

# Strategic Parenting: Embracing Hard Discussions to Enrich Children's Development

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# Challenging Questions from Children

Candice Mills, Ph.D.

**“Why do  
dogs pant?”**

**“Why does HE  
get a new toy  
and I don’t?”**

**“How did I get  
inside your  
uterus?”**

**“Will I die  
someday?”**



# Children ask questions for a reason

Attention seeking

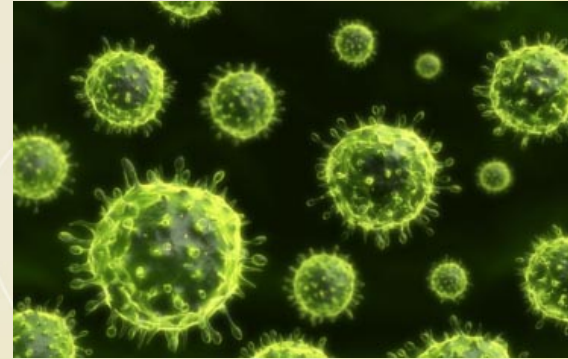


Information seeking



# Does the way we answer children's questions matter?

- For learning information



# Does the way we answer children's questions matter?

- For learning approach
- Naturalistic speech study (Kurkul & Corriveau, 2018)
  - Recorded parent-child conversation
  - Examined how parents responded to children's questions, and what children did in response



CHILD: “What kind of tickets are these?”

CAREGIVER: “Well, when you go to the circus, you have to buy tickets, you know, so that you can get inside.”



**CHILD: “What is a calorie?”**

**CAREGIVER: “Oh, you don’t have to worry about it.”**





**CHILD:** “Where do babies come from?”

**CAREGIVER:** “You’re too young for this conversation! Ask me again in five years!”



# Does the way we answer children's questions matter?

- Naturalistic speech study (Kurkul & Corriveau, 2018)
  - Results:
    - Lots of variability in how parents answered children's questions.
    - Lots of variability in how children handled not getting a clear answer.
      - Persistence vs. Withdrawal



# Does the way we answer children's questions matter?

- For learning approach



# Strategies for responding

- **Factual:** “Why do dogs pant?”
  - Ask a question (“Hmm, what do you think?”)



# Strategies for responding

- **Factual:** “Why do dogs pant?”
  - Ask a question (“Hmm, what do you think?”)
  - Offer a answer (“Dogs pant to cool themselves off.”)
  - ... with some prompting for more (“Do you know how people cool themselves off when it is hot outside?”)
  - Engage in **conversation**



# Strategies for responding

- **Emotional:** “Why does HE get a new toy and I can’t?”
  - Acknowledge the emotions (“It sounds like you are feeling frustrated. Is that right?”)



# Strategies for responding

- **Uncomfortable:** “How did I get inside your uterus?”
  - Remember that a child is **curious**
  - Clarify the reason for the question (“Oh, what made you wonder about that?”; “What do YOU think?”)
  - Provide snippet explanations (“A little piece of me and a little piece of your dad got together in my uterus.”)



# Strategies for responding

- **Emotional AND uncomfortable:**

“Will I die someday?”

- Recognize that the child is curious and may have feelings to sort out
- Follow your child’s lead
- Think about how to be honest but gentle (“Well, eventually, people’s bodies stop working, but that probably won’t happen for a very long time.”)





# General strategies for responding

- Know that children are sometimes satisfied by snippets of information
- Understand their temperament
- Model how to handle ignorance
- Consider using books as tools
- Engage THEM in conversations about challenging topics







# Using Children's Appearance-Related Observations for Good

Shayla Holub, Ph.D.

# The Challenges

- Embarrassment and worry for the individual
- Uncertainty about what to say
- Worried about unintended consequences
  - Talking about it could overemphasize differences



# Color Blind or Color Conscious? White American Mothers' Approaches to Racial Socialization

Brigitte Vittrup<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This study investigated the extent to which White American mothers discuss race with their children, which topics they are willing to discuss, and why some choose not to discuss it. Data were gathered from 107 mothers of children aged 4 to 7 years. Most mothers indicated the topic was important to discuss, especially for the purpose of elimination of bias and discrimination. However, many reported having no or only vague discussions. Only 30% were categorized as having a color conscious approach, whereas 70% indicated a color blind or color mute approach. The latter seemed to presume their silence would lead children to not notice differences and thus remain unbiased. Many also indicated that they would only approach

Journal of Family Issues

2018, Vol. 39(3) 668–692

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DOI: 10.1177/0192513X16676858

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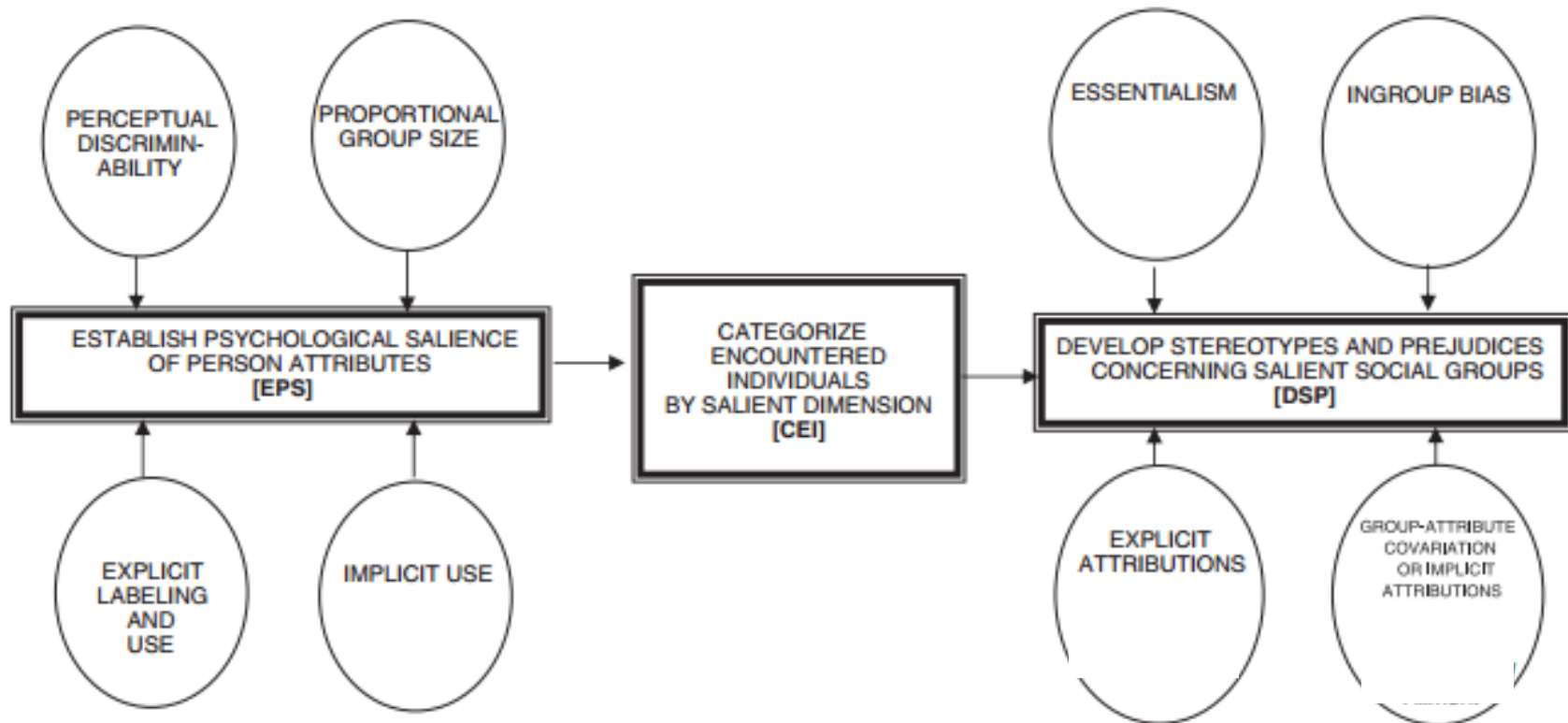
# Children are observers



Aboud, 1995; Dunham & Emory, 2014; Fassbender et al., 2016; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Heron-Delaney et al., 2013; Ruffman et al., 2016

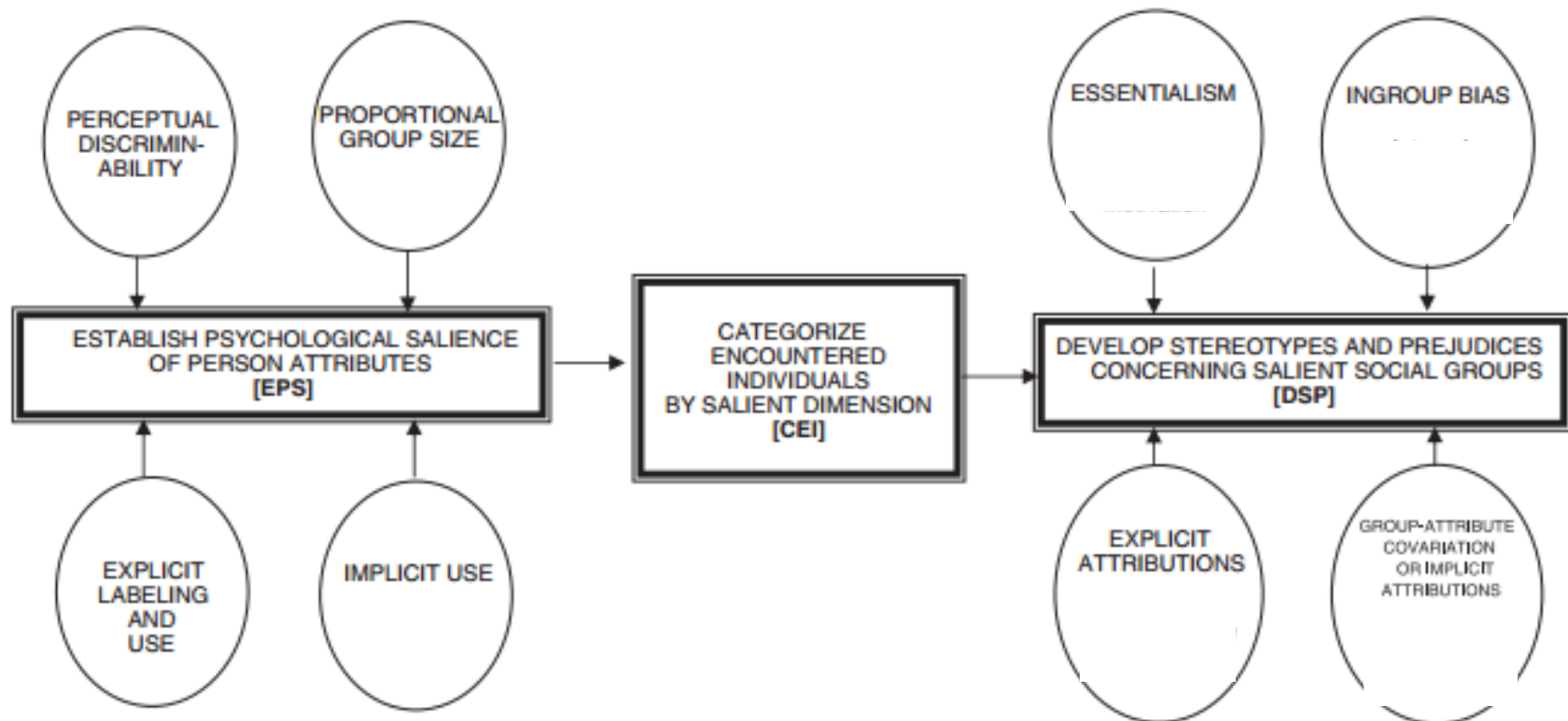
# Making Meaning of The Differences They Observe

- Developmental Intergroup Theory (Bigler & Liben, 2007)



# Parents Can Minimize Children's Bias

- Explicit conversations can counter other messages





# Responding to Appearance-Related Observations

- Make the most of opportunities to counter stereotypes and negative messages.
- Be careful not overreact. Respond kindly and positively.
- Use age-appropriate language and provide the right amount of information at once.
- Help children feel their questions and comments are welcome.
- Keep talking!



# Don't Just Respond, Be Proactive!

- Model behavior that shows you value differences
- Expose children to all types of diversity
- Media often presents diverse characters in biased ways (Tuchachinsky et al., 2015).
  - Filter
  - Talk about representation
  - Counter stereotypes, talk about why they are wrong



# Don't Just Respond, Be Proactive!

- Read books that celebrate differences, while also pointing out our shared humanity, acceptance of others, and acceptance of self.





# Children's Negative Emotions

Jackie Nelson, Ph.D.

# Young children's emotions are:

- Difficult for them to understand
  - poor emotion labeling
- Hard for them to control
  - poor emotion regulation
- Unable to see how their emotions affect others
  - poor perspective taking



**I broke this cheese in half.**



**"He doesn't want to go (even though we've repeatedly told him we're not going anywhere)."**



# Caregiver response to these big emotions

- Supportive / emotion coaching / emotion encouraging
  - When we: *problem-solving, comfort, give space for (appropriate) expression*
  - It teaches kids: *my emotions are natural and manageable*
- Unsupportive / emotion dismissive / emotion discouraging
  - When we: *punish, minimize, get upset ourselves*
  - It teaches kids: *my emotions are bad and should not be shown to others*



# Main findings...and caveats

- Supportive responses to children's negative emotions are related to greater social skills, emotion regulation, and academic achievement
- Unsupportive responses are related to more behavior problems and dysregulation
- But, ...
  - Stress affects parental responses to children's negative emotions
  - Parents' beliefs about children's emotions and their role as an emotion socializer affect their responses
  - Gender and cultural differences in parental responses to emotion
  - Developmental differences in what is "supportive"





# Social development quartet: When is parental supportiveness a good thing? The dynamic value of parents' supportive emotion socialization across childhood

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## Abstract

This introduction to the *Social Development Quartet* summarizes four articles that examine age-related and contextual shifts in the utility of parents' emotion socialization responses for children's social-emotional development. The first two articles present evidence for age-related changes in the benefits of parents' supportive responses and consequences of parents' nonsupportive responses to children's negative emotions between early and middle childhood. The next two articles consider contextual variations in this developmental shift by examining teacher reports of children's competence and family patterns of response among mothers and fathers. Together, these studies question the unilateral assumption that parental support of children's negative emotions is always a good thing, and provide a more nuanced understanding of when and in what contexts parents' responses are adaptive for children.

# Additional considerations

- Child temperamental reactivity
- Parent-child conflict (when negative emotions are directed at you!)



# Final thoughts

- Young children experience a lot of big emotions - that's typical and developmentally appropriate
- Being supportive of those feelings can require patience, self-regulation, and help from others
- What's considered "supportive" may vary based on context and child age
- Try to respect children's feelings and involve them in solutions

