

## BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



### Racism Impacts Learning, Behavior, Lifelong Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **In this Brain Boost we are looking at how racism affects the development, learning, and health of our children.***

Too much stress is not good for us — at any age. Research has shown constant stress during childhood can impact developing brains and biological systems, with lifelong effects on learning, behavior, and health. New evidence also suggests that dealing with racism and discrimination can trigger that stress response in children.

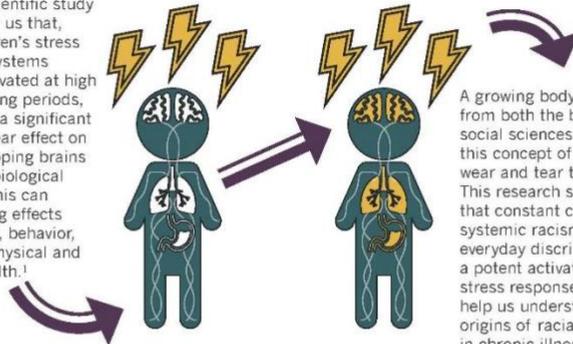
In a previous two-part Brain Health Boost about early childhood development and lifelong health, we discussed in [part 1](#) how our stress response helps us deal with threats, challenges, and hardships. When we experience a threat, stress hormones spread throughout our bodies, activating a stress response from all of our biological systems. In [part 2](#), we highlighted how excessive stress can affect the development of the brain and nervous system, the cardiovascular system, the immune system, the neuroendocrine system and the metabolic system.

This research suggests that illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and many brain illnesses have their roots in early childhood, and poverty, racism, exposure to violence, unstable housing, and food insecurity, can lead to lifelong health problems, decreased well-being, and shorter lifespan.

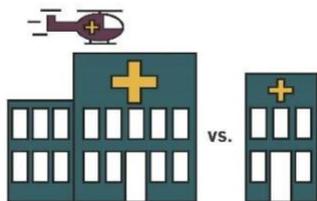
Research from [Harvard's Center on the Developing Child](#) shown in the infographic below demonstrates the impact of racism on childhood development. Studies show that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in this country have more chronic health problems and shorter lifespans than non-BIPOC. The Center recommends working together to reduce (and hopefully eliminate) the biases that exist toward others in this country.

# HOW RACISM CAN AFFECT CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Years of scientific study have shown us that, when children's stress response systems remain activated at high levels for long periods, it can have a significant wear-and-tear effect on their developing brains and other biological systems. This can have lifelong effects on learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.<sup>1</sup>

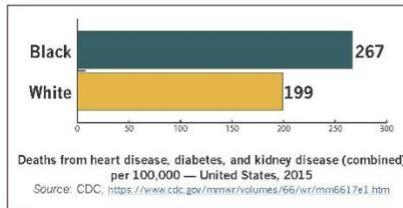


A growing body of evidence from both the biological and social sciences connects this concept of chronic wear and tear to racism.<sup>2</sup> This research suggests that constant coping with systemic racism and everyday discrimination is a potent activator of the stress response. This may help us understand the early origins of racial disparities in chronic illness across the lifespan.



The evidence is overwhelming: Black, indigenous, and other people of color in the U.S. have, on average, more chronic health problems and shorter lifespans than whites at all income levels.<sup>3</sup>

People of color receive unequal treatment when they engage in systems like health care and education, and also have less access to high-quality education and health services, economic opportunities, and pathways to wealth accumulation.<sup>4</sup> All of these reflect ways in which the legacy of structural racism in the U.S. has created conditions that disproportionately undermine the health and development of children and families of color.



Multiple studies have documented how the stresses of everyday discrimination on parents or other caregivers, such as being associated with negative stereotypes, can have harmful effects on caregiving behaviors and adult mental health.<sup>5</sup> And when caregivers' mental health is affected, the challenges of coping with it can cause an excessive stress response in their children. But we can prevent lasting harm if we work together.

To address these challenges, we must not only provide needed services for all young children and families, but also create new strategies to address "upstream" inequities that systematically threaten the health and well-being of young children of color and the adults who care for them.<sup>6</sup>

This means actively searching for and reducing unseen, restrictive biases in ourselves and in economic and social policies through initiatives such as fair hiring and lending practices, housing and home ownership programs, anti-bias training, and community policing initiatives.<sup>7</sup>



It's clear that science cannot address these challenges alone. But science-informed thinking combined with expertise in changing entrenched systems and the lived experiences of families raising young children under a wide variety of conditions can be a powerful catalyst of more effective strategies.<sup>8</sup>

## WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

It is important for all children to learn about diversity — and the earlier the better. One thing that you can do as a parent is seek out books that feature Black and Indigenous people and People of Color (BIPOC) for your child. It can be challenging to know how to choose a “good book” and [EmbraceRace](#) offers these tips for evaluating the quality of books featuring BIPOC.

- **Choose a compelling book.** Recommending a book can make it seem like homework to your child. Consider your audience and look for a book that has an engaging story and content to which your child will respond.
- **Include books in which BIPOC characters are the stars.** Choose books that are told from BIPOC point of view instead of those in which they are secondary or background characters.
- **Add material featuring BIPOC gradually.** Start by including books that introduce and celebrate human differences and that star BIPOC children in everyday situations. It’s important that your child already has a foundation of curiosity, knowledge, and respect for differences before you introduce challenging stories of racism so that they don’t become convinced that the lives of BIPOC are only about struggle.
- **Consider the experience and/or expertise of the author(s).** Look for authors who are drawing on their own experiences or have done extensive research to ensure authenticity of the story.
- **Look for books that depict positive interactions across different groups.** Seeing positive interaction between cultures can reduce anxiety and help prevent prejudice.
- **Aim for balanced portrayals.** How BIPOC characters are represented in books matters as much as who is represented. Make selections that broadly represent the rich and complex humanity and experiences.
- **Use a critical lens while reading any book.** If you find issues with negative or inaccurate portrayals use it as an opportunity to discuss the book with your child to help develop their critical thinking skills.
- **Do your research.** Talk to librarians and book sellers about diverse books they recommend and why.

And don’t forget to encourage your child to **BE BRAIN HEALTHY** and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose

- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

**About the Brain Health Initiative ([www.brainhealthinitiative.org](http://www.brainhealthinitiative.org))**

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).