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How Racism Affects Children in the Early Years

Why Racism Matters

How does racism influence children's lives and development from the time they are born until age 5? How does it affect their health, their learning in preschool, their families, or their neighborhoods? It is critically important for those who work with or on behalf of children to understand the ways racism--both conscious and unconscious--affects young children of color.

Racism takes on multiple forms throughout society, and it seeps into every layer of a child's life. It operates through negative judgements about people from marginalized groups (Black, Latine, Asian, and Indigenous people) and through discriminatory actions targeted toward them based not only on the way people look (their physical characteristics) but also how they talk, where they come from, and where they live. Racism is a toxic stressor that takes a toll on the well-being, the economic circumstances, and psychological outlook of marginalized groups and their communities. Despite the stress of racism, marginalized communities have persevered and resisted unjust conditions by leaning into their cultural values, assets, and strengths. What do the children gain from being members of these families? How is their healthy identity shaped by being a part of these communities?

Much of what we know about racism is from the vantage point of adults, not children. Our goal in this paper is to raise awareness – among researchers, policymakers, advocates, and health and education practitioners – about the effects of racism on the development of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. We want to expand the knowledge base around how both interpersonal and structural racism limit the health, education, and social-economic advancement of racially and ethnically

marginalized families and children. In addition, we want to uplift the strengths and cultural assets of these marginalized communities.

In December 2024 a supplemental issue of the research journal, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, entitled "Advancing Developmental Science on the Impact of Racism in the Early Years" was published. The supplement was a collection of scholarly papers on the ways in which parents, families, and children manage to thrive despite facing racial injustice throughout their daily lives. The articles also highlight overlooked issues and opportunities for additional research about how racism influences children's development. All the research is theoretically rooted in the newly formed Racism + Resilience + Resistance Integrative Study of Childhood Ecosystem (R³ISE) integrative framework developed by Iheoma U. Iruka along with the other co-editors

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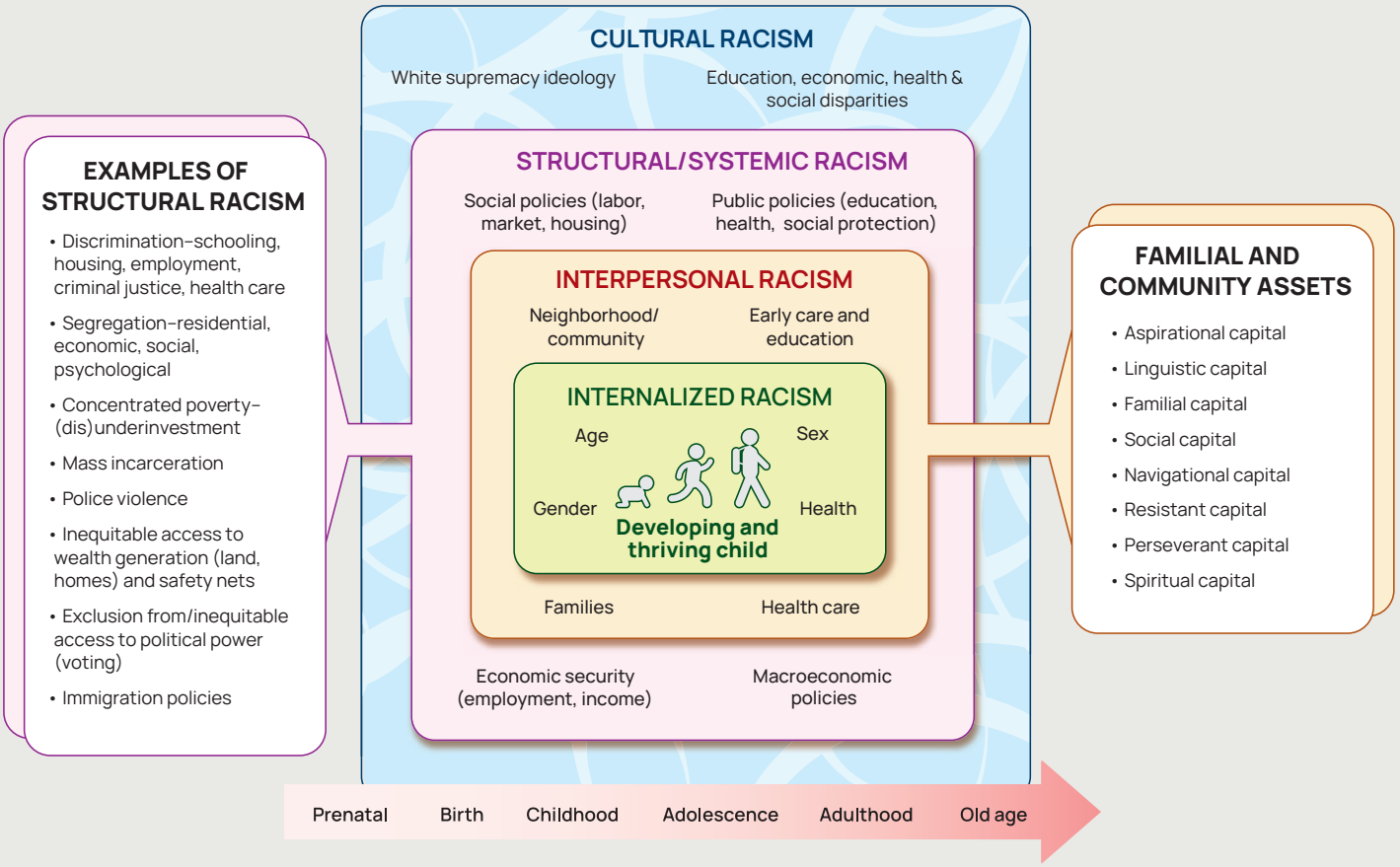
of the supplement (Stephanie M. Curenton, Jacqueline Sims, and Nneka Ibekwe-Okafor) as well as other contributing authors. The R³ISE approach acknowledges that racist policies and practices can affect multiple generations and become embedded in both micro and macro social environments that then impact children's development (See Figure 1). All the papers in the supplement are summarized in this report, and are organized into topical areas related to anti-Blackness, neighborhood and community environments, COVID, parenting, and learnings from Indigenous communities and Black families' spiritual traditions.



Intergenerational effects of racism

Racism + Resilience + Resistance Integrative Study of Childhood Ecosystem (R³ISE). The R³ISE integrative model is a conceptual framework examining how different forms of racism, such as cultural and systemic racism, impact children's healthy development and the moderating role of family and comunity assets. Note that vicarous racism and some other forms of racism are not pictured.

Source: Iruka, I. U., Gardner-Neblett, N., Telfer, N. A., Ibekwe-Okafor, N., Curenton, S. M., Sims, J., Sansbury, A. B., & Neblett, E. W. (2022). Effects of racism on child development: Advancing antiracist developmental science. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, 4, 109-132.

https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-devpsych-121020-031339

Sources of Support for Children and Families Confronting Anti-Blackness

Anti-Blackness is a form of racism targeted toward people of African descendent, and it is rooted in the dehumanization and the commodification of Africans during the globalized capitalism of the transatlantic slave trade, which ultimately resulted in millions of Africans being dispersed throughout the globe and forced to endure the physical and psychological violence of involuntary servitude for hundreds of years. Janvieve Williams Comrie and colleagues explain that anti-Blackness (and anti-Black racism) is a historical and systemic oppression and negative perception of Black people that is adopted not only by White Americans or Europeans but also is adopted even among other socially marginalized groups. Within the United States, the precursor for anti-Blackness began with chattel slavery and continued into Jim Crow segregation and even present-day mass incarceration.

Unfortunately, anti-Blackness was rampant in the historical legacy of the U.S. early care and education system that began with Black women being forced to care for White children through slavery and their roles as domestic servants. Even during the modern era of the early 20th century, Black families still have a history of being inadequately served by early care and education programs, and this continues even until present day. In 2024, only 6 percent of eligible Black infants and toddlers are being served by Early Head Start programs. Continued neighborhood and school segregation pushing Blacks into under resourced communities and the continued economic inequalities that result from centuries of unpaid labor and pay discrimination make it less likely for Black children to be in high-quality early childhood programs compared to their White peers. And this is especially problematic because early care and education originated to support the social, emotional, and academic development of young children, particularly those children who were racial or ethnic minorities living in poverty.

In their article **"Interrogating the role of anti-Blackness in the early care and education experiences of Black children and families: A call for advancing equitable science and practice,"**[1] Courtney A. Zulauf-McCurdy, Olivia R. Nazaire, Tunette Powell, and Iheoma U. Iruka explain the disparities and inequities in how Black children and their families are perceived and treated in early care and education programs. They explain the history behind the problem by writing "The inception of these early childhood education programs was driven by a 'need' to address what were considered Black children's inherent deficits and the cultural deprivation they were exposed to at home and in their community." But Zulauf-McCurdy and colleagues offer suggestions for how to improve these programs. Such suggestions include providing anti-bias and racial trauma training for educators and welcoming Black parents into the classroom to "elevate and integrate the cultural assets of Black children and their families." Other recommendations include incorporating African-centered curriculum, assessments, or pedagogy that highlight the strengths of Black children and their families and create opportunities for Black children to thrive in classroom experiences.

Another way anti-Blackness shows up in education is through deficit-based judgements about children's abilities based on their speech, which is referred to as linguistic racism. In **"When kids be talkin' Black: White educators' beliefs about the effects of African American English on young children's achievement,"**[2] Nicole Gardner-Neblett and Xigrid Soto-Boykin document racial prejudice among 209 preschool through 3rd grade teachers. They find that teachers' preconceived expectations about their Black students were lower if they heard the children speaking African American English. Teachers' biased judgements were not due to children having lower academic skills; on the contrary, Gardner-Neblett and Soto-Boykin cite evidence that Black students have strong oral storytelling skills that are not inhibited by their use of African American English. Those teachers without graduate-level training and without much teaching experience were even more likely to hold these negative beliefs compared to those teachers with advanced training and experience. In fact, those teachers with more experience teaching children from diverse backgrounds had favorable views of children speaking African American English. Some of their recommendations for improving this bias include educators receiving training so they can increase their competence instructing children who speak African American English and to help teachers understand what linguistic racism is and how to decrease it. They also advocate policies that promote linguistic equity and funding for more research into this issue.

Racism in Neighborhood and Community Environments

The environments in which children live have a profound influence on their health. Environmental racism is the inequality whereby racially and ethnically marginalized people live in places where they face a disproportionate risk of exposure to pollution and the health conditions associated with that exposure. The U.S. nation has a well-documented history of placing families of color in proximity of hazardous pollutants and in places vulnerable to climate change.

Myles D. Moody and Lacee A. Satcher, the authors of **"Toxic pathways: Exploring the impacts of vicarious and environmental racism on Black youth in early childhood,"**[3] argue for studying how to lessen and mitigate the impacts of environmental pollutants and toxins by tapping into Black families' psychological resilience. They recommend strengthening health, environmental and social policies to provide healthier environments for Black children's development, such as universal access to health care for expectant mothers, for children's caregivers and guardians, and for children themselves. They also advocate for policies that expand access to free green spaces, which research has shown to benefit children by improving their moods and lowering their stress. They explain that green spaces have even been linked to lowered gun violence rates in urban neighborhoods.

Allison Ford, the author of **"Where we live, learn and play: Environmental racism and early childhood development in review,"**[4] articulates the issues children face growing up near environmental pollutants and climate change. She combined two frameworks to explain these risks. The first, the R^{3}ISE integrative framework, notes that racist policies and practices can have a multigenerational impact on children's development; the second, the critical environmental justice framework, emerged from protests by communities of color over the unequal siting of hazardous waste facilities and centers the needs of children of color. Using

both these lenses, Ford explores important questions that help raise awareness of how pollution harms our youngest members of communities, such as "Do young children experience pathways to environmentally influenced disease differently from older children and adults?"

In **"Systems approaches for uncovering mechanisms of structural racism impacting children's environmental health and development,"**[5] Devon C. Payne-Sturges, Ellis Ballard, and Janean Dilworth-Bart argue that scientists (and society at large) must consider the "upstream process of environmental racism", meaning the sources of the problems with pollutants and toxins in communities, in addition to focusing on the "downstream consequences" such as negative health and learning problems in children. They explain that exposure to pollution is "among the mechanisms through which structural racism impacts children's health, development, and learning opportunities." The authors recommend investigating the complexity of system dynamics and structural racism in socio-historical events to understand wide-spread environmental racism like the Flint, Michigan lead poisoning crisis. The system dynamics model provides a venue to "integrate evidence from multiple disciplines through a common language and visualization of systems of structural racism." The authors explain that "the ultimate goal is to not just focus on a particular racial/ethnic group, but also work collectively to resist systems of marginalization and policies that create inequities in order to bring about improved conditions for all."

It is also important to consider the environment where children grow up in terms of their access (or lack of access) to resources and infrastructure. Heidi A. Vuletich, B. Aspacia Stafford, Iheoma U. Iruka, and B. Keith Payne demonstrate that where children live has implications for their access to quality early childhood education. In **"Exploring the relation between early childhood education and historical and contemporary racism and bias for Black children,"**[6] they investigated the relationship between a geographical area's history of racism, defined as how widespread enslavement was in an area, and a Black child's chance of success in early childhood education programs. Fortunately, they found that the history of an environment was not linked to children's present day academic outcomes when those children were attending high-quality early childhood programs. In this study, they examined 20 high-quality preschools run by the Educare Learning Network in 16 cities across the U.S., so this null effect was present in multiple locations. They recommend further study of these high-quality programs in order to understand what or how features of the programs were linked to protective factors.

The Dangers of Racism During COVID

Crises like the COVID-19 pandemic reveal racial inequities that may be more visible during tragedies. In their paper called **"Racial/ethnic wealth gaps and material hardship disparities among U.S. households with young children: An investigation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic,"**[7] Sihong Liu, Joan Lombardi, Indivar Dutta-Gupta, and Philip A. Fisher used survey data from nearly 7000 parents to identify factors that exacerbated wealth gaps among households at various financial levels (low-income, middle-income, high-income) and found that these gaps were especially exacerbated for Black and Hispanic/Latine(a) families with young children during the first two and half years of the pandemic. They found that wealth gaps – including debt, home ownership, and income as well as discrimination experiences –highlight the pervasive economic vulnerability of communities of color. The authors note, "addressing racial and ethnic wealth gaps and hardship disparities is key to facilitating equitable, healthy early childhood development." They recommend policies that provide food and housing assistance, including direct cash payments, to benefit families with children. Such programs should account for differences in hardship burden experiences by middle-income families, especially for families of color.

COVID also had a negative effect on marginalized people's mental health. Xinwei Zhang, Suge Zhang, Feiran Zhang, Tong Liu, Walter S. Gilliam, Ayse Cobanoglu, and Thomas Murray, in **"Asian and Asian American early educators' racial discrimination experiences and student well-being during COVID-19: A moderated mediation model,"**[8] investigate educators' emotional well-being at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when there were extreme expressions of anti-Asian hate around the country. They found that Asian and Asian American early educators' experiences of racial discrimination were associated with how helpless they felt which in turn was connected to their students' socioemotional and behavioral well-being. They also examined whether this association varied based on how many other Asians were living in the community, and it did. These effects were stronger in communities with high concentrations of Asian and Asian Americans. The authors explain that neighborhoods with high Asian concentration often have populations with low socioeconomic status, limited English proficiency, and limited social capital coupled with a stigma against people seeking mental health services, and living in these communities can exacerbate the challenges the teachers were facing. Zhang and colleagues recommend the need for culturally sensitive mental health supports to help Asian and Asian American early educators cope with racism.

The Power of Parenting as a Protective Factor

There is no doubt that families are the central most important aspect of children's lives. As the R³ISE Integrative Model explains, families of color have many cultural assets that help them endure when they are facing discrimination and bias. Parents can positively contribute to their children's development – despite the impact of racism on their lives.

One way in which families protect children is by fighting to provide educational resources for their child. In a study conducted in Cincinnati, Black parents participated in community group interviews with early childhood education staff and thought leaders about the hurdles they face in accessing early childhood education. Kristen A. Copeland, Amy King, Julietta Ladipo, Desiré Bennett, Alexis Amsterdam, Cynthia White, Heather Gerker, and J'Mag Karbeah were the authors of the study called "Barriers to early childhood education for Black families and calls for equitable solutions from a qualitative study using peer researchers and an antiracist lens."[9] First, parents talked about how they face anti-Black racism in that they were constantly being asked "to prove that they and their children were worthy and deserved access to these services." Parents also talked about how discriminatory experiences with social service state-mandated home visiting made them hesitant to engage in such programs. The study had many recommendations about how to increase access and improve equity to ensure more Black parents can participate in early childhood education programs. For instance, they suggested allowing parents paid leave to search for child care or to participate in home visits. They recommend that states provide longer eligibility periods for child care subsidies.

They also believe it would be helpful to assign each family with someone who can counsel them about their preschool options. Lastly, they recommend employing pediatric clinicians as advocates for families given that their profession conveys power and respect in ways that typical families cannot convey. The authors also note that burdensome paperwork serves as "a logistical barrier to managing the inadequate supply of subsidized slots for high-quality childcare" in government-funded preschools.

In the paper about **"Guidance and respect: Chinese American preschoolers' perceptions of parental support for learning,"**[10] Yoko Yamamoto, Jin Li, Huiying Yang, and Isabel Zhang highlight the ways that preschoolers view their parents' support for their learning. They study low-income and middle-income Chinese families living in New England and examined children's stories. They find that the children expressed positive perceptions of their parents' roles in their learning. Yamamoto and colleagues describe how children's stories "reflected the prevalent Chinese cultural learning model, such as emphasizing parents' authority in guiding, coaching, and teaching their children." The children described their relationships with their parents as reciprocal, they respected their parents as role models. These authors argue the positive perceptions of parent-supported learning among Chinese American preschoolers challenge the negative stereotypes of Chinese parents as "tiger parents." Like previous authors from other papers described here that focus on early learning and education, Yamamoto and colleagues recommend that early childhood programs reflect on identifying educators' biases and misconceptions associated with Chinese immigrant parents.

In **"Cultural and contextual understanding of parent engagement among Latine parents of pre-K children in low-income neighborhoods: The role of immigration enforcement threat, parent health and sociodemographics,"**[11] R. Gabriela Barajas-Gonzalez, Alexandra Ursache, Dimitra Kamboukos, Bo Gu, Keng-Yen Huang, Heliana Linares Torres, Sabrina Cheng, Laurie Miller Brotman, and Spring Dawson-McClure describe how Latine parents support their children's learning at a time of rising tensions surrounding immigration enforcement. They surveyed 163 parents with a child attending pre-kindergarten in New York City. The researchers wanted to understand how parents were involved in their children's learning during a time when an anti-immigration and anti-Latine sentiment was high in the U.S. They also wanted to understand what factors were associated with multiple aspects of family engagement in young children's learning. Their findings show that Latine families still support their children's development and education despite the tense anti-immigrant political atmosphere. Their findings also indicate that parent health and immigration enforcement threat are associated with several aspects of family engagement. The authors recommend policymakers and educators take a holistic approach to supporting parent engagement among Latine families by attending to parent health and the adverse impact of a hostile immigration climate.

The Fortitude of Indigenous Communities and Black Families' Spiritual Traditions

Racism toward Indigenous communities living within the U.S. has used colonization to relocate people in an attempt to make them invisible, appropriate their homelands, and separate children from families by placing them in boarding schools. In **"Stories and reflections on gikinawaabi: Recentering Indigenous Knowledge in early childhood development through food- and land-based practices,"**[12] Jessica Barnes-Najor, Beedoskah Stonefish, Chelsea Wentworth, Danielle Gartner, Jessica S. Saucedo, Heather Howard-Bobiwash, Patrick Koval, Richard Burnett, Lisa Martin, Michelle Leask, Rosebud Schneider, Cheyenne Hopps, Charla Gordon, and Ann Cameron aim to place the voices and knowledge of indigenous families living in Michigan at the center of community research. They used a community participatory approach and Indigenous methods to identify how traditional food- and land-based practices support children's development. They found that learning through observation (translated in Anishinaabemowin as gikinawaabi in the Ojibwe dialect) is a foundational approach to learning and culture that supports intergenerational connections and helps children develop a sense of responsibility for their community. They also describe the cultural concept of "healing in action," a practice that uses love as a guiding principle and focuses on sharing teachings about traditional ways to support young children to grow and thrive.

Black people have similarly used the power of traditions to heal the next generation. The authors of **"The religio-spiritual capital of the Black Church: A conceptual model for combatting antiblackness in the early years"**[13] zero in on how racism is harmful to children but

Amber M. Neal-Stanley, Jenille C. Morgan, and Danielle J. Allen also explain how the Black Christian Church has been a source of strength for this community. They argue that religion and spirituality "endows young Black children with spiritual knowledges, gifts, capabilities, and skills to not only cope with but challenge the anti-Black racism in their young lives." While not a monolith, the Black Christian Church provides lessons in ethics, morality, freedom, and social traditions originating from the religious, cultural and social experiences of Black people. The Black Church tradition has always asserted that racism was evil and slavery was immoral, and it is grounded in the idea that people's spirits are free no matter the physical circumstances and that no one is inferior to another person (e.g., that everyone is equal in the eyes of God). Neal-Stanley and colleagues explain that the positive social experiences and interactions children have "guard their thoughts and minds against mainstream norms, values and standards that devalue Black humanity." Children may benefit from learning about how the Black church (along with other Black religious and spiritual traditions) has been the driving force behind social progress like the Civil Rights Movement. The authors suggest teaching children how the church can can be a model of collective power used to help people "see their intrinsic value as human beings, enabling them to develop understandings about God and humanity, … and equipping them with the necessary tools to combat, disrupt and resist the structural and interpersonal anti-Black racism in their lives."

Racism Does Matter: Expanding What We Know and Taking Action

The collection of research articles described in this paper provides evidence of how young children and their families confront and cope with racism. Racism is pervasive and in some cases neighborhood context can exacerbate the harmful effects, but there are many ways parents can protect their children and be intentional about sharing their cultural knowledge, traditions, and strengths. This body of research is a strong beginning, but more research is needed.

Also, these studies highlight the urgency for long-awaited policy action that can enhance children's learning and improve their lives. For example, policies that entail improved professional training for teachers about bias and racial trauma and access to free universal preschool expand children's learning experiences and opportunities. Additional policy actions are needed to ease families' financial burden, such as more social benefits like food, housing, child care assistance, and paid leave plus reparations to the descendants of those families who were harmed by oppressive policies of the past. Researchers, pediatricians, practitioners, community leaders, and families must all work together to continue to learn about and share knowledge related to how racial stress and trauma harms children. And we must work together to advocate for the policy changes needed to dismantle racial injustice!

[1] **"Interrogating the role of anti-Blackness in the early care and education experiences of Black children and families: A call for advancing equitable science and practice,"** by Courtney A. Zulauf-McCurdy (University of Washington Seattle), Olivia R. Nazaire (Boston University), Tunette Powell (Arizona State University), Iheoma Iruka (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

[2] **"When kids be talkin' Black: White educators' beliefs about the effects of African American English on young children's achievement,"** by Nicole Gardner-Neblett (University of Michigan) and Xigrid Soto-Boykin (Arizona State University).

[3] **"Toxic pathways: Exploring the impacts of vicarious and environmental racism on Black youth in early childhood,"** by Myles D. Moody (University of Alabama-Birmingham), Lacee A. Satcher (Boston College).

[4] **"Where we live, learn and play: Environmental racism and early childhood development in review,"** Allison Ford (Sonoma State University).

[5] **"Systems approaches for uncovering mechanisms of structural racism impacting children's environmental health and development,"** by Devon C. Payne-Sturges (University of Maryland School of Public Health), Ellis Ballard (Washington University), and Janean Dilworth-Bart (University of Wisconsin-Madison).

[6] **"Exploring the relation between early childhood education and historical and contemporary racism and bias for Black children,"** by Heidi A. Vuletich, (University of Denver) B. Aspacia Stafford (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Iheoma U. Iruka (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and Keith Payne (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

[7] **"Racial/ethnic wealth gaps and material hardship disparities among U.S. households with young children: An investigation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic,"** by Sihong Liu (Stanford University), Joan Lombardi (Stanford University), Indivar Dutta-Gupta (Center for Law and Social Policy), Philip A. Fisher (Stanford University).

[8] **"Asian and Asian American early educators' racial discrimination experiences and student well-being during COVID-19: A moderated mediation model,"** by Xinwei Zhang (Yale University), Suge Zhang (University of Connecticut), Feiran Zhang (Yale University), Tong Liu (Yale University), Walter S. Gilliam (Yale University; University of Nebraska, Omaha), Ayse Cobanoglu (Yale University), Thomas Murray (Yale University).

[9] **"Barriers to early childhood education for Black families and calls for equitable solutions from a qualitative study using peer researchers and an antiracist lens,"** by Kristen A. Copeland (Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Department of Pediatrics, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine), Amy King (Cincinnati Children's Hospital), Julietta Ladipo (Parent Peer Researcher), Desiré Bennett (Design Impact), Alexis Amsterdam (Cincinnati Children's Hospital), Cynthia White (Cincinnati Children's Hospital), Heather Gerker (University of Cincinnati), J'Mag Karbeah (University of Minnesota).

[10] **"Guidance and respect: Chinese American preschoolers' perceptions of parental support for learning,"** by Yoko Yamamoto (Brown University), Jin Li (Brown University), Huiying Yang (Tsinghua University), Isabel Zhang (Brown University).

[11] **"Cultural and contextual understanding of parent engagement among Latine parents of pre-K children in low-income neighborhoods: The role of immigration enforcement threat, parental health and sociodemographics,"** by R. Gabriela Barajas-Gonzalez (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Alexandra Ursache (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Dimitra Kamboukos (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Bo Gu (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Keng-Yen Huang (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Heliana Linares Torres (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Sabrina Cheng (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Laurie Miller Brotman (NYU Grossman School of Medicine), Spring Dawson-McClure (NYU Grossman School of Medicine).

[12] **"Stories and reflections on gikinawaabi: Recentering Indigenous Knowledge in early childhood development through food- and land-based practices,"** by Jessica Barnes-Najor (Michigan State University), Beedoskah Stonefish (Michigan State University), Chelsea Wentworth (Michigan State University), Danielle Gartner (Michigan State University), Jessica S. Saucedo (Michigan State University), Heather Howard-Bobiwash (Michigan State University), Patrick Koval (Boston University), Richard Burnett (Michigan State University), Lisa Martin (Johns Hopkins University), Michelle Leask (Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan), Rosebud Schneider (Community Partner), Cheyenne Hopps (Community Partner), Charla Gordon (Community Partner), Ann Cameron (Community Partner).

[13] **"The religio-spiritual capital of the Black Church: A conceptual model for combatting antiblackness in the early years,"** by Amber Neal-Stanley, (Purdue University), Jenille C. Morgan (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Danielle J. Allen (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).

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