

## HOW PREJUDICE IS LEARNED

Prejudice is not inherited; it is learned, first from parents and then from an ever widening circle of people and institutions ranging from relative to schools. One of the pioneer scholars of racial prejudice, Gordon W. Allport, found that children can learn bigotry in two basic ways: by adopting the prejudice of their parents and other family members and from the cultural environment, or by being raised in such a way that they acquire suspicions, fears and hatreds that sooner or later focus on minority groups.

But the learning of prejudice is a complicated matter for children and it takes a long time. It begins with the child grasping the concept that some children are different from himself, but that is more a matter of curiosity than anything else. Children get their first hint of what prejudice really means from language, from certain powerful words loaded with emotional impact that can wound their fragile self-esteem. These words may vary from region to region depending on the ethnic composition of a particular area. In the Northeast “kike,” “dago,” “wop” or “spick” might be examples; in the South “nigger,” “cracker” or “redneck” might produce the same reaction. But it takes children time to learn to whom these words refer and to completely understand their parents’ rejection and hatred of those categories of people.

The next learning stage may take place between the ages of about seven through eleven and is characterized by the child’s rejection of those who are the objects of the parents’ prejudices.

In this stage, Allport and other researchers found, the child tends to go overboard. If blacks are the hated category, then the child blindly condemns all blacks, viewing them all as having no good qualities, no redeeming features. The prejudiced child at this stage, often around the fifth grade, has mastered the proper bigoted phrases, even if he or she still hasn’t quite given up a fairly democratic style of behavior toward the hated category.

A child at this point often says harshly bigoted things but may still play with children of the group he/she is talking against. It takes the child another few years to learn to modify his or her total verbal rejection into something more realistic and easier to rationalize and defend.

At this stage the child, now a teenage, no longer claims all people of the hated category have no good features and is willing to concede them some good attributes. But the behavior of the prejudiced young person at this point begins to harden into the familiar pattern of adult bigotry that is shared by his or her parents or family circle.

In short, it takes the entire period of childhood and much of adolescence to master prejudice.