new parenting practices during this period, with book consumption emerging as one of the most commonly reported actions. Consumer data supports their claim. Books with messages that aligned with Black Lives Matter goals increased in sales in the latter half of 2020, which was the period of time we asked about in our survey. Although we can't link book sales to specific individuals to confirm reports, the general pattern suggests that indeed, people purchased children's books with the goals of the movement in mind.

WAS THIS JUST A MOMENT IN TIME?

Social movement scholars often seek to understand when movements matter and how. Black Lives Matter is no exception, and scholars have examined its myriad impacts. We know, for instance, that there were significant changes in White Americans' racial attitudes immediately following the Summer 2020 protest movement, but that these changes were fleeting. Within just a few months, Whites' beliefs about racial discrimination and support for the police had rebounded to where they were before the protests and support for BLM dropped below early 2020 levels (Chudy and Jefferson 2021; Reny and Newman 2021). Considering this, is it possible that race socialization in White families followed the same pattern? Parents may have acted once in the immediate aftermath of the movement and then moved on.

To test whether changes in race socialization were momentary or enduring, we again turn to survey data. We fielded two more surveys using the online platform YouGov to White parents of White, school-aged children in June (N=1,500) and December (N=1,000) 2021. Along with our December 2020 survey, these data give us reports on parental actions at six month intervals out to 1.5 years from the time of George Floyd's murder.

The three surveys of White parents captured a variety of race-focused discussion topics between parents and their children (e.g., Hughes and Chen 1997; Stevenson 1994). Our measures were designed to capture both progressive and conservative racial topics. On the progressive side, respondents were asked whether they had conversations with their children in the last six months about people of other racial and ethnic groups who are important to the nation's history;

7 This book seems to sell seasonally during the back-to-school period. It was published in July 2018, and appeared on the bestsellers list starting in mid-August for six weeks. It reappeared on the list in late August 2019 for another six weeks. Its reappearance on the list in June 2020 doesn't match this seasonality, and it stayed on the list for twice as long this time.

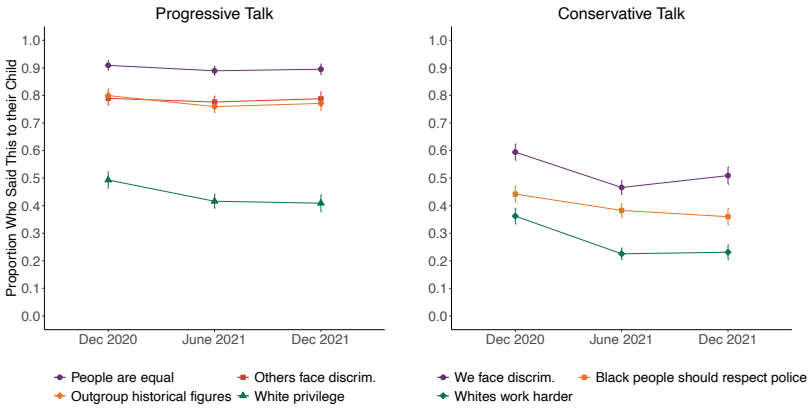
the rewards and special privileges that might come from being white; the idea that people are equal regardless of their race and ethnic background; and that other racial and ethnic groups are sometimes still discriminated against because of their race. On the conservative side, we captured themes related to Black socio-cultural responsibility and what has come to be called "reverse-racism" by the right (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Engelhardt 2021*a*; Kinder and Sanders 1996). Parents were asked if, in the last six months, they had told their kids: if Black people were more respectful to the police, things would go better for them; that White people get ahead because they work harder than other groups; and about the possibility that some people might treat their White child badly because of his/her race.

Figure 7.3 plots the proportion of parents who report talking with their kids about a topic at all in the last six months for each of the three time periods.[8] The panel on the left shows progressive race talk between parents and children. Across all measures, we find that White parents most often report telling their children that "people are equal regardless of their race or ethnic background." Ninety-one percent of White parents report telling their children this in the six months after George Floyd's murder and self-reports of this conversation topic remain remarkably stable over the three time periods. Discussions of outgroup historical figures and discrimination too remain quite stable: 79% of White parents said they talked with their kids about discrimination non-White people face in the six-months after George Floyd's death. The number was 78% in June of 2021 and 79% in December of 2021. Significantly fewer parents talk to their children about White privilege: 49% in December of 2020, 42% in June 2021, and 41% in December 2021.

These results suggest two things. One, the majority of White parents report talking to their children about racial discrimination in the United States, highlighting important historical figures who are not white, and communicating egalitarian messages to their children. Some, although not most, even report talking about White privilege to their White children. Second, we generally see stability across the time period. Three of the progressive talk items are nearly constant across the three surveys, while the decline in discussing White privilege is 8 percentage points. This suggests that while White racial attitudes may have rebounded to pre-Floyd levels, the direction and content of race socialization messages at home stayed relatively consistent.

8 The response options in the 2021 surveys differ slightly from the 2020 survey. In 2020 survey we asked respondents how many times they had talked about each topic with their children and gave response options of "never," "once," "a few times (2-3)" and "several times (4+)." In 2021, we asked how often they talked about each topic and had three response options: "never," "sometimes," and "often." The plot shows the proportions in 2020 who said they talked about a topic at least once, and for 2021 it shows the proportion who said they talked about a topic sometimes or often with their children.

Figure 7.3: Over Time Talk



Notes: The points in the 2020 survey are for the proportion of respondents who said they talked about a particular topic once or more in the past six months with their child. For the two 2021 surveys, the points indicate the proportion of respondents who said they sometimes or often talked to their child about a particular topic.

The righthand panel in Figure 7.3 shows discussion of conservative leaning race topics in White households. On average, these topics are less prevalent than the progressive messages that align with BLM goals, with the exception of discussions of White privilege. Fifty-nine percent of White parents reported telling their kids that they, as a White person, may face discrimination or unfair treatment because of their race in the half year after George Floyd's murder. This number declines to 47% in June and 51% in December 2021; these are statistically significant declines from the December 2020 period ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, parents reporting that they've said Black people should respect police more declines by eight percentage points between December 2020 and December 2021 and discussions about how Whites get ahead because they work harder drop by thirteen percentage points—from 36% to 23%.

The results suggest a net positive for racially progressive socialization in White households—at least when it comes to explicit, self-reported conversations about race from parents.[9] Further, the results suggest that while conservative race talk in White households consistently declined between December 2020 and December 2021, progressive race communication remained largely stable.

Our survey data, too, let us examine actions taken by parents to race socialize their children over this period. In our 2021 surveys we repeated our in-home and public-facing action items along with a few additional measures to capture racially conservative socialization practices. In 2021, we asked respondents if they had bought or borrowed a book or toy because it communicated "traditional American values"

9 Race socialization also includes indirect messages that children receive about race, which are likely more mixed in meaning (Hagerman 2024; Lesane-Brown 2006).

Table 7.2: Parenting Behaviors in Past 6 Months, December 2020 to December 2021

	Dec. 2020	June 2021	Dec. 2021
Took 1 or more in-home action (mean on 0-5 index)	68% ($\bar{x}$= 1.58)	64% ($\bar{x}$= 1.69)	68% ($\bar{x}$= 1.72)
Took 1 or more public-facing action (mean on 0-5 index)	47% ($\bar{x}$= 1.04)	13% ($\bar{x}$= 0.27)	14% ($\bar{x}$= 0.28)
Consumer, traditional values	—	27%	30%
Decrease diversity exposure	—	4%	4%
Attend All Lives Matter protest	—	4%	4%

Results show the percentage of respondents who took each action. We also show the average number of in-home and public-facing acts performed in each sample. There are slight differences in the items comprising the in-home acts in 2020 versus the 2021 surveys. In 2020, we have an item about whether parents purchased a book because it provided tips about how to discuss race and discrimination with their child. In the 2021 surveys, this item asked whether they purchased a book for their child because it discussed the idea of "White privilege" or "anti-racism."

to their child, if they had changed their child's school or daycare for an environment with *more* White children, or attended an All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter protest with their child. Table 7.2 shows the frequency of progressive in-home and public-facing race parenting behaviors across the three survey waves, along with the three additional conservative behaviors captured only in the 2021 surveys.

Just as in 2020, approximately two-thirds of White parents report performing at least one in-home action in the past six months in June and December of 2021. Further, the average number of in-home acts is consistent across the three waves, with parents reporting 1.58 to 1.72 acts out of 5 in each period. This suggests that compared to White racial attitude change among adults, which was short-lived in 2020, White parents' choices to increase children's exposure to racial diversity and ideas about racial difference and discrimination in the home did not diminish over time.

Public-facing actions, on the other hand, steeply declined. In 2020, almost half of parents said they'd done at least one of the public-facing actions including taking their child to a protest, helping them make a sign supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, or attending a public meeting about race topics with their child in the previous six months. In both 2021 surveys, however, only 13–14% of parents report the same. Not only are these public-facing actions more costly—and so, parents on average were less likely to participate in them in each survey wave—but also, it appears that they are conditional on public opportunities. As the Black Lives Matter movement subsided in activity in 2021, and opportunities to engage in public race socialization were less visible to White people, White parents spent less time engaging their children in public-facing race socialization.

Turning to the conservative socialization items that we asked for the first time in 2021, we again find in-home action is more common than public-facing action. Approximately 30% of parents say they've bought or borrowed something for their child to communicate traditional American values in 2021. This is on par with the share of parents who said they bought or borrowed something because it discussed the persistence of racial discrimination in the 2021 surveys. The vast majority of parents do not report decreasing their child's exposure to racial diversity in their school or childcare or attending an All Lives Matter type protest (just 4% report each). The numbers are equally low for the parallel progressive activities during this time period: 5% report attending a BLM protest and 4% say they changed their child's school or daycare for one with more diversity in both 2021 surveys.

What's perhaps most striking in these data is that we see more explicit racial socialization from White parents than prior work might have suggested (e.g., Abaied and Perry 2021). But this work is mostly taking place inside the home, to which political science has given limited attention. Even eighteen months after racial upheaval, parents still engage their kids in discussions about race in the United States and some include their children in race-focused political action. And while we do see some conservative racial socialization practices take place, they are generally less common than more progressive parenting practices. It seems that the political balance of socialization practices mirrors the same emphasis on progressive actions we observed in the Facebook pages targeting parents during the summer of 2020.

EXPLAINING BLM TO CHILDREN

Our survey items show consistency in the types of race talk that White parents report. But these items offer little nuance. When a parent reports that they have talked to their child about how all people are equal, what messages exactly are they communicating? It is possible to tell a child that all people are equal and therefore we should not talk about race—or that all people are equal and therefore we should strive to end persistent social, economic, and political inequalities to live up to that ideal. Both of those conversations would be coded as telling one's child that all people are equal, but they would communicate different messages about race in the United States.

Within the 2021 surveys we asked parents how they would explain Black Lives Matter to their children. This was an open-ended question that allowed respondents to answer in their own words. Open-ended questions within surveys can offer a fuller understanding of the complexities in how people make sense of politics (Bracic et al. 2023; Israel-Trummel 2025). After reading a sample of responses, we built a codebook to code the open-ended data for several key themes and

whether the statement communicates support for or opposition to BLM.

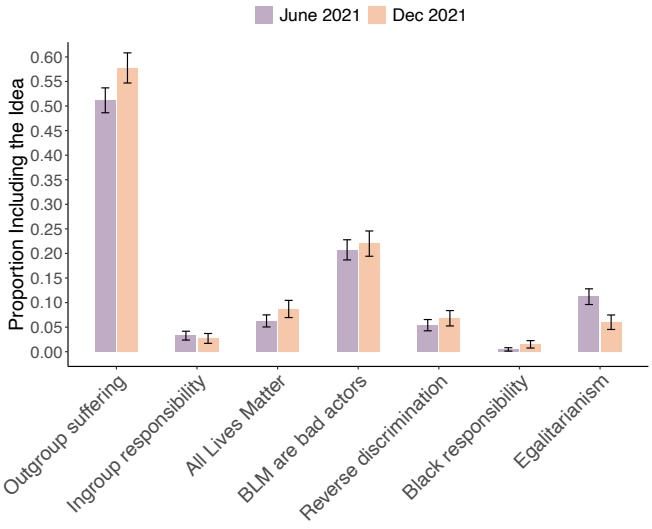
Trained research assistants coded respondents' statements for seven different ideas. We code whether respondents, 1) draw on ideas about outgroup suffering, 2) make claims about ingroup responsibility, 3) contend that all lives matter, 4) claim that BLM are bad actors or troublemakers, 5) argue that BLM is unfair to White people or is engaging in "reverse discrimination," 6) say that racism and racial inequality are Black people's fault, or 7) highlight the egalitarian idea that all people are equal or that race shouldn't matter. The first and second topics generally draw on racially progressive ideas, the third through sixth make racially conservative claims, and the seventh draws on colorblind racial ideology. People have complex and often contradictory ideas, which can be apparent in this type of open-ended data (Weaver, Prowse and Piston 2020). Our coding scheme therefore allows for the possibility that respondents draw on multiple of these ideas, including from both progressive and conservative perspectives. Finally, our research assistants coded for whether the response, on balance, expressed support, opposition, neutral, or ambivalent attitudes toward BLM.

Figure 7.4 shows the proportion of responses that included a given theme in the open-ended response. Only 3.5% of White parents say they either wouldn't talk about BLM with their kids or that they don't know what they would say in each survey. Instead, respondents offered rich portraits of how they talk about the topic that fell across multiple thematic categories. As with the close-ended questions, parents generally lean in the progressive direction when they explain BLM in their own words. A majority of parents' responses (51% in June and 58% in December) highlight discrimination and suffering among Black Americans. Common examples of this type of statement include:

- I would say BLM is a movement to try to stop the unfair harassment that African Americans often receive a the hands of law enforcement. (December 2021)
- In the United States we have disregarded the rights of Black Americans. Black Lives Matter is a recognition and an effort that Black Americans should not be killed based on the color of their skin. (December 2021)
- I would tell him that black Americans are killed disproportionately higher than white Americans and that until Black Lives Matter not all lives matter. It's not that other lives are less important it's because black lives need to be as important. (June 2021)

These statements straightforwardly acknowledge the existence of racial inequality and make clear that Black Americans are not treated the

Figure 7.4: Open-Ended Statements about BLM



same as White Americans. Often these statements focus particularly on police, but sometimes extend beyond criminal justice to broader inequalities.

In comparison, very few statements (approximately 3%) note any sort of ingroup responsibility for that suffering. When these statements do appear, they tend to partner with ideas of outgroup suffering, as with the respondent who stated:

> [This is roughly how I talked him him last year] :The BLM movement is sorta complicated. So you have to use your imagination and empathy. You know that white people have mistreated Black people for a long time, right? And you know that the cops are used to hurt people who are considered "less than" (Black or BIPOC people, homeless persons, people who have addictions, or who are very poor, etc), right? BLM is a reminder that cops pick on black people the most, and often just murder them. Remember Jay's friend Allah who had that cop follow him? Well, this happened to a man named Mr Floyd and the cops killed him. BLM reminds white people (and anyone who actually cares about others) that Black people don't deserve to be murdered– that they are precious and special, too. And there are a lot of white people who don't like it at all! [Then we talked about how white people where [*sic*] flipping TF out!] (December 2021)

Another parent who blended together themes of outgroup suffering and ingroup responsibility similarly noted that their response wasn't hypothetical, but was what they told their child:

> ...They didn't have to ask me about BLM; as soon as the protests erupted, I initiated a conversation because I don't want them to be oblivious of the world around them. I explained that there are many instances each year of white officers harassing black people, that in some places, it seems daily, and that in too many cases, it leads to innocent black citizens being killed at a per capita rate much higher than white. I explained what happened to George Floyd to my 12 year old. I let my 15 year old see the video. Then explained that people are outraged and protesting, but officers keep harassing protesters until riots erupt. (June 2021)

This balance toward the acknowledgment of Black suffering with the more limited focus on White responsibility fits with the patterns in the quantitative survey data, where parents were much more likely to report talking about discrimination faced by outgroups than they were to talk about White privilege (see also Chudy 2024).

A significant minority of respondents offer backlash explanations. Approximately one out of five respondents describe BLM protesters or organizers as bad actors in both surveys. Often these statements refer to Black Lives Matter groups as communists, Marxists, or racists. Some of these respondents said they would tell their kids that BLM protests are violent and protesters loot and burn cities. Some of the respondents who claim BLM are bad actors took pains to indicate that racism is wrong before dismissing the movement and its aims:

- It started out with pure intentions and then turned into a bunch of thugs who. decided they did not have to play by the rules because they think their skin color gives them a pass to be animals. I would then show my child all the damage done by BLM in multiple cities across the US. (December 2021)
- I would say that the BLM movement is trying to right some wrongs but they are doing it the wrong way with violent protests, not peaceful ones for the most part, and some members are buying million dollar multiple homes with the donations. (December 2021)
- I would tell them it is a money laundering operation for the Democrat party, and show them video of our cities being looted and burned down last summer. I would tell her about how it has not helped even one African American, only made a few "leaders" of the movement rich. I would then explain how important it is to be "colorblind", we are all humans and deserve Love and Respect. (December 2021)
- Black lives DO matter. But so do all lives, of all races. The Black Lives Matter organization is not a good group. They have often

> used violence during their protests, which is directly against what civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr taught. BLM has actually sent this country backwards. Many people who weren't concerned about their neighbors race are now very concerned because at any point, you can be called racist and be ostracized. We need to celebrate the fact that America is full of a wide range of cultures and ethnicities. Are we different? In some ways, yes. Just as they do things differently on the East Coast vs the Midwest. But we are all still humans, created by God, and should treat everyone with respect and dignity. (June 2021)

Six to nine percent of White parents invoke All Lives Matter or Blue Lives Matter in their explanation and 5–7% describe BLM as reverse discrimination across surveys. Often these statements were simple responses just stating "all lives matter" or that BLM is racist. At times they were longer statements, as with the respondent who wrote:

> BLM is a Marxist and racist organization that presents itself as trying to help with racial issues in society. In reality it promotes racism, anarchy, and does nothing constructive to help society. A far better approach would be to not judge anyone by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, as MLK Jr. suggested. BLM fails horribly based on the evident content of their collective character. (December 2021)

Finally, a relatively small number of respondents offer a colorblind explanation of BLM (11% in June and 6% in December). The relative paucity of these responses compared to both progressive and backlash responses is somewhat surprising as the prior literature emphasizes how White people—parents and non-parents—tend to deploy color-blind language when talking about race in attempts to avoid direct engagement with racial topics and maintain the status quo (Abaied and Perry 2021; Bonilla-Silva 2014). These parents say things like "everyone is equal" and "skin color doesn't matter." Most interestingly however, parents often pair egalitarian ideas with other ideas, both progressive and backlash. For example:

- People who are black are judged by the color of their skin. This is wrong. Nobody is better than anyone else just because of skin color. People are all the same. There is a lot of rascism in the country and the shootings of black children and adults has to stop. (December 2021)
- The idea that Black Lives Matter is a true idea, as all lives matter as we are all children of God. The organization however is not good and wants to tear down western values (December 2021)

Figure 7.5: Attitudes toward BLM from Open-Ended Statements

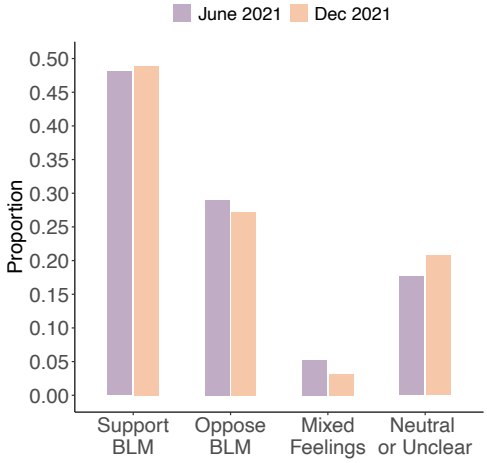


Figure 7.5 shows the proportion of respondents in each period whose open-ended response conveys support for BLM, opposition to the movement, and then those responses that are mixed or unclear. As with the close-ended data, the results suggest that White parents of school-aged children were more likely to communicate messages to their children in support of Black Lives Matter than to strictly oppose the movement. We again observe marked stability in attitudes toward BLM from these open-ended responses. Nearly half of parents' open-ended responses communicate support for BLM in both June and December, while just under 30 percent of responses communicate opposition in both surveys.

The results also show that a meaningful percentage of parents—just under 25% in both surveys—communicate mixed or unclear attitudes to their kids about the Black Lives Matter movement. Although the explicit racial socialization of White children appears to lean left, most fundamentally, it is contested. Different children receive different messages about the meaning of the Black Lives Matter movement and the state of race relations in the United States.

WAS IT REALLY BLM?

Our results so far indicate that White parents changed how they race socialized their children in the immediate aftermath of widespread BLM protest in 2020. But we've not yet been able to tie BLM to these socialization changes. In this final analysis, we turn to how attitudes toward Black Lives Matter in 2016 and 2020 are linked to race socialization practices in 2024. Given that we think parents were likely to respond to social movement calls to engage in progressive race socialization based on their predispositions, we would expect

that parents who were more favorable to BLM in 2016 and 2020 would engage in more race-focused discussion with their children later on.

To do this, we rely on data from the American National Election Studies (2025). The ANES has been conducting nationally representative surveys of Americans since 1948. Frequently, they construct panel surveys where they interview the same respondents several years apart to track political attitudes and behaviors over time. We use data from the 2016-2020-2024 Panel Sample. Fortuitously for our purposes, respondents were asked about their attitudes toward BLM in the first two waves of the survey (in feeling thermometer measures), and respondents who had children at home in 2024 were asked about whether they discuss both race and politics with their children. This allows us to test how attitudes toward BLM in 2016 and 2020 predict future socialization behavior. We analyze the 435 White respondents who said they had children under 18 at home in 2024.

We begin in Table 7.3, where we first model the frequency of race discussion with children in 2024 using favorability toward BLM in 2016 and 2020. In all these models, variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1 and we control for other attitudinal variables likely linked to both BLM attitudes and political participation as well as demographic covariates. We find in this first model that attitudes toward BLM in both 2016 and 2020 are significantly and positively associated with talking about race with children in 2024. That is, White adults who felt more favorable toward BLM in earlier time periods talk more with the children in their home about race than White adults who were less favorable toward the movement. Further, the separate influences of views in 2016 and 2020 views point to, in the first case, responses relative to durable associations with the movement and, in the second, responses connected to updated views of the movement, with the most plausible cause the summer 2020 protests. This is another piece of evidence that White parents who engaged more in racial socialization post-2020 BLM are those more favorable to the movement's aims.

But, perhaps White Americans who are more favorable toward BLM are simply more politically engaged in general. To probe whether BLM attitudes in the prior time periods are linked to broader political socialization or political participation, we model four other dependent variables in Table 7.3. First, we examine whether BLM attitudes predict general political conversations with children in 2024. We find no link here. This means that attitudes toward BLM are linked only to race-focused conversations with children in 2024. This is strong evidence for specific race socialization effects of Black Lives Matter rather than either broader political effects or the concern that a confounding variable drives the linkage between attitudes in 2016 and 2020 and behavior in 2024.

Next, we model three measures of political participation that do not involve children: donating to a campaign, contacting an elected official,

Table 7.3: Prior BLM Attitudes Predict Discussing Race with Kids in 2024, but not Politics or other Political Activities

	Race	Politics	Donate	Contact	Volunteer
BLM Views$_{2020}$	0.117*	0.065	0.053	0.015	0.007
	(0.048)	(0.051)	(0.053)	(0.051)	(0.086)
BLM Views$_{2016}$	0.123*	−0.002	0.033	−0.019	0.128
	(0.056)	(0.060)	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.101)
Partisan Strength$_{2016}$	0.149*	0.154*	0.051	−0.064	0.072
	(0.037)	(0.039)	(0.041)	(0.039)	(0.066)
Racial Resentment$_{2016}$	−0.016	−0.011	−0.124	−0.138*	0.090
	(0.064)	(0.068)	(0.070)	(0.068)	(0.114)
Political Interest$_{2024}$	0.097*	0.199*	0.151*	0.072	0.106
	(0.047)	(0.049)	(0.051)	(0.049)	(0.083)
Constant	0.163	0.077	−0.205	−0.079	−0.518*
	(0.100)	(0.106)	(0.109)	(0.106)	(0.179)
Demographic controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	435	435	435	435	435
R^2	0.155	0.119	0.140	0.081	0.108

*$p < 0.05$. OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Variables scaled 0-1. Models adjust for complex survey design.

and volunteering for a campaign. Across each of these dependent variables, Black Lives Matter views in early periods are *unassociated* with these other kinds of political involvement. Social movement scholars are often interested in how movements might influence the world by reshaping the behavior of everyday people (e.g., Giugni, McAdam and Tilly 1999; Shuman et al. 2023). If we were to just look at conventional measures of political participation (donating, contacting, etc.), we would find no evidence of movement effects. And yet, when we consider in-home race socialization through discussions between parents and children, we see the movement may influence American political behavior in more subtle ways.

Our models included controls for partisan identity strength in 2016, racial resentment in 2016, and political interest in 2024. We again find evidence that points to the potential role of socialization in political polarization. Stronger partisans and people who are more interested in politics are more likely to talk about both race and politics with their children. Interestingly, partisan identity strength is not significantly associated with any of the non-socialization focused political participation outcomes. In total, these models indicate that White parents who are more favorable to BLM in a prior period are more likely to take up movement calls to discuss race openly with their children later on.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION AS DEPENDENT VARIABLE

White parents of school-aged children responded to the Black Lives Matter movement by changing what they talked about with their kids, the consumer choices that they made, and the way that they introduced their children to politicst. Not only do parents seem to think that what kids learn can shape the future of the nation, but they are responsive to the broader political environment in their socialization choices. During times of political disruption, when culture and people's lives are unsettled, we observe political socialization as an outcome of larger political processes. Politics shapes what parents do and say with their children.

Further our evidence suggests that in the immediate period following the protests and until at least the close of 2021, White parents' socialization choices leaned progressive. While a meaningful share of parents communicated conservative racial messages to their children, evidence suggests that many parents took at least one action and had at least some discussion with their children in ways that aligned with Black Lives Matter goals. Still, as the cost of actions increased, White parents were less likely to engage and a minority of White parents talked with their children explicitly about White privilege.

Parents are a key socializing agent, but other actors and institutions matter as well. As we have seen, people without young children under their care also care about how children are race socialized. In the next chapter, we move from the private sphere of the home to the public world of schooling to understand how the broader American public reacted to the Black Lives Matter movement through reshaping race socialization.