

FAQ About Racial Affinity Groups

What is an affinity group?

An affinity group brings together people who have something important in common—perhaps ability, age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or other trait. Examples of affinity groups include:

- A leveled math class (ability affinity)
- A church congregation (religious affinity)
- A 7th grade (age affinity)
- A girl's sexuality education class (gender affinity)
- A support group for children of divorced parents (family structure affinity)

Although members of the group may share a common identity, it does not mean that everyone in that group has had the same experiences. Rather, participants recognize that their identity has an effect on the way they move through the world. They provide a space for reflection, dialogue, and support. The goal of affinity groups is to facilitate positive identity exploration and development towards the larger goal of creating an inclusive and thriving learning environment. These kinds of groups offer a time and space for empowerment of the individual and of the group within the greater community.

Why do we believe racial affinity groups are important at ECFS?

Research shows that children develop a heightened sense of racial identity awareness as they get older. As a result, friendships often shift along racial lines during these very transformative years. Without exploring this part of their identity, children are left without the language or skill to process their social experiences in a healthy way.

By starting structured conversations early, we're giving all children a safe way to reduce racial stress, address what they see in the world, and enhance their own identity development. Periodically separating the groups acknowledges that there is sometimes different work to be done to achieve these goals. Affinity groups grow racial literacy, the capacity to understand ourselves and build authentic relationships cross-culturally.

Why is there a need to discuss race?

Each of us, and each of our students, has a racial identity. Learning to navigate what that means in the context of our school, and in society, is an important tool for people living and working in a diverse society. Race is a social construct, but as long as race carries certain privileges for some but not all, it is important to understand and acknowledge those places of inequity and our place as either beneficiaries of those privileges, or as one who does not have those privileges.

But aren't racial affinity groups divisive?

Because of our country's history of segregation and racism, some of us might feel uncomfortable being in a group based on racial affinity. We often find ourselves in racial affinity groups, but the setting feels different when the conversation is about race. Separating a racially diverse group of people into groups based on race can feel like a step backward. We might say things like, "I don't think about people in racial terms," or, "I notice people's personalities, not their race."

Scientific studies show that we do, in fact, notice race. All of us are affected by racial prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. All of us have racial identities. Racial affinity groups give us a safe space to reconstruct our racial identities as positive, aware, and anti-racist. Affinity groups do not take the place of cross-cultural/cross-racial dialogues, but rather serve to enhance and support positive, healthy communication and interactions.

Why did we choose the racial and ethnic groups that we did?

This year Ethical Culture and Fieldston Lower Schools will offer the following groups:

African-American/Black
Asian & Pacific Islander
Latina/Latino
Multiracial
White

We chose these groups because they generally represent the racial identities represented at ECFS based on parental classification. One might ask why didn't we create more specificity? It is clear that African Americans don't necessarily have the same experience as those of Afro-Caribbean heritage. Similarly those who identify of East Asian descent may have a very different experience than those from South East Asian descent. The goal of an affinity group is to create an experience of critical mass. If we subdivided each group, we may not have been able to achieve that experience.

It is very important that each student in cooperation with their parent have the opportunity to identify themselves. It is for this reason that a survey will be sent home in order to register each child's placement. We know that all students may not be ready to participate in affinity groups. It is for that reason that we will also offer a cross-racial group that will explore the same topics.

What do racial affinity groups do?

Affinity groups meet for a wide variety of purposes. That purpose determines what the group does. Affinity groups might work to discover what it means to have their shared identity, celebrate successes, raise issues, make plans, or learn information—whatever the group needs. Very often, affinity groups work to prepare members for meaningful interaction with other affinity groups.

Any affinity group's discussions and activities depend on the needs of its members. For a racial affinity group, meeting those needs might mean:

- Talking about what it means to have that racial affinity—e.g. “What does it mean to be African American, or Asian, or Latino, or Multiracial, or White at our school?”
- Discussing concerns and issues within the group
- Supporting each other in the work of creating an anti-racist community
- Celebrating your racial identity
- Develop an understanding of our particular racial identity
- Participating in a group as a member of the majority
- Making connections with others who share your racial affinity

I can understand how affinity groups at the adult level or even at the high school level make sense, but aren't the primary grades too early a time to start this work?

Research has shown that children, by the age of three, are actively involved in sorting their world. At this early developmental stage, they are aware of difference as they engage in sorting blocks, animals, colors, people, etc. Therefore, to ensure that the noticing of difference does not turn into some kind of deficit, it is critical to support children in their awareness of each other's difference and to connect them positively to their own identity. Children are empowered to face and challenge prejudice and ignorance by the tools and experiences we give them. When educators and adults do not help young children develop healthy cultural identities, then our larger culture and their peers are ready to do it for us. We know that the personal exploration and resulting confidence that students develop in affinity groups is essential to supporting young children who will grow into happy, self-reliant, and healthy young adults.

Resources To Support Conversations On Race and Ethnicity

Definitions From Teaching Tolerance

Color - the natural appearance of something, including how bright it is and what shade it is

Skin - the outer covering of a human or animal body

Skin color - the coloring of a person's face and skin

Race -one of the major groups into which human beings can be divided. As a social construction, it relates to the grouping of people based on physical characteristics, such as skin color.

Working Definitions from M. Richards & E.Denevi

Ethnicity: relating to a person or to a large group of people who share a national, cultural, and/or linguistic heritage, whether or not they reside in their countries of origin.

Race: a group that is socially defined, but on the basis of physical criteria including skin color and facial features.

Multiracial: A person who identifies with more than one racial heritage.

From Diffen.com

The traditional definition of race and ethnicity is related to biological and sociological factors respectively. Race refers to a person's physical appearance, such as skin color, eye color, hair color, bone/jaw structure etc. Ethnicity, on the other hand, relates to cultural factors such as nationality, culture, ancestry, language, and beliefs.

Picture Books to read with your child

Black All Around, Patricia Hubbell

Black, White, Just Right, Marguerite Davol & Irene Trivas

Jalapeno Bagels, Natasha Wing & Robert Casilla

My People, Langston Hughes & Charles R. Smith

One Green Apple, Eve Bunting & Ted Lewin

One, Kathryn Otoshi

I Am Latino: The Beauty in Me, Sandra L. Pinkney & Myles C. Pinkney

Shades of Black: A Celebration of Our Children, Sandra L. Pinkney & Myles C. Pinkney

The Colors of Us, Karen Katz

Shades of People, Shelley Rotner & Sheila M. Kelly

The Skin You Live In, Michael Tyler & David Lee Csicsko

All The Colors We Are: Todos los colores de nuestra piel/The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color, Katie Kissinger & Wernher Krutein

The Name Jar, Yangsook Choi

I Am Mixed, Garcelle Beauvias & Sabastian Jones

Black Is Brown Is Tan, Arnold Adoff & Emily Arnold McCully

Chocolate Me!, Taye Diggs & Shane Evans

Brown Like Me, Noelle Lamperti

Upper Elementary

The Birchbark House, Louise Erdrich

Creativity, E.B. Lewis

How Tia Lola Came to (Visit) Stay, Julia Alvarez

Landed, Milly Lee & Yangsook Choi

Taneesha Never Disparaging, M. LaVora Perry