

You may be wondering ...

## Should we address all racial jokes?

If you think long enough, you can probably think of a time when you heard a joke that was specifically about an ethnic-racial group or that had ethnic-racial undertones. It is logical to think that context is all that really matters in terms of the effects that these types of jokes can have on youth. You might hear students say that telling jokes with ethnic-racial undertones is OK as long as these jokes are “between friends,” between people who are comfortable with each other, between people who trust each other enough to know that “it’s just a joke,” or between people who are of the same ethnicity or race and/or of the ethnic-racial group that is being joked about. What research shows, however, is that these types of jokes are, in fact, harmful for adolescents’ psychosocial well-being.

### **Jokes Have Consequences**

**Although teasing is a common occurrence among adolescents<sup>1</sup>, jokes about racial stereotypes can cause increased anxiety among targeted adolescents<sup>2</sup>.** Forming friendships with peers is very important for adolescents<sup>3</sup> and having an ethno-racially diverse group of friends has been linked with numerous positive benefits. Talking about race and ethnicity with peers, however, can be challenging. One way to reduce discomfort is to use humor<sup>4</sup>. Next time you hear youth making these types of jokes, consider that this may actually be a sign of their discomfort with issues of race and ethnicity.



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And even more importantly, keep in mind that although these jokes may seem harmless, especially if they are between friends, research shows that these jokes can negatively impact students’ development. In one study with 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> graders from two New York City high schools, comments such as “You loud Dominican you” or “I can’t see you Shauna, where are you Shauna?” to a Black friend when a group of friends were out at night led to a spike in anxiety 24 hours later, and this was the case even if adolescents who were the focus of these jokes explained that their friends were “only joking”<sup>2</sup>.

### IN THE CLASSROOM

### Conversation Starters

**Jokes about ethnic-racial stereotypes may come up during Session 2 of the Identity Project, as this session addresses the topic of stereotypes. It is important to address all jokes when they occur, as failure to do so could result in more tolerance of racist statements<sup>5</sup>.**

The next page contains a selection of conversation starters<sup>6,7</sup>. Engaging students in this dialogue can put them on a path toward learning how to take someone else’s perspective, which is important to create a more inclusive classroom. Encourage students to consider the effects of race-based jokes and to understand their impact on others in the classroom<sup>7,8</sup>. You might also find it helpful to tell students about what research on young people has discovered with respect to the effects of ethnic-racial jokes “between friends.”

## Consider these prompts to start a conversation in your classroom:

How would you feel if someone said something hurtful to you about your ethnic-racial group but said it was a joke?

What kind of environment would we like to create in the classroom?

Can you see how some people may not think that's funny?

What is underlying these jokes?

How can the joke affect people who hear it?

### Key Takeaway:

Ethnic-racial jokes have consequences. Even if students who are the victims of these jokes are shrugging them off and saying that they don't really mind these jokes and perhaps even find them funny, it's clear from the research that even jokes "among friends" can be harmful to students' mental health.

### References and Articles for Further Reading:

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