Book Review and Giveway! *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America* by Dr. Jennifer Harvey

I grew up in Alaska, and after a short time living in Anchorage in a diverse neighborhood, we moved to a rural area. I attended a school that was predominantly white, with a handful of Native Alaskan students and fewer than five black students. While I knew that racism was wrong, I didn’t understand that racism was still prevalent or that I had privilege. I learned in school that segregation was something that happened a long time ago and ended in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was taught as a day to remember someone who helped end segregation. Rosa Parks was presented as someone who was simply tired when she got on the bus that day. When conversations in our U.S. History and Government classes became intense over the rights of indigenous people, especially Native Alaskans, no one talked about racism. The overall conversation, I remember, was that what happened to Native Alaskans was in the past and we couldn’t change it. I was taught to be color-blind.

When I got to college, I remember taking an Introduction to Teaching course, and the instructor talked about how color-blindness didn’t work. My reaction was probably similar to those of my classmates at first, wondering what this conversation had to do with education. But she explained that when she didn’t see someone’s color, when she didn’t see someone as Black, she couldn’t see her privilege as white. She couldn’t see the advantages she had as a white person in our society when she tried to be color-blind. And it was in that moment that the scales fell off my eyes and I understood that I had white privilege.

*Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America* by Dr. Jennifer Harvey is a much-needed resource, not only for parents but for anyone who works with white youth. Dr. Harvey begins with the myth of color-blindness and the fact that children see race. We may say race is a construct, but that doesn’t mean constructs aren’t real and don’t have real consequences. Dr. Harvey insists that we must start having conversations explicitly with our children about racism. No one wants to have an uncomfortable conversation, and no parent wants to have a conversation that their child isn’t ready for. However, Dr. Harvey rightly points out that children are already confronted by race and difference at an early age. As many of us know, we often think that things are over our kids heads when they are actually listening to much of what we say. Perhaps not at the same level, but they hear what we say in front of them, and they also hear what is on the news and the media around them.

My child has experienced being the different one, from being one of only two white children in his class at Choctaw Head Start, to being the only white student in his class in first through third grade. But he also has experience of being different because he is developmentally disabled. He happens to be the child of tall parents (I’m 5’10” and my husband is 6’4”) so he is bigger than other children his age, which also adds a layer of misunderstanding about his development. I have had the experience of other children laughing, pointing, or asking questions about my child, such as, “Why doesn’t he talk?” “Why does he make loud noises?” “Why does he flap his hands like that?” and statements such as, “He scares me.” And my experience of parents of typically-developing children in these situations is often one of embarrassment, of moving their children along, and not responding to their children’s behavior in a way that invites them to ask questions, but instead seeks to quiet them and remove them from the situation.

Dr. Harvey’s work is focused on white families and racism, but I found her approach helpful in understanding that most parents are not prepared to talk with their children about disability, and most white parents are not prepared to talk with their children about racism, until an incident or event happens. Dr. Harvey’s approach encourages parents to ask questions to help clarify and unpack what their child has observed or experienced, rather than trying to quiet them, shame them for pointing out differences, or assume they don’t understand what they have observed.

One of the greatest insights in *Raising White Kids* that I think every parent, and caregiver, grandparent, teacher, or pastor, ought to know in working with white kids is for us white parents/leaders to manage our own anxiety. We are the ones who are often embarrassed, ashamed, and not sure what to say when a child says something awkward, or observes the behavior of someone else, or hears something on the news. It is our own anxiety that often shuts down conversation, that stops a valuable learning moment.

*Raising White Kids* establishes a framework to begin these conversations, by sharing specific questions and tools for parents and caregivers to use to help their children unpack and understand moments of racism. She also provides good insight and caution about seeking out space where white children can have the experience of being a demographic minority, as well as considering whether we are welcomed and invited to do so.

While my experience as a parent of a white child is different, nonetheless, when chatting with a Black parent of a disabled child on Twitter, I mentioned how I wanted to go to one of the Black Lives Matter protests but couldn’t because I would have to take my son with me. I was thinking of how difficult it would be for him to be in a crowd. She tweeted back that she would be afraid of her son being harmed or killed by the police. The fear of having a child who is unable to verbally respond to a police officer is much greater for Black parents of disabled children.

One of the greatest takeaways from *Raising White Kids* is the need for “creating communities of parent-peers.” We need to reach out, learn, and work with other parents in educating our children as well as educating other parents on race (and I would add disability). Dr. Harvey also encourages the creation of student groups at schools for racial justice similar to GSA’s (Gay-Straight Alliances). Recently, the Racial Justice Alliance student group at a school in Montpellier, Vermont, made the national news for raising a Black Lives Matter flag at a school where over eighty percent of the students are white. The work the school is doing to raise awareness of privilege and work for justice is the work of an entire community. The work of educating all of our children, but especially white children on racism and privilege, is work that we do not do alone.

I highly recommend *Raising White Kids* as a resource for all white parents, caregivers, and youth leaders who are open to exploring their own issues surrounding white privilege.

I received an advance reader copy of *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America* in exchange for an honest review and the opportunity to give away a copy on my blog.

To win a free copy of *Raising White Kids,* please comment below! I will select a random winner by 8 p.m. on February 14th. If you are the winner, you will be notified on my blog and given instructions to contact me so I can send you your free copy.