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Q & A with Jessica Ralli and Megan Madison

By Patricia J. Murphy | Apr 26, 2021

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Megan Madison (l.) and Jessica Ralli.

Jessica Ralli and Megan Madison are the co-creators of the *First Conversations* board book series from RISE x Penguin Workshop, which introduces tough topics to toddlers and the tools to discuss them. Their debut title,


Our Skin: A First Conversation About Race (illustrated by Isabel Roxas), is now on bookshelves; and *Being You: A First Conversation About Gender* (illustrated by Anne/Andy Passchier) is due out in July. Ralli is also an early childhood educator, the coordinator of early childhood programs at the Brooklyn Public Library, a library advocate, a columnist, and a blogger. Madison is an early childhood educator, professional development and workshop facilitator for teachers on race, gender, and sexuality, a life-long student of radical Black feminism, and a doctoral candidate at Brandeis University's Heller School of Social Policy. PW spoke with the duo about the inspiration and research behind their new series, and their hopes that these books will spark conversations and ignite social change.

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Can you tell us how the idea for First Conversations first came to light? And, how did the two of you join forces?

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Jessica Ralli: The idea came when Megan did some workshops on race and gender for parents and educators at our library. Afterwards, there were many questions about how do we talk about race and gender with our kids and students, and what books could we suggest to help them. We started thinking about the kinds of books we could recommend; but most of them were for older kids, and were not accessible and did not approach these difficult discussions in very developmental ways.

Then, when I pitched the idea of *Our Skin* to our editor, Cecily Kaiser, I wasn't thinking about writing the book myself. But, Cecily "got it" right away and asked me if I could write the book with someone. I told her that I knew the perfect person who understood and could translate this topic to children, parents, and teachers. So, I asked Megan if she'd like to write the book with me.

Megan Madison: And, of course, I said, "YES!" because I saw a *real* need. In addition to facilitating workshops and getting all kinds of questions, I was also in my PhD process, and had spent a whole lot of time reading all sorts of grown-up books about race, gender, and patriarchy. And, as an early child educator like Jessica, I have acquired the superpower of being able to translate difficult topics into simple language that young kids can understand. So, by combining our super powers, and trusting in our relationship—and believing in our abilities to do this together, we started writing *First Conversations*!

How have your multi-layered backgrounds influenced the writing of this series?

Ralli: Language development and early literacy in early childhood has been a focus of mine—and my life's work. So, as the coordinator of early literacy programs at the Brooklyn Library, my work has been a huge source of both inspiration and research for these books in many ways. And, as an early childhood educator and a special education teacher in preschool classrooms, I have seen children bring up the subject of skin color, ask questions about gender, etc., and adults bristle, not knowing how to respond.

Also, as a white mother raising white children, I wanted my kids to develop a vocabulary for recognizing and disrupting racism—and other systems of oppression. I also wanted to give them language to describe the unfair patterns they are already noticing in our community, their schools, and the media.

With *First Conversations*, we have created books that I have been looking for to support intentional, honest, and early conversations about race and racism with my kids. It's the reason I co-wrote this book and series.

Madison: My professional training as an early childhood has given me the framework and the foundational concepts to help co-create these books. With this background knowledge of how young children can demonstrate critical thinking skills, and recognize patterns but don't yet have the language to communicate these things, we have the lens to write for the way they think.

We know from our collective experience that young children have compassion, curiosity, and are ready for these conversations, and that their teachers and parents need help.

Can you encapsulate the additional research that informed your writing? What were some of your resources for further reading?

Ralli: The research came first from what I've always known and observed as an early childhood educator and a librarian. Then, when we dug into the current research, it confirmed a lot of what I've known. For instance, children are already noticing differences in skin color by six months, and by three years old they're experiencing racial bias.

Madison: The growing body of research underscores the importance of talking to young children about race, racism, and other forms of oppression. As Jessica said, we have learned that children of color are experiencing racism as early as 0–3 years. And, young white children are able to notice unfair treatment in social situations, as well as

microaggressions. Since they are experiencing these things, the kids are ready to have the conversations about why they are happening, what they can do about it, and how to make it right.

So, the question leads us to: are their parents and teachers ready? Through the research, we've also discovered that lots of grownups—especially white grownups, haven't had the experience or the greatest role models to have these conversations. The research also shows that white parents have some hesitancy in discussing these topics. And, while most believe they should do it, many don't know how, and some don't think it's appropriate at an early age, or that it might be harmful. But, that's not what the research says. What the research *does* say is that talking about tough topics, like racism, brings greater self-awareness, self-esteem, and confidence in recognizing prejudice.

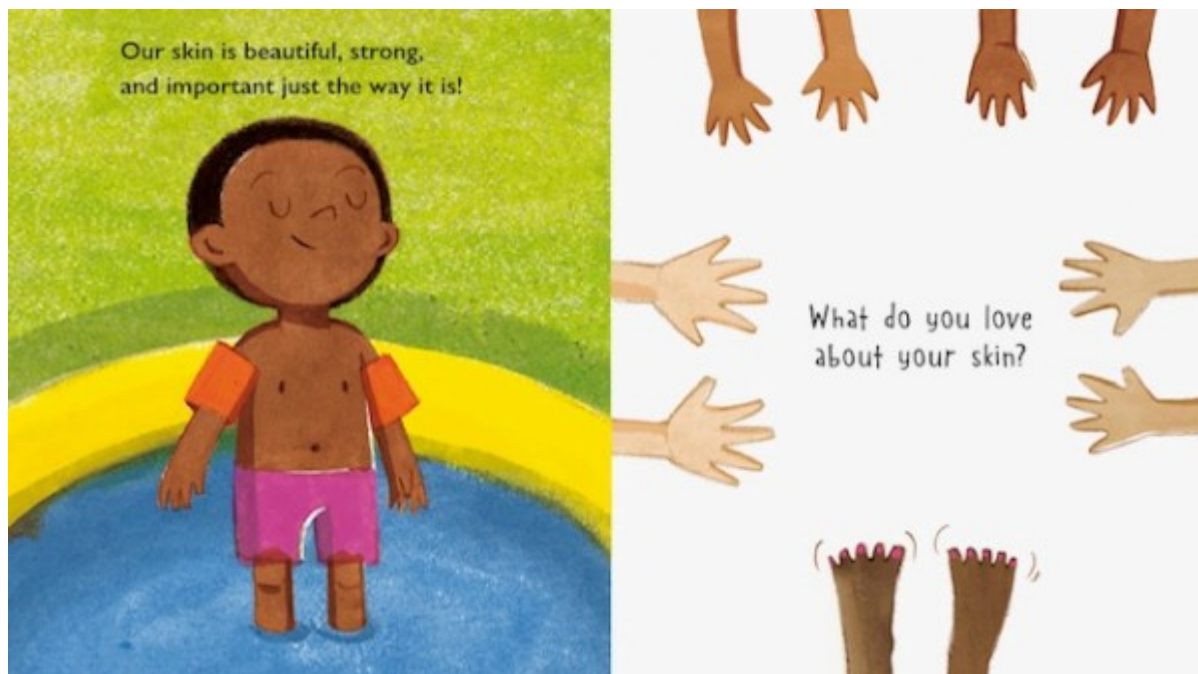
One of our research resources in particular, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* [by Louise Derman-Sparks, Julie Olsen Edwards, and Catherine N. Goins] presents a framework with four core goals for young children: identity, diversity, justice, and activism. While writing, we kept each of these goals in mind and did our best not to fall into some of the very common misconceptions.

What are your recommendations for when, where, and how to share *Our Skin*?

Madison: We suggest that *Our Skin* can be used as early as 2–6 years old. However, we recently heard from someone who read the book to her young child, and her 15-year-old son happened to be listening. After she was finished reading, he told her that he thought it was the best explanation of systemic racism he had ever heard. So, our books can be read at any age—and also anywhere.

I would love them to be shared all over the place: in the backseat of the car, at school, home, the library, grandma's house, the doctor's office, in playgroups—you name it! I want them to be shared in preschool classrooms with young children as well as professional development workshops with teachers. I really hope the books end up in all the places that kids and families and teachers need them.

Ralli: We also suggest that while reading they take breaks, add stories of their own, and allow lots of room to share their thoughts and feelings, and discuss the open-ended questions. Recently, we had one mother write in a social media post that while reading this book with her five-year-old they said, "I love my skin!" for the first time! It was in response to our question, "What do you like about your skin?" We thought a great deal about the open-ended questions to get kids thinking and learning.



An illustration from *Our Skin*.

What would you say to reluctant parents/teachers who might feel their children aren't ready for either your books—or the conversations they inspire?

Ralli: I would say they are ready! Young children are already seeing differences and noticing inequities. Young children of color are already

experiencing prejudice and racism from toddlerhood. And, young white children are already noticing unfair patterns in

our society—and may even be perpetuating racism. So, they are ready to have conversations about why the world is the way it is and what they can do to make it right. You can't change something that you don't acknowledge or don't have the language to talk about.

So, parents and teachers must be at the ready, too. The challenge here is that grownups often don't know where to begin, have the right language to use, or know if it's even OK to talk about. Grown-ups often shut down and/or postpone conversations about race, especially white grown-ups who have the luxury and privilege to do that. Finding the language and talking together are the first steps. These conversations need to happen early—and often, if we're going to build this world, as it should be.

What are your hopes for *Our Skin* and your desired takeaways for its readers?

Ralli: First, I hope that grown-ups actually read this book with their kids, library visitors, classes, and other grown-ups. I want people—especially white people—to move through feelings of discomfort and/or fear, to know that it's OK to feel uncomfortable, and to make mistakes. As a result of this, I would like white children and adults to develop the capacity to talk about race and racism, and to respond to racism and injustice when they see it happening. At first, these won't be perfect conversations, but you will have more than one chance to do it.

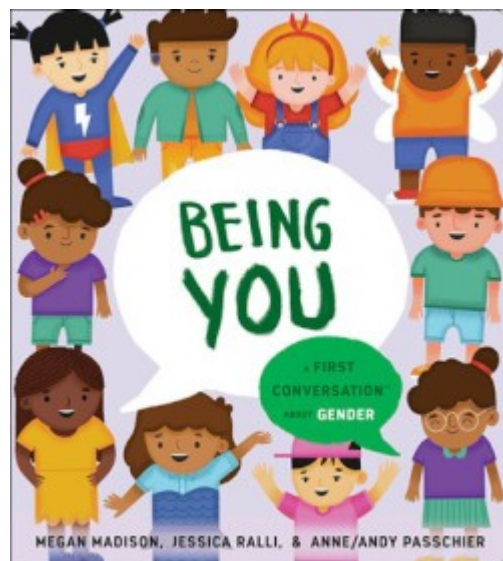
Ultimately, I hope that our readers walk away from reading *Our Skin* feeling seen, safe, aware, and empowered.

Madison: My greatest hope, too, is that every child sees themselves and feels affirmed. I also hope that *Our Skin* and our series will answer some of the real questions people have about why the world is the way it is, and inspire them to make the world better. I hope the books support grown-ups in being brave and having honest, important, healing conversations with the people they love most. And I hope that these conversations keep going—and turn into action.

Can you tell us about the second title, *Being You*, and the importance of addressing gender at an early age?

Ralli: *Being You* is about the first messages we receive about gender, which happen in early childhood. We learn from a young age that gender is an important social category and that there are things we should or shouldn't do/want/be based on the sex we're assigned at birth. *Being You* is written to help young children make sense of what they are seeing, hearing, and feeling when it comes to gender expression, gender identity, and gender stereotypes, and to take an empowering look at movements for gender justice.

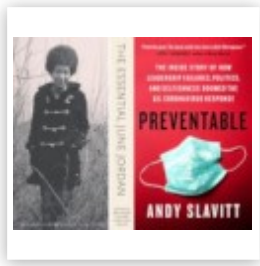
Madison: Talking about gender is just as important as talking about race with young children—and talking about their intersections is important too! Even before children are born, they are being impacted by patriarchy and the gender binary. Often, children are assigned a sex and a gender while they are still in the womb. And based on that assignment, their families and communities are developing a whole host of expectations about who they will become and how they should be in the world. So young children are confronted by these untrue beliefs and unfair experiences very early. That's why it's important that we support them to navigate all this by engaging them in ongoing, open conversations about their observations and feelings. We can give them language to describe themselves, others, and the unfair patterns they are observing in the world. We can also model strategies for resisting.



Are their plans for additional First Conversations?

Madison: We're planning to publish a book on consent and one on bodies next year. There are many more topics that we'd like to write about—everything from money and class inequality to borders and immigration. I'm especially interested in LGBTQ families, ableism, religious diversity, and incarceration, too. We'd also love to hear from readers what they feel like they need. So, let us know what you think at FirstConversations.org or on Instagram [@First_Conversations](https://www.instagram.com/First_Conversations).

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