



## From the One Globe Kids Blog - Intergroup Contact Theory

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**One Globe Kids puts the world in your child's hands. And while doing that we visit great places, we meet great people and we learn a lot. Our Blog is where we share our own adventures. This is a summary of the post about the research behind our tools.**

### How to Reduce Prejudice. What the Research Tells Us

If we're serious about creating a better world for our kids (and we are), we need a serious plan with proven strategies for reducing prejudice. Most of what I do at One Globe Kids is focused on creating a positive, virtual cross-cultural experience for children. The app is designed to simulate a real friendship with someone that your average four-to-eight year old might not have the chance to meet and befriend, given the how tough many geographic and linguistic obstacles there are at that age. Like many parents, I want my own kids to have a diverse group of friends and to be able to interact with many types of people. I want them to look at everyone as an equal, regardless of their background, and contribute successfully in our increasingly globalized world. Using my mom instincts and my personal experiences living and working abroad as a compass, I created One Globe Kids.

I didn't know all the technical language that social science researchers use when studying prejudice. I'm not even sure I knew there was a formal field of study about prejudice. Beyond personal stories, I didn't know how to describe how interacting with someone who's different can impact your life. I simply felt very strongly that it does. It had had a huge impact on me, and everyone I spoke with also had his or her own stories that reinforced my belief that we were on the right path.

Now those of us who want actionable steps for reducing prejudice have a resource. Two well-known social psychologists, Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, spent 13 years searching for and re-analyzing studies on intergroup contact from around the world (515 studies from 38 countries, to be exact). John Dovidio from Yale University called their 2011 book *When Groups Meet: The Dynamics of Intergroup Contact* "the definitive volume on this topic." This impressive book thoroughly examines the complex factors involved in successful intergroup relations. It also gives us a solid foundation for taking practical action against prejudice.

### Intergroup Contact Theory

The question of what happens when different groups of people interact has long interested sociologists across Europe and America. In the 19th century, prominent thinkers believed that all intergroup contact nearly inevitably leads to





conflict because one group feels superior to the other. When the shocking violence of Hitler's prejudice was discovered at the end of World War II, intergroup contact theorists realized that a more complete understanding of this interaction was necessary. In the beginning, some naively assumed that simply bringing people from different races together (to share a meal, for example) would be sufficient to end prejudice and correct negative stereotypes. It was not. More than 50 years later, researchers in social psychology now know that intergroup contact usually does decrease intergroup prejudice. (In *When Groups Meet* 94% of the studies showed contact leading to reduced prejudice.) However, there are conditions and circumstances that can make the contact more or less effective at reducing prejudice and knowing this can make our efforts much more successful.

Intergroup contact reduces prejudice by: 1) increasing our empathy for others, 2) reducing our anxiety about meeting and interacting with the "other", and 3) increasing our knowledge about this other group. Interestingly, increased empathy and reduced anxiety have a much greater impact on prejudice reduction than increased knowledge. In the long run, in terms of multicultural education it's better to teach empathy than country flags, it turns out. Empathy affects our feelings and emotional responses to a group, which radiate out, spreading positive feelings and reduced prejudice beyond just the persons in contact. (Known as generalized effects in social psychology circles.)

Research has shown that by getting to know you, I have reduced prejudice for everyone in your group. And quite often, I also have reduced prejudice for people in other groups I don't yet know. Not only that, when my friends see me having a positive interaction with you, their prejudice toward you is also reduced. And much of this holds true not only for direct, person-to-person contact, but also when the contact is indirect, even via television or other media.

I must admit that my jaw dropped a little when I read the research. Could it really be this simple? Actually, no.

## First Change Your Behavior

One of the main stumbling blocks to interacting with someone from a different group is our own anxiety about it. Once we have the opportunity to meet someone from the "other" group, we must be brave enough to make the contact. Our expectations that it will be difficult, scary and uncomfortable, lead to anxiety and cause us to back away. Yet this is exactly the opposite of what we should do. Fear only breeds more fear. Instead of first trying to change attitudes in order to change behavior, social psychologists recommend the opposite: first change your behavior, and attitude change will follow. The more contact we have, the less anxiety we have AND the less prejudice. If we consciously, purposely, meet and interact with people from groups other than our own, that interaction will feel increasingly comfortable and normal.

The research also shows that while intergroup contact generally reduces prejudice, it is most effective when it "consists of close, high quality intergroup relationships such as those afforded by cross-group friendships". Friendship is a unique interaction that combines repeated contact, often across a variety of settings, with the sharing of experiences, stories and feelings. More intimate than a cross-group interaction with a colleague or neighbor, close friendship build



empathy in a way that almost nothing else can. When we have a friend in another group, we begin to see that person not as a member of a different group, but as a member of our own group. Prejudice dissolves.

In 1954 social psychologist Gordon Allport published *The Nature of Prejudice*, unveiling his “intergroup contact hypothesis” that outlined specific factors that enhance the prejudice-reducing effects of intergroup contact. Researchers have continued to study his proposed optimal conditions, and even today they remain generally accepted as important strategic components of prejudice reduction. Allport proposed that intergroup contact leads to reduced prejudice if the contact situation incorporates four conditions:

- Equal status within the contact situation means that all participants are given equal opportunity to participate, offer suggestions, make decisions and use available resources.
- Having common goals leads people to be friendlier and more willing to help each other for the common good.
- Intergroup-cooperation to achieve a common goal leads to reduced conflict and hostility between groups, encouraging positive relations as both groups benefit from their cooperation.
- Evidence demonstrating the significance of institutional support comes frequently from studies in interracial schools. Contact between children of different races is more frequent and more positive when school principals and administrators appear to value this type of interaction. Likewise, when students believe that their teachers support intergroup relations, the interactions are more frequent and more positive. Studies with the military and other organizational settings have similar results.

While these optimal conditions are not exclusive and do not guarantee reduced prejudice, they certainly increase its likelihood.

## Taking Action Against Prejudice at an Early Age

Children begin learning about themselves and the world around them in a formative way between two to five years old. Attitudes are shaped, and they start to notice identity and differences between themselves and others. Studies indicate that intergroup contact during one’s youth can predict reduced levels of prejudice later in life, serving as a formative experience for framing and developing intergroup attitudes. Views of different racial and ethnic groups can be affected and shaped by others with whom they come in contact. With this knowledge, we can be proactive in helping our children push prejudice to the side. We can lead by example, finding and creating opportunities for interaction with others in our neighborhoods and our schools.

We can create contact opportunities with “friendship potential,” those that create extensive and repeated contact, encouraging shared experience, self-disclosure and other types of friendship-building processes. We can influence expectations for intergroup contact by helping children focus on the similarities between us. And we can make sure our children know that we believe it’s GOOD for them to have friends who are different from them.

One Globe Kids was designed to make global intergroup interaction appear attractive and doable for young children. A



powerful social tool for reducing prejudice clothed in an app costume. My, how far we've come.

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