

Protecting children from racism and racial abuse: a research review

Summary of research and findings

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The impact of racism

- Racism has been defined in many ways, but a consensus has emerged that issues of power and domination are as important as those of prejudice.
- Research has consistently demonstrated that children from ethnic minorities suffer many forms of disadvantage in British society, and that this can include poorer health, poverty and educational under achievement. Effects are not necessarily uniform, with minorities being differentially affected and some variation by gender.

Research on racial abuse of children

- There is only a limited amount of research specifically relating to the issue of racial abuse of children but two discrete bodies of research provide insights into this aspect of children's lives; racial bullying within school settings and racial violence within the community. Although these areas do not comprehensively address the issue, they provide valuable messages for agencies working with minority ethnic children and families.
- Children from ethnic minorities are more likely to experience bullying than their white counterparts.
- The most common expression of racism is through racist name-calling, which is often viewed by adults as trivial, although its impact on children can be profound.
- Although research evidence is limited, what is available does imply that racial bullying frequently involves the use of violence.
- In areas where there are few children from minority ethnic communities these children may be particularly vulnerable to racial abuse. The effect is heightened by the lack of access to support from other minority ethnic children.

- Children's racism should not be viewed as consistent or unified. Their participation in racism is complex and often contradictory. Many children hold anti-racist beliefs and condemn discrimination whilst also perpetrating racist behaviour.

Violent racism

- A small body of research has emerged which addresses adolescents' experiences and perceptions of violent racism, both as victims and perpetrators. These have usually occurred in 'problem' areas where high levels of racial violence were previously identified.
- One of the consequences of focusing on 'extreme' areas is that much of the research has been undertaken in working class localities. The prevalence and impact of racial abuse in predominately middle class areas has yet to be addressed.
- Many victims of racial violence are adolescents, although younger children can also suffer.
- Perpetrators of racial violence are mostly either adolescents or young adults.
- Violence against ethnic minority groups is persistent, patterned, and long-term in the way that it affects individuals and the places where they live.
- In areas with high levels of racial abuse and harassment, violent racism is often seen by white people as a routine aspect of daily life rather than as a deviant or pathological activity.

Disability and racial abuse

- Although evidence is scarce, studies do suggest that disabled minority ethnic children and adults commonly experience both verbal and physical forms of racial abuse and harassment. It is unclear how the dual dimension of disability and race makes their experiences different to those of non-disabled children.

Racial abuse in the family

- Some children of mixed parentage can experience racial abuse, both verbal and physical, within their family settings, most commonly by a white parent or relative, although occasionally the ethnic minority family members.

Responding to racial abuse of children

The evidence reviewed demonstrated the six main factors that strategies to challenge racial abuse and harassment need to address:

Local cultures of racism

- The manner in which racism is constructed, understood and mediated in different localities determines the extent of racial abuse and harassment in the area and its particular nature and dynamics. Frequently, the views held by perpetrators of racial harassment and violence towards ethnic minorities are shared by the wider communities to which they belong. Perpetrators view this as legitimising their actions. Consequently any strategies to combat racial abuse must also address racism in its wider context.

Wider impact of racial violence

- Any discussion on the impact of violence on ethnic minority communities must acknowledge that the fear and anxiety extends far beyond the individual victim and affects the whole community.
- Racist motivation can transform even apparently trivial incidents into something much more disturbing and frightening both for victims and other members of the ethnic group.
- Children do not necessarily have to be direct victims to suffer the effects of racial abuse. The targeting of their relatives or communities as a whole will inevitably impact on their lives.

White people as victims of racial abuse

- In many victim accounts there are reports of attacks on white as well as ethnic minority victims.
- The intensity and nature of the violence is very different for the two groups, with ethnic minority children much more likely to experience repeat victimisation. One study found that white victimisation was the result of ethnic minorities' resistance to racial abuse linked to territorial dominance. How prevalent are attacks on white children in other circumstances or on children and young people from white ethnic minority groups such as Jewish or Irish populations is unknown.

Reproduction of racism

- Little is known about how racist views are reproduced in children. Existing research is ambiguous. Some research shows that racism is passed generationally through families and that children are racist because their parents have taught them to be. Other research has found that many children have very distinct views from their parents concerning race and that they themselves establish the culture of racism.
- Wider societal and institutional forms of racism perpetuate racist beliefs and ideologies in the population and make it easier for people to commit racist acts.

Backlash against anti-racist policies

- Responses against racism and racial abuse that are not presented in an appropriate form may create an '*anti-racist backlash*', by being perceived as '*unfair*' by the target community. Insensitive anti-racist strategies may inadvertently give strength to racist beliefs rather than challenge racism. Strategies to combat racist violence also need to incorporate an understanding of how perpetrators see the world.

Challenging racism

- Although the family structure is an important site of resistance to racism, research highlights that many minority ethnic children do not discuss their experiences of racial abuse with parents or other family members.
- Ethnic minority young people are not passive recipients of racism - they employ a range of strategies when confronted with racial abuse.
- It is important to produce integrated strategies, involving a number of agencies, to combat racist abuse both in the school setting and in the local community.
- To date, the majority of responses have focused on the victims of racial harassment, but the effectiveness of these programmes is debatable. Agencies also need to undertake both preventive and interventive programmes focusing on perpetrators.
- There is a need for approaches which are based on children's actual experiences and perceptions rather than adult constructions of the problem.

Social services response to racial abuse

- Official child care procedures and guidance emphasise cultural sensitivity rather than requiring agencies to adopt pro-active approaches to challenging racism.
- The review found no research-based literature pertaining to the role of the child protection system in responding to the racial abuse of children. Social work texts assert that although racial abuse does constitute child abuse it should not generally be addressed through the formal child protection system as its causes and manifestations are different to abuse within families. The exception to this is intra-familial racial abuse which is a form of emotional abuse.

Conclusions and recommendations

Research on health, education, employment and identity shows differences between minority ethnic communities. Research on children and racism similarly needs to address differences between communities, alongside the impact of age, gender and

disability.

There is a need for research in four main areas in order to inform child welfare responses to racial abuse:

Perpetrator studies

- Studies need to identify what factors motivate and support young children, adolescents and adults to commit acts of racial abuse, and what are the most effective ways of combating these.

Children's perceptions of racial abuse

- We need a better understanding of children's perceptions and experiences of racial abuse, its impact on their lives, and what forms of assistance they perceive as being the most helpful and appropriate.

Resilience to racial abuse

- Research on resistance to racial abuse needs to be developed, especially studies exploring factors associated with resilient children, families and local communities.

Child protection

- Research needs to be done on the interface between child protection and racial abuse, in particular the impact of the child protection system on children from different communities and on racial abuse in the context of other forms of child abuse.

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