A Different World:  
Children's Perceptions of Race and Class in Media  
Conducted by Lake Sosin Snell Perry and Associates and Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE), for Children Now, Los Angeles, California, 1998

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I'm looking for me / What I like to see / People I'd like to be / Do I see me? / How I see people like me / I believe what I see / What is real to me / How they expect me to be / I want to see me

I'm looking for me

*America is engaged in a national dialogue on race, but the voices of our children have yet to be heard. How do they feel about issues of race? What are they learning about diversity? Does media play a role in shaping their understanding? As our nation grows increasingly diverse, the answers to these questions become critical. To explore this important issue, Children Now commissioned a groundbreaking series of focus groups and a national poll of 1,200 children.*

This research is unprecedented in a number of significant ways. While previous studies have measured adults' perceptions of media's race messages - and others have asked children about media or about race - this is the first to bring children, media and race together. In addition, most polls survey people in proportion to their percentage of the population. We chose to survey the same number of children (300) of four races - African-American, Asian, Latino, and White - to explore the views of each race in equal depth.

Children - of all ages and all races - recognize the power of media in their lives. They look to the media for role models - imitating the way their favorite characters dress, the way they talk, how they do their hair. From the shag haircuts of the women on *Friends* to the baggy fashions of the hip hop music scene, the influence of media on today's children can be seen everywhere. And beyond superficial messages about style and appearance, children are getting more formative messages from the media. The characters they admire - and the news stories they watch - send both subtle and explicit signals about their value, their families, and their race.

Research demonstrates that children get messages about their race by seeing how and how often its members are portrayed in the media. Media grant legitimacy through the 'recognition' and 'respect' shown to racial groups. Recognition occurs when group members appear in programs, while respect is conferred when group members are cast in positive roles. The absence of group members suggests that they are not worthy of viewers' attention, while stereotyped or negatively-valued roles indicate that they are not worthy of respect. And children get these messages about other races as well as their own, helping shape their earliest opinions.

Our study found that children overwhelmingly believe that it is important for all kids to see people of their own race on television. White children see people of their race on entertainment television most frequently, followed by African-American children. Asian and Latino children see people of their race much less frequently. Across all races, children recognize media's use of stereotypes, frequently attributing positive traits and roles to White characters, and negative traits and
roles to minority characters. Similarly, children believe that television news media portrays races very differently, showing African-Americans and Latinos in a negative light more often than Asians and Whites.

However, this research also shows that children have great faith in media's ability to send children positive messages about race. Over 80% of children from every race say that media has the power to show kids "that people of their race are important." Children also see that "television starts conversation" among peers of different races. That's why, when asked to design their perfect show, children across all races say it would have, "different cultures, different religions, different races, different everything. That would be really smart."

Today's children will be the first generation to come of age in an America where racial minorities are the numeric majority. Our future will depend upon their ability to develop positive racial identities and an appreciation of diversity. To help build bridges across racial lines, children will need to expand their conceptions of race and race relations in ways their parents never knew. Clearly, media is only one of the many influences in our children's lives, but young people believe that it has both the power to break down stereotypes and the potential to build greater understanding. One young girl offered this simple advice: "[Don't] make prejudice on TV. I just wish this world would be one happy - nobody is prejudiced against each other - one happy family."

**What I like to see**

**Key Finding**

*Children of all races watch a great deal of television including a wide variety of different kinds of programs.*

Music videos, sitcoms and cartoons are the television programs children of all races aged 10 to 17 most frequently watch.

The next most frequently watched TV shows for children are sports programs (53% 'very often or often'), reality type shows (44%), talk shows (41%), local and national news (39%), and dramas (37%).

Children are least likely to watch television news magazines (22% 'very often or often') or soap operas (20%).

Talk shows fall into the top category for African-American and Latino children but are listed among the least watched by White and Asian children.

African-American (54% 'very often or often') and Latino children (52%) also watch more reality shows - like 'COPS' and 'When Animals Attack' - than White (41%) and Asian children (36%).

**Key Finding**

*African-American children strongly feel that entertainment media represent their race more fairly than the news media (47% to 25%). Asian children feel the opposite, slightly favoring the news media (36% to 28%). Both White and Latino children are split between the two.*
People I'd like to be

Key Finding

Children of color primarily choose African-Americans as those they admire and White children primarily choose White television figures as their favorites.


No Latino or Asian television characters were named.

Michael Jordan and Will Smith, two African-American men, had cross-over appeal and were listed as favorites by children of all races.

Moesha and Oprah were named as favorites by African-American, Latino and Asian children.

Key Finding

When asked why they admire a character, most children first say "because they are funny." After that, children of color are most likely to say "because I look up to them," and White children are more likely to say "because they act the way I want to act."

Most children offer "because they are funny" as their main reason for admiring characters. White children are most likely to list this reason (28%), followed by African-Americans (19%), Latinos (18%) and Asians (17%).

In the focus groups, a Latina teen answered, "I [like] Will Smith, because he's funny and he's always got solutions for problems." A younger White girl chose Elaine on 'Seinfeld' because, "she's really silly so I think she'd be a good friend." A younger Asian boy said, "Eric on 'Boy Meets World.' He's really stupid but he's funny."

African-American and Latino children (17%) each are much more likely than White (9%) and Asian (7%) children to choose characters because they "look up to them."

One Latina teenager listed the qualities she looks for in a role model, "Good personality, good job, nice person."

White children follow with "they act the way I want to act" (11%), which was the response of 7% of Latino children, 6% of Asian children and 4% of African-American children.

In the focus groups, many children mentioned that they admire the characters who do the things they want to do themselves but can't or are afraid to do. One young White boy said he liked Kramer on 'Seinfeld' because,"He's crazy. He does anything. He's not scared to try something." An older White boy said: "They do that stuff maybe you want to do but you can't be like Beavis and Butthead," while another listed "Will Smith ... because he gets all the women." A female Asian teenager agreed saying that she liked Buffy the Vampire Slayer because "she beats up a lot of vampires."

White children are the most likely of all races to admire characters "because they are smart" (10%). African-American children are the most likely of all races to cite "because they have the career I want" (9%) and Latinos are most likely of all races to say "because they are popular" (8%).
Do I see me?

Key Finding

White and African-American children say they see people of their race on television while Latino and Asian children are much less likely to see their race represented.

As a teenage Latina girl explained, "[TV programs] are mostly about White families. They don't really show Hispanics or African-Americans. And we, in Newark, that's like the whole population, Blacks and Hispanics. So how are we going to actually relate to something when they're all White?"

In the focus groups, children also noticed that there were White shows and African-American shows but few with both races together. As one Asian teen girl noted: "You see African-Americans getting along with other African-Americans and Caucasians getting along with other Caucasians, but you rarely see an African-American and Caucasian together happy and as friends."

This disparity in representation explains why nearly all children think there are 'enough' White people as main characters on entertainment television but they are much less likely to believe that there are 'enough' African-American, Latino or Asian people as main characters. All races agree the biggest problems are the lack of Asian and Latino characters.

As one Asian teenage girl observed: “You look at television shows and more than 90 percent of it is Caucasian or African-American people, and there really aren't that many Asian people out there in television.”

Key Finding

Children agree that it is important for young people to see people of their own race on television, although children of color have stronger feelings about this than White children.

Four out of every five children of color believe it is important to see their race on television. White children think it is less important than other races do, but even two-thirds of these children agree.

When asked why it is important, a young African-American boy explained, "Because it will tell people like us that we can succeed and do our best and stuff like that." A peer offered another reason: "If more Black people were on television, the more respect Black people would get in general." An older Asian girl elaborated, "Because you want to think 'I could do that. I could be there. That could be me in five or six years.' But you don't see anything of yourself, and you're just like, 'Oh, well maybe I'll just have to go do this. Go be the, you know, the stereotypical really-smart-in-math-type of kid.'"

As children age, it becomes more important to see their race represented on television. This is true for all races, with 10- to 12-year-olds thinking it less important, and 16- to 17-year-olds thinking it most important. For example, 83% of Latino 16- to 17-year-olds think it is important compared to 65% of Latino 10- to 12-year-olds.

Young people believe that negative messages are sent to children who do not see their race on TV. A focus group of older African-American boys listed the messages: "They don't have a chance ... they'll never get on TV ... you
are not good enough ... it's hard to get that far..." Younger White children explained, "They would think that their age and religion and culture didn't matter." One younger Latina girl agreed, "It's sad. It's sad because if there's a lot of people the same kind of way and only one person another way, they're going to be like, 'Wow, there's no people like me.'"

Across all races, children agree that it is important to see people of their own race on television because...
..."it tells children that people of their race are important," (84%)
..."it makes children of that race feel included," (81%) and
..."it provides role models." (78%)

How I see people like me

Key Finding

Children think that White characters on entertainment television programs are most likely to be shown in a positive way while Latino characters are most likely to be negatively portrayed.

One White teenage boy explained, "[Television] makes White people look smarter because they have a lot of money and you see more White people in the private schools."

Another boy in the same focus group added, "If it's a Black person on a White show, sometimes they show people being scared of them."

A teenage Asian girl complained that Asians are shown as "kind of book smart... wearing thick glasses and taking notes ... Or they're like the Kung Fu Master."

Another Asian teen said, "I think [Latinos] are kind of seen as lower on the spectrum... pretty negative... not usually thought of in the same way as Whites."

Although the overall conclusions remained largely the same, there was significant variation among races about how different racial groups were portrayed.

African-American and Latino children are the most likely to think Whites are shown positively (70% and 75% respectively) while Whites and Asians are slightly less likely to think so (64% and 63% respectively).

Asian children are least likely to think African-Americans are shown positively (33%) while Whites, African-Americans and Latinos are equally likely to think they are shown positively (40%, 43%, and 44% respectively).

African-Americans are most likely to think Asians are shown negatively (32%) while Asian children are least likely to think people of their race are shown negatively (18%).

All races agree that Latinos are the most likely to be portrayed negatively on entertainment programs. Nearly half of African-American children believe Latinos are portrayed negatively (49%), followed by Latino (39%), Asian (35%) and White (34%) children. However, it's worth noting that Latino children tend to be most ambivalent about portrayals of their race, as they are also the most likely to see Latinos as portrayed positively.
Key Finding

**Children across all races associate positive characteristics more with the White characters they see on television and negative characteristics more with the minority characters.**

A teenage white boy described his answer, "You really don't see many Black people portrayed as smart people... They don't really have a steady job. They try to get girls and stuff and they are really laid back." An Asian teenager added, "like the shows with White people, they don't fight a lot. But with the Black and Latino people, they're always fighting or arguing."

However, children are equally likely to associate 'being someone you admire' and 'working hard' with both White and minority characters.

**Focus group participants also noted that children of all races are sent messages when certain races are portrayed negatively. As a younger Asian boy commented about the 'reality' show 'COPS': “Like they're arresting African-Americans, people can get the wrong idea that like, all African-Americans are bad, because that's not true.”**

### I believe what I see

Key Finding

**All children agree that the roles of boss, secretary, police officer and doctor in television programs are usually played by White people while the roles of criminal and maid/janitor on television are usually played by African-Americans. Never do children see Latino or Asian characters as the dominant person in the listed roles.**

Conclusions are similar across race lines although both African-American and Latino children are somewhat more likely to see their race in all roles - both positive and negative. For example, 12% of African-American children expect the boss would be African-American, while overall only 7% of children agree.

This difference was most marked, however, with the roles of 'criminal' and 'maid.' Thirty-five percent of children overall see the maid/janitor as African-American, compared to 51% of African-American children.

In the focus groups, children were shown a diverse group of photos of aspiring models and asked to choose which they'd be likely to see on TV in a series of roles. Participants had very clear opinions about the appearance of a good character or a bad character. When assigning the role of 'criminal' or 'drug addict,' focus group participants agreed that some people just have the 'look' of a bad person.

Choosing the picture of an African-American man for the role of criminal, a younger White boy said, "He just looks like the type of criminal that would probably steal or something." Another person there agreed, "Black people are mostly like robbers. Yeah, robbers and gangsters." Children also chose Latinos for the criminal saying that the Latino man "looked mean" or "like he could kill someone."
When choosing a White man to play the police officer, an African-American boy from New Jersey said, "He looks intelligent." One young White girl chose an African-American for the police officer, "because Black people seem to be more tough."

"In TV, it's very defined as to what race correlates with which types of characters. I said a drug addict looked like [a Latino] and that's what I’ve seen in a lot of shows is that kind of look. Unconsciously we've been influenced greatly by the media and how we see people," said an Asian teen.

What is real to me

Key Finding

*Children of color think families on television have more money than their families, while White children are equally likely to say that families on TV have the same amount of money.*

Forty-seven percent of White children say families on television have the same amount of money as their family and 45% say TV families have more money.

In contrast, 55% of African-American children say families on TV have more money (compared to 36% who say 'same'), 53% of Latino children say families on TV have more (36% same) and 50% of Asians feel likewise (39% say same).

Key Finding

When asked whether race or money divide people in America more, White children are more likely to say money than race, while African-American, Latino and Asian children are split between the two.

White children are significantly more likely to say that people are more divided by how much money they have (46%) rather than by their race (30%), while African-American children and Asian children divide evenly between the two (40% money and 38% race), and Latino children give money a very slight edge over race (40% to 35%).

An older White boy explained why money was more divisive: "People act like they are better than everybody else because they are rich." A younger African-American male explained his choice of race: "White people think they are better than Black people. They think they can tell Black people what to do."

Children with professional parents are slightly more likely to say that money is the defining issue (49% professional, 40% non-professional) while children with non-professional parents are slightly more likely to say race divides more (34% non-professional, 29% professional).

As they get older, children of all races are more likely to see money as the defining issue. For example, 10-to 12-year-old Latino children choose race (40%) over money (29%) while their 16-to 17-year-old counterparts choose money (44%) over race (32%).

As one young African-American boy explained, "You may have friends that don't have that much money or have a lot more money than you, but they can be your friends. [But with] race, it doesn't really matter. They won't like you because of your color. And they don't want to be your friends. "However, a Latina teenager in Newark believes that, "They consider us the poor class, because we live around here. They consider themselves the high class because, if they want that, they could get it. Now, we've got to struggle for it."
Although children think that all races are shown doing 'both' good and bad things on the news, they agree that the news media tends to portray African-American and Latino people more negatively than White and Asian people.

A solid third or more of every race believe that Latinos and African-Americans are mostly portrayed doing 'bad things, like crime or drugs or some other problem.'

This was particularly salient with children in the focus groups. When choosing an African-American for the criminal in the casting exercise, a young White female said, "Like the news and everything, you always see Black people doing drugs and carrying around drugs, shooting people and stealing things and everything." An older Latina girl agreed, "Because that's what you see most of the time is Hispanics and Blacks. You don't see White people selling drugs." Young Latino children answered similarly when asked how they see their race in the news, "Gangs. Accidents. Drug dealers. Churches. When they go to jail. Murders."

In contrast, half of African-Americans and Latinos believe that White people are shown doing 'good things like helping people and winning awards' (50% and 47% respectively) while Whites and Asians think White people are shown acting both ways (50% and 55% respectively).

African-American young people were the most critical of the news media's portrayals. They were the only respondents in the poll who see each race as either being portrayed more positively or more negatively - rather than choosing 'both' as an option most of the time, as children of other races did.

In the focus groups as well, African-Americans were most likely to be upset about portrayals of race in the news. One younger African-American boy said, "The news is sort of unfair. Because like when they have on robberies and stuff, they're always blaming us, African-Americans, for it."

Older African-American children are much more likely to see people of their race doing bad things on the news (43%) than are younger African-American children (30%).

When asked what he sees his race doing in the news, one African-American teenage male said, "Covering their face... They are either getting locked up — stolen something."

When looking at news portrayals of teenagers of different races, feelings become even stronger. Children are even more likely to see White and Asian teenagers portrayed mostly positively and to see African-American and Latino teenagers portrayed mostly negatively.

Overall, 48% of children think that White teenagers are portrayed positively, while 44% believe that African-American teenagers and 42% believe Latino teenagers are portrayed more negatively. Children are split on whether Asian teenagers are portrayed positively, or both positively and negatively.

As children age, they are significantly more likely to think African-American teens are presented negatively. For example, 32% of White 10- to 12-year-olds think African-Americans are portrayed negatively compared to 57% of White 16- to 17-year-olds.

When asked whether news about teenagers is fair, a younger White girl responded, "Well, I don't think so because
the news makes it seem like most Hispanics are bad. And most Blacks are bad because that's what the news is - about their robberies. They don't have a lot of bad stuff about Whites, so I don't know. It doesn't seem fair."

Some participants mentioned that they believe that adults - especially of other races - formed impressions of them from the news media. An African-American male described one incident he had with an older White woman. "They see stuff like us snatching pocketbooks whenever they walk in the streets. We had gone to Pizza Hut... and went to go sit down and she just grabbed her bag and slid to the other side. I wanted to say something to her, but she was older."

Key Finding

Large majorities of African-American, Asian and Latino children feel there should be more people of their race as newscasters, while most White children feel there are enough White newscasters.

Three out of four White children feel that there are enough people of their race delivering the news while only 1 out of 5 African-American children, 1 out of 4 Latino children and 1 out of 3 Asian children feel the same way.

An African-American teenager commented that, "They have Black subs. They don't have Black lead anchors." One younger White boy thought there are enough newscasters of all races: “Yeah because there is Japanese and Chinese, Black and White.”

However, the race of the newscaster does not affect the trust children place in the news. This is true for at least two-thirds of children across all races.

An African-American teen thinks the news influences adults of other races: "They see stuff like us snatching pocketbooks... We had gone to Pizza Hut... and went to go sit down and she just grabbed her bag and slid to the other side. I wanted to say something to her but she was older."

I want to see me

Finally, the poll and focus groups found that almost three quarters of all children say they have ‘best friends’ of different races. In the focus groups, many children mentioned that they saw these friends most often at school. As an older White boy from Alabama stated: "If you go to public school, you look at everyone the same because I've seen what Black people can accomplish in the schools and I've seen what White people can accomplish and they are the same."

Respondents of all ages and races expressed faith that the media could help bring races together by showing people of more races interacting. Based on their own experiences with friends in school, one White teenager said, “I think if there is a mixed show [and people] are talking about it, it will help the Whites relate more to the Blacks.... Like in school, television starts conversation.”

Young people in the focus groups had strong opinions about what they would like to see on television. They offered advice to television producers, as well as many creative ideas for their ideal show. Children advised directors to portray all races more often, more fairly, more realistically and more positively. "There should be more movies and television shows that we're more important, we have better lifestyles, better jobs and stuff like that, instead of being in an apartment that's all trashed, working in hotels and stuff like that,” said a younger African-American girl in Alabama.

A young Latino girl in Newark said, "I would tell him that they should put some people that are Latinos, not only put Blacks and Whites." One young White girl had a taller order, "They should have an equal amount of Whites and Blacks and Hispanics and every race on the shows. Not just Black and White. They should have Spanish and Korean and Asian.”

A teenage Asian girl from California advised: "I think that there should be Asians in there. I don't think that they should have an Asian person just standing there, I mean, I think that they should have them in the workplace or like a friend or something."

Said one teenage African-American boy in Newark, "Be more realistic... Stop showing everything we do negative
and start showing the things we do positive." A young White boy agreed, "And like they should have... a mixture and that they should stop making all the Black people always be the ones who are bad."

Their ideal shows would appeal to "everybody" and have a diverse racial cast. They wanted the shows to reflect the realities of their lives that is, to feature more teenagers, to be 'real,' and, most importantly, to show more people of all races interacting with each other.

"I would like a show about my background and how my parents came here and how they tried to make a living for me and my brother. And I know a lot of people here had families that went through everything... I want something like that, action in something. Not just a bunch of White people just like, 'Oh, honey, it will be all right. Just forget about it.' I want something real," said a teenage Latina in Newark. Asian girls echoed that advice, "It would be a realistic show about a group of friends dealing with school, family, friends, boys and girls, etc. Asian characters and some other races. No fake stuff, no happy endings unless needed. The real world."

African-American teenagers said they wanted to see their age and race: "My ideal television show would be about a group of teenage boys, seeing how rough it is out in the real world, towards peer pressure, what they do during conflict."

Younger White children offered a similar show: "People of all races and different looks. The movie would be about teenage problems like drugs, school, sex and home situations. The movie would have people that actually solve the problems. Then at the end of the show it would tell the viewers how to solve the problem. It would be like a day in a teenager's life."

And an older White boy described his ideal program, "I put [my show] based in the summer time and you've got Black people and White people all in the neighborhood together playing basketball and just getting together doing what they want to do."