

# Chapter 18

## Conclusions



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In this book, we have presented several tools based on hair combing interaction (HCI) and colorism for social workers and infant and early childhood educators to use to support Black and Indigenous children and families of color. From an attachment, relationship-based framework these conceptually connected tools may be used with parents or primary caregivers of children, and early childhood educators and teachers. Each of the developmental, culturally based, trauma-informed tools is illustrated throughout the book and designed to understand the influence of caregiver and child factors that may shape behaviors during HCI.

We began with the Ethnobiography *of the caregiver*, designed to provide a structure to systematically assess the individual and sociocultural factors that shape the social context of the neighborhood and the historical context of the caregiver. Two standardized tools to assess skin tone and hair texture are included for use by researchers or clinicians. The projective tool of the Neck-up Drawing provides a method to understand the caregiver's self-perception of their immutable racialized features. These drawings and the selection of emotions to describe their feelings about their perception of their racialized self provide areas for clinical exploration and opportunities for parental insight. In the Appendix, we provide several tools referenced throughout the book, the *Childhood Experiences of Racial Acceptance and Rejection* (CERAR), a semistructured interview, the Tender Headed Rating Scale to assess the degree of physical pain experienced by children during the hair combing time, and the survey, *The Recognition of the Impact of Colorism*<sup>®</sup> (RICS). This brief survey can be used by both therapists and researchers to assess a parent's understanding of how children emotionally experience negative messages of colorism.

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## A Growing Recognition of the Beauty of Natural Hair

In the past decade, there has been an explosion of social media including books and movies, such as comedian Chris Rock's movie on *Good Hair*; and, more recently, Oprah Winfrey's showing of the movie, *Dark Girls*. This movie by actor Bill Duke and released in 2013 documents the experiences of dark-skinned African-American women's emotional pain of racial rejection by members of their families and community. He has since released a movie on *Light Girls* to tell their stories of acceptance and rejection based on skin tone. Social workers and infant and early childhood practitioners may use this video to structure their conversations about race with parents.

A recent nationwide movement of a coalition of community organizations has worked for the passage of legislation titled the CROWN Act, which stands for Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (2019). This law prohibits discrimination in the workplace based on an employee's hair texture and hairstyle.

We hope that the antidote to these unconscious memories of the race-based trauma of colorism can be the use of healthy cultural practices such as the routines and rituals of combing natural hair. Connection to culture – the traditions, values, and practices that reflect an ancient African philosophy of resilience, and collectivist community practices – benefits parent-child relationships (Miller & Goodnow, 1995). Through interventions based on the hair combing interactions, social workers, therapists, and other infant and early childhood practitioners can support and strengthen parent-infant socioemotional relationships. Joining with parents for observation and listening, lively talking, and storytelling, during this routine interaction, supports positive perceptions of a child's skin color and hair type, reinforcing parents' unconditional acceptance of their child. Through daily routines of loving and gentle physical touch during hair combing time, parents and other caregivers communicate acceptance of their child through the sensory experience of touch. Finally, paying close attention, then listening and responding carefully to the child's cues during the routine of combing hair, strengthens the attachment relationship. More simply stated, touch, talk, and listen. The positive interactions with young children during hair combing time begin to disrupt toxic legacies and stereotypes and reconnect families of color to a rich cultural heritage (Mbilishaka, Chap. 13).

## Implications for Research

The scientific study of hair combing interactions between caregivers and young children as a developmental context for research is in an embryonic stage of development. The central research questions for basic and applied research centers on the question: Does hair combing interaction shape the quality of parent-child attachment? Other potential research questions that may be explored by interdisciplinary

behavioral scientists – developmental psychologists, social workers, educators, and the medical field – cover critical developmental processes of early childhood. These questions include: How does this repetitive, predictable hair combing routine contribute to a child’s emotion regulation, neurological, linguistic, and cognitive development? Does this repetitive behavior reduce stress in the parent or caregiver? What are the long-term implications of the positive practice of HCI for the child as a future caregiver for the quality of the relationships with their children?

There remains a need for continued evaluation research on the incorporation of the topics of colorism and childhood experiences of racial acceptance and rejection based on skin color and hair type into parent education curricula. Evidence-based, culturally grounded resources to support parents of color.

## Implications for Practice

Hair combing time offers opportunities for parents or primary caregivers to connect emotionally with their infants and young children – talking, touching, and listening – and, most optimally, can lead to secure and stable relationships over time. These behaviors are fundamental to healthy growth and development in the early years (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The social work or behavioral health practitioner or early childhood educator who witnesses hair combing interactions between parents and young children are in a position to observe, assess, and comment on positive exchanges that affirm parental capacities to nurture and protect.

Furthermore, hair combing provides a portal for helping professionals to learn from parents about their own earlier hair combing experiences, understanding past interactions and relationships that were pleasurable, as well as those that were harsh and rejecting. Taken together, stories create a parent’s *ethnobiography* and can include cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences that helped to form parental beliefs and attitudes about racial features, especially hair and skin tone, now communicated in interactions with their children. Inviting persons of color to reflect on their intergenerational experiences of racial trauma and discrimination in a therapeutic or caring environment, and to share their stories, can lead to the reduction of risk and enhancement of caregiving strengths, offering an effective strategy for healing. What a parent shares is invaluable in helping both the parent and professional appreciate parental strengths and vulnerabilities, leading to change in the developing parent–child relationship. Furthermore, stories invite the professional’s empathic response to what is told, inviting personal and professional reflections within the context of a supervisory relationship, about hair combing and relationship experiences, leading to greater self-awareness and cultural understanding, using the lens of ethnicity, culture, race, and inclusion as a centerpiece.

Our hope is that these intentional tools and techniques invite Black and Indigenous persons of color to reflect on their intergenerational experiences of racial trauma and discrimination in an environment that leads to healing, growth, and change. We also hope that these tools, related to hair combing interaction and the exploration of

colorism, will be adopted by professionals and complement traditional professional practice strategies such as observing, assessing, gentle questioning, listening, and responding with empathy for caregivers.

We have incorporated relationship-based, racially informed reflective practice throughout each chapter in this book. Engaging in Reflective Supervision nurtures professional growth and personal self-awareness, using the lens of ethnicity, culture, race, and inclusion as a centerpiece. In the reflective supervision process, applying the central principle of the Diversity Tenets “awareness of self” opens the door for understanding the experiences of others (Thomas et al., 2019; Van Horn, 2019). We hope you will become more aware of experiences that have shaped your own beliefs about diversity, ethnicity, culture, and race, reflect on them, and share them with others in a protected space. Such awareness contributes to effective service and quality social work practices. In the process of joining with parents to explore their childhood experiences of racial acceptance or rejection, social workers and helpers can also reflect on thoughts and feelings that come to mind about their childhood experiences of being treated differently based on a personal, immutable physical characteristic, such as facial freckles or red hair.

Finally, to understand the depth of this complex interaction of combing hair, we presented a colorist-historical trauma framework as a conceptual foundation for reflective supervision and applied practice. This Framework provides the basis for the psychosocial tools introduced in the book. Each chapter provides reflective questions tied to the social, cultural, and emotional content described regarding colorism and hair type. These questions invite the reader to think reflectively about the information shared and, at the same time, to consider personal thoughts and feelings about culture, ethnicity, and race that may have been evoked by the experiences and materials described.

In summary, *Talk, Touch, & Listen!* creates a new awareness among parents, White professionals, and Professionals of Color about the importance of hair combing routines and rituals to promote healthy growth and change. With a new recognition of the power of hair combing experiences and colorism, past and present, to affect young children, parents can then become empowered through community based interventions to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of rejection, racial trauma, and psychological harm. We hope this reflective practice framework will help parents and professionals use the hair combing time to assess or provide mutually rewarding, therapeutic support for caregivers and their young children.

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