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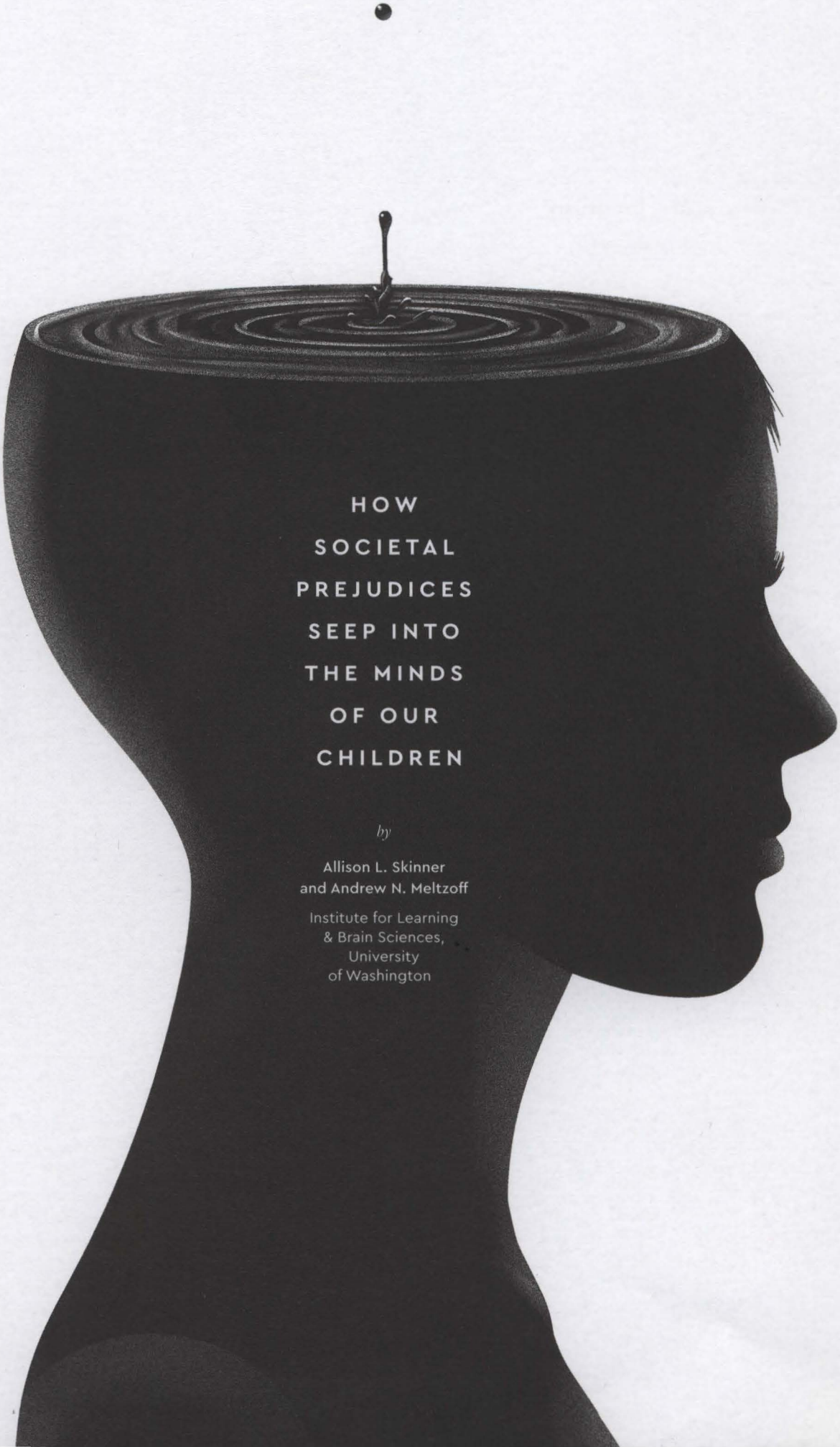

In the 21st century world, where prejudice can lead to hatred, xenophobia, violence, and extremism that claim untold lives and displace millions of people, it is never tooearly to combat the onset of prejudice through education. Allison Skinner and Andrew Meltzoff tell us how prejudices seep into the minds of our children and what can be done to stop this.

We want our children to lead happy and productive lives. We want them to grow up to be fair-minded, moral adults who are not biased. Our children are not born with biases against other people, but many children become biased at a surprisingly early age. How do they 'catch' the biases from adults and peers in their culture? What can we do about it? New research is beginning to point to answers that may help parents, educators, and policymakers.

Scientific studies show that young children readily form biases in favor of their own social groups. As early as preschool, and increasingly in elementary school, children begin to group other people into social categories based on gender, ethnicity, language, and nationality—favoring their own group over others (Hailey and Olsen, 2013). Moreover, children who are members of a socially dominant group are particularly likely to develop biases favoring their own group. All too often this bias toward the in-group (those people in the child's social group) translates into prejudice against the out-group (those people who come from outside of the child's own social group). Yet providing children with education about the groups around them and how to navigate intergroup relations can go a long way in curbing these biases before they form firm roots. Here we review what science says about common contributors to prejudice among children, and address the ways education can be used to rein them in.

One thing we know about the development of bias in children is that negative experiences with members of out-groups can lead children to develop prejudice. Children who have hostile interactions with members of other social groups develop strong prejudices against them. Thus, if experiences are disharmonious, first-hand exposure to members of other groups tends to increase children's prejudices against those groups (Kang and Inzlicht, 2012). Even exposure to negative depictions of members of other groups—for example, through media and other messaging—can create or

heighten prejudice among children. Children who are told that out-group members do not like the child's own group or that out-group members are 'mean' will to develop prejudices against members of that group. Empirical studies show that this process begins among children as young as 4 years of age.

Another factor that influences young children's prejudices is their parents' attitudes. Children's prejudices tend to be related to the prejudices held by their parents, although this is hardly a direct one-to-one match (Degner and Dalege, 2013). It likely varies according to how explicit parents are in communicating their biases to their children. Negative messages parents provide about other social groups increase children's intergroup prejudices.

A surprising new finding is that children can 'catch' bias from adults even when the adults don't explicitly teach it to them. Adults' *unspoken* biases directly and powerfully influence the prejudices of the children around them. Parents may not explicitly share their attitudes about sensitive topics like race with their children, either because they do not want to influence the attitudes of their children or because they are unaware of their own biases (Mooney, 2014). But research shows that unspoken biases may still be influencing children. We recently discovered just how powerfully prejudices can be communicated from parents to young children through nonverbal signals. Through this research we have begun to unlock the mystery of how your young children 'catch' biases (Skinner, Meltzoff, and Olson, 2016).

We found that children are social detectives. They are searching for clues, scraps of evidence, about whom we adults like and don't like, who is considered 'good' in the culture and who is shunned and considered 'bad' by others in the culture. Their detective work does not stop with analyzing what we say verbally. It also extends to what we do and how we act. We found that when adults 'leak' nonverbal messages about bias and prejudice, our little children pay attention to those nonverbal cues. Whether they know it or not, parents, teachers, and others in society provide subtle clues about how much they like and trust members of social groups through their facial expressions and body language.

In this recent study, we tested for bias in preschool children who were only 4 and 5 years of age. We discovered that children who saw adults display negative nonverbal signals toward another person subsequently expressed a bias against that person. Just from the fact that the adults scowled at a person and spoke to her in an unfriendly tone, the children 'caught' the social bias they were exposed to.

What is more, children did not just develop biases against the specific individual who was the target of the nonverbal bias. The children also became biased against a friend of that individual, who was portrayed as a member of the same group. This suggests that this process may be the foundation for larger intergroup prejudices. In other words, if children exposed to a bias against one or two members of a group readily generalize that bias to the rest of the group, this could explain how prejudices about gender, race, ethnicity,

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Above:
Andrew Meltzoff studies how children learn.

and nationality are spread to children. If children observe their parents (or other adults, peers, or media) systematically displaying negative nonverbal signals, such as limited smiling or eye contact or a negative tone of voice, to members of a particular social group, that could lead children to develop prejudices against members of that group.

What can be done to combat prejudice from developing in the minds of young children? In order to address prejudice we must first pinpoint the factors that lead prejudice to develop. From there we can create strategies to counteract those factors. Although children readily develop biases against members of out-groups, carefully crafted education can reduce those prejudices. Scientific studies show that children who are exposed to positive representations of out-groups in media show lower levels of prejudice against members of those groups (Durkin et al., 2012). For example, children who see racially diverse groups of children depicted in the media go on to favor groups that are racially diverse over groups that are exclusively made up of racial in-group members. Explicit positive messages about other groups can also decrease intergroup prejudice. One study compared children who were told good things about the out-group (but ended up having a negative experience with them) to children who were told bad things about the out-group (but ended up having a positive experience with them). The children who had had a bad experience with the out-group but were told good things about them actually liked them more than children who were told bad things about the out-group (Kang and Inzlicht, 2012). So although negative experiences with members of other groups can increase prejudice, evidence suggests that positive messages can ameliorate these prejudices.

Although we cannot shield our children from prejudice, education and constructive exposure to out-groups can go a long way. One thing we can strive to do is provide children with positive messages about members of other groups and facilitate positive contact between children of different groups (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). As adults we can make a point of diversifying our own contacts as well, thereby modeling positive intergroup relations to children. Research has shown that children whose parents have friends of other races tend to be less racially prejudiced, and this is especially true of children who have seen their parents interacting with friends of other races (Pahlke, Bigler, and Suizzo, 2012; Vittrup and Holden, 2011). Importantly, our new research suggests that we can unconsciously communicate our own biases to our children through our nonverbal behaviors. This means that ultimately we, as adults, might want to be more careful about the prejudices we model to our children. Given how rapidly children catch social biases from the adults around them, we might begin to think about the messages we are sending our children through both spoken and unspoken channels.

We are educating our children through everyday interactions as well as through formal schooling. Children are learning how to treat others simply from watching and listening to us (Meltzoff et al., 2009). Our children are always learning—whether we know it or not.