

# Quarterly

SUMMER 2021

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## Fighting racism

### OVERVIEW

The impact of racism  
on children

### REVIEW

Childhood interventions  
to reduce racism







### About the Quarterly

We summarize the best available research evidence on a variety of children's mental health topics, using systematic review and synthesis methods adapted from the *Cochrane Collaboration* and *Evidence-Based Mental Health*. We aim to connect research and policy to improve children's mental health. The BC Ministry of Children and Family Development funds the *Quarterly*.

### About the Children's Health Policy Centre

We are an interdisciplinary research group in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. We focus on improving social and emotional well-being for all children, and on the public policies needed to reach these goals.

To learn more about our work, please see [childhealthpolicy.ca](http://childhealthpolicy.ca).

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"Race" is a socially constructed concept, not based in biology, and this concept has profound effects on children's lives when racism ensues. We discuss racism's impact on social, emotional and physical well-being of young people.



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Childhood interventions aiming to reduce racism have been delivered for decades. But how well do they work? We conducted a systematic review to answer this question.



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#### Stopping bullying

Bullying is an unacceptable but frequent experience for children. We examine interventions that aim to reduce in-person and online bullying.

### How to Cite the Quarterly

We encourage you to share the *Quarterly* with others and we welcome its use as a reference (for example, in preparing educational materials for parents or community groups). Please cite this issue as follows:

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We celebrate the Indigenous Peoples whose traditional lands  
Quarterly team members live and work on.

## A STATEMENT OF RECOGNITION

At the Children's Health Policy Centre we are deeply saddened to learn of the 215 children whose bodies have been discovered on the site of the former residential school in Kamloops. We are also saddened to learn of similar news coming from other Indigenous communities. In honour of all these children and their families and communities, and in honour of all Indigenous Peoples, we stand with you and we remain committed to moving forward on the path of truth and reconciliation.



*Kamloops Indian Residential School  
Kamloops, B. C.*



# The impact of racism on children

*People in high school thought racism toward First Nations was funny.*

— An Indigenous person reflecting on their experiences<sup>1</sup>

*A friend's 5-year-old daughter returned home from her first day in kindergarten in tears and confused because a classmate had taunted her saying: "You brought the China flu! Get away! Yuck!"*

— An individual reflecting on experiences of an Asian child<sup>2</sup>

*The other day my 10-year-old daughter was playing with her friends, and one of the white girls said to her, "Your skin colour is too dark — it's, like, dirty." She was so sad when she came home and told me.*

— Mother of a Black child<sup>3</sup>



“Race” is a social construct used to classify individuals who share common physical features, such as skin colour.<sup>4</sup> Because it is a social construct that does not reflect biology, parameters for classifying individuals or groups have changed over time, as have the words used to describe so-called races.<sup>5</sup> (The sidebar provides more information on the language we use in this issue of the *Quarterly*.)

Racism, in turn, occurs when people’s worth is assigned based on their identified race in ways that unfairly disadvantage some groups while simultaneously advantaging others.<sup>7</sup> Racism results in avoidable and unfair disparities in power, resources and opportunities — for individuals and groups and within institutions and social systems.<sup>8</sup> Racism is therefore never acceptable. When we take a relational world view, thinking of all

## Respectful communication, communicating respect

As the *Quarterly* team, we acknowledge the ongoing roles and responsibilities we all hold as citizens in combatting racism in all its forms. As one small step, throughout this issue we use language that reflects current approaches to respectful communication and communicating respect. Guided by BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, we use the terms *Indigenous*, *Black*, *Asian* and *white*.<sup>6</sup> We also use the term *racialized* to describe individuals or groups who experience economic, political and social disparities, injustices and violence as a result of “race.”<sup>5</sup>

experience as interconnected, racism also diminishes all of us and divides the world into “us” and “them.” As Martin Luther King Jr. noted: “Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the damages caused by racism are far greater for people who are deemed “racialized” by virtue of being Indigenous, Black, Asian or other so-called people of colour — and who therefore take the brunt of racism.

## Effects of racism

As a determinant of health, racism has a profound impact on child well-being.<sup>10</sup> Its many negative effects for racialized young people include:

- restricted access to resources, such as housing, education and employment;
- increased exposure to negative experiences, such as racist incidents and unnecessary contact with the criminal justice system;
- increased engagement in unhealthy behaviours to cope with the stresses of racism, such as substance use; and
- increased rates of physical injury as a result of violence.<sup>8</sup>

To investigate the effects of racism on social and emotional well-being, researchers combined findings from more than 120 observational studies involving young people from birth through age 18.<sup>8</sup> Most of these studies were conducted in the United States, although Canada and many other countries were also represented. Drawing on the experiences of Black, Latinx, Asian and Indigenous children, the meta-analysis found many significant links between racial discrimination and poorer well-being. Mental health concerns were the most frequent, including depression, anxiety and conduct problems, as well as self-esteem and self-worth concerns.<sup>8</sup>

As a determinant of health, racism has a profound impact on child well-being.

Racism also has detrimental effects on children's physical health. A study that included more than 95,000 American children aged 18 and younger found that those who experienced racial discrimination had a significantly lower likelihood of reporting that they were in excellent health, compared with those who did not have such experiences.<sup>11</sup> As well, children exposed to racial discrimination were more likely to experience common childhood illnesses.<sup>8</sup> The physical impact of racism also starts early, with low birth weights and preterm births being linked to maternal experiences of racial discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

## What about Canada?

Data focused exclusively on Canadian children reveal stark differences in the experiences of racialized children compared with non-racialized children — from infancy through adolescence. For example, infant mortality is 3.9 times higher for Inuit, 2.3 times higher for First Nations and 1.9 times higher for Métis children compared with non-Indigenous children.<sup>12</sup> As well, the rate of foster placements is over 13 times higher for Indigenous young people compared with non-Indigenous.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, while Black children make up about 9% of the Canadian population, they represent approximately 24% of children receiving child protection services.<sup>14</sup> (The sidebar describes long-standing efforts to improve equality in access to child welfare and related services for Indigenous children in Canada.)

Racialized Canadian children may also experience greater hardships and disparities in the education system. For example, while high-school graduation rates for Indigenous young people have increased substantially over the past 15 years in British Columbia, they are still lower — at 69.6% for Indigenous students versus 86.5% for non-Indigenous.<sup>19</sup> As well, Ontario data collected over the past two decades show

### A legal battle for equality

The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society and the Assembly of First Nations have led long-standing efforts to make services more equitable for First Nations children.<sup>15</sup> In 2007, these organizations filed a complaint under the Canadian Human Rights Act noting that federal government funding for First Nations children was lower and had more restrictions than for other children — in essence, violating Jordan's Principle, which upholds that Indigenous children must receive needed services in a timely way.<sup>15</sup> The government made eight unsuccessful attempts to have the case dismissed, but in 2016 the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal substantiated the complaint and ordered Canada to stop its discriminatory behaviour. In 2019, the government was further ordered to pay \$40,000 to all First Nations children, parents and grandparents who had been affected by the discriminatory treatment.<sup>16</sup> But Canada is now filing for a judicial review regarding which groups of children it is obligated to serve — thereby missing a crucial opportunity to advance reconciliation, starting with how Indigenous children are treated.<sup>17–18</sup>



that Black students were more likely than non-Black students to receive harsher punishments, to be streamed into academic tracks that excluded post-secondary access, and to drop out of school.<sup>20</sup>

Youth criminal justice system data also suggest greater inequity for racialized young people. For example, Indigenous youth account for 50% of admissions to custodial facilities despite representing only 8% of Canadian youth.<sup>21</sup> As well, Ontario police data show that Black youth are more likely to be charged and less likely to be only cautioned for minor offences than their non-Black counterparts.<sup>22</sup>

## The need to fight racism begins in childhood

Researchers have also long studied the origins of racial identities and prejudicial attitudes — starting in childhood.<sup>23</sup> Early studies showed that children typically began to identify as belonging to a specific “race” around age three or four years.<sup>24</sup> Studies have also found that white children begin to show a pro-white bias, including a preference for playing with white peers, when they are as young as three to five years.<sup>25</sup> These findings suggest that antiracism efforts should begin early. In the [Review article](#) that follows, we summarize interventions that aim to reduce racism in childhood. We acknowledge that antiracism efforts must also focus on adults, from whom children learn their early beliefs and behaviours. Yet childhood interventions can also be a starting point. 🖐️



Antiracism efforts must focus on adults, from whom children learn their early beliefs and behaviours.

# Childhood interventions to reduce racism

While children can be educated about the harms caused by racism — and can change their beliefs and behaviours as a result — debate persists about the best ways to achieve this goal.<sup>26</sup> We therefore conducted a systematic review of childhood antiracism interventions to determine which are the most successful.

To ensure high-quality evaluations, we required studies to use randomized controlled trial (RCT) methods. We searched for RCTs in abstract databases from 2010 to 2021 and hand-searched relevant systematic reviews. We accepted only studies conducted in high-income countries to ensure applicability to Canada. As well, outcome measures had to evaluate either attitudes or behaviours toward racialized children. (The [Methods section](#) provides details on our search strategy and inclusion criteria.)

We retrieved and evaluated 14 studies. Five RCTs evaluating 11 interventions met our inclusion criteria. Three trials assessed three different interventions within the same study,<sup>27–29</sup> while two assessed a single intervention each.<sup>26, 30</sup> Interventions varied, ranging from TV shows,<sup>27</sup> books<sup>28–29</sup> and an approach known as classification skills training<sup>29</sup> to diversity workshops<sup>30</sup> and history lessons.<sup>26</sup> The sidebar highlights an additional experiment that assessed how teacher feedback affected children's acceptance of migrant students.



It is possible to improve attitudes toward people of colour and increase the valuing of racial fairness.

## Can teachers help children to respect diversity?

Researchers have identified how teacher feedback can affect children's acceptance of migrant peers. They conducted a study with nearly 1,000 students in Grades 3 to 6 in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.<sup>31</sup> First, students saw photos of children they did not know on a computer screen and were asked to rate how much they would like to sit beside them. The photos included both migrant and non-migrant children. Then students were told that teachers often praised the children on the screen for being attentive or, alternatively, often scolded them for being inattentive. Teacher feedback significantly influenced students' stated willingness to sit beside migrant children, with positive comments increasing this willingness and negative comments decreasing it. These results suggest that teachers can play an important role in changing children's attitudes and helping them to appreciate diversity.<sup>31</sup>

## Can pro-diversity TV reduce racism?

Three different pro-diversity TV shows were assessed with American preschool and kindergarten students.<sup>27</sup> Children were white, attending predominantly white schools in Ohio. The 10-minute programs stressed the similarities of characters from different racial groups and focused on the need to change racist attitudes. Main characters were either cartoons, puppets or actors, with study authors predicting that human actors would have greater impact on anti-Black and anti-Asian attitudes. Control children watched a show with only white characters.<sup>27</sup>



## Can books help increase acceptance?

Three different types of pro-refugee books were assessed in elementary schools in suburban and rural England, where most children were not refugees.<sup>28</sup> All study participants were white. The intervention began with children looking at photographs of refugees and a world map highlighting countries the refugees originated from. (Although the study authors did not specifically state that the photos showed refugees identifiable by race, it was likely that they did.) Children then discussed why people might leave their countries and immigrate to England. This discussion was followed with a researcher reading a portion of a book while the children followed along in their own books.

Every adult has a role and has the responsibility to address the individual and systemic forms of racism affecting all our communities.

The books all involved close friendships between non-refugee and refugee children, addressing three different themes. Books on *positive personal qualities* stressed attributes of refugee children, such as liking animals and being good at football. Books on *shared characteristics* highlighted similarities between English and refugee children, such as attending the same school. Meanwhile, books on *dual identity* focused on both the shared characteristics of English and refugee children as well as similarities and differences between them. Researchers hypothesized that all three books would engender more positive attitudes toward refugees, with *dual identity* books being most effective.

For all three book types, the intervention was delivered once a week for 20 minutes, for six consecutive weeks. Control children participated in regular classroom activities.<sup>28</sup>

## Teaching children to think more broadly

Researchers assessed pro-refugee books alongside an intervention called classification skills training (described below) in another study with elementary-school students.<sup>29</sup> The students, all of whom were white, were living in a major port of entry for people seeking asylum, where tensions had arisen between majority white English citizens and ethnic minority immigrants. In the pro-refugee book intervention, children were read stories focused on close friendships between English and refugee children (following the same procedures described above except using only one type of book rather than three). Another group received the skills training. For this intervention, children were shown photographs of English and refugee adults and were taught to classify them across multiple dimensions, not just single social categories. This intervention was based on past research showing that when children were able to classify people along multiple dimensions, they had less stereotyped views. A third group received both the pro-refugee books and the training. Control children participated in regular classroom activities.<sup>29</sup>

## Offering diversity workshops

Researchers assessed diversity workshops with English students attending elementary schools in low-income neighbourhoods; 85.1% of the students were white and 10.4% were Asian.<sup>30</sup> The workshops included the children watching three brief plays; all featured a character who was initially excluded, followed by all characters recognizing it was better to be inclusive, and the performance ending with everyone playing together. After each play, actors who played excluded characters answered questions about their character's feelings and experiences. Children then participated in art-based activities and discussions focused on understanding and respecting differences — after the play and in classrooms over the following month. Control children participated in regular classroom activities.<sup>30</sup>



## Does teaching history help?

An educational program aimed at reducing anti-Black racism was assessed with white elementary-school students during a summer program in the American Midwest.<sup>26</sup> Children were taught six history lessons featuring biographies of 12 famous individuals, half of whom were white and half of whom were Black. All lessons emphasized the individual's positive attributes and contributions to society. Children taking part in the intervention also learned about the Black Americans' experiences of racism, while the control lessons made no reference to discrimination. For all children, lessons lasted 20 minutes and were delivered over six days.<sup>26</sup> Table 1 summarizes the interventions and the studies.

<b>Intervention</b> (# of interventions tested)	<b>Approach</b>	<b>Sample size</b>	<b>Ages</b> (country)
Pro-diversity TV programs (3) <sup>27</sup>	Children watched one of three 10-minute TV programs with pro-diversity content; shows varied based on main characters being <i>cartoons, puppets</i> or <i>actors</i> .	63	5–6 yrs (United States)
Pro-refugee books (3) <sup>28</sup>	Children were read books that focused on one of three themes: <i>positive personal qualities</i> of refugees; <i>shared characteristics</i> between refugee + English children; or <i>dual identity</i> , including shared characteristics + differences.	261	5–11 yrs (England)
Pro-refugee books vs. classification skills training vs. both interventions combined (3) <sup>29</sup>	<i>Pro-refugee books</i> : children read books that focused on shared friendships between refugee + English children; <i>classification skills training</i> : children were taught to categorize individuals based on multiple characteristics; <i>both interventions combined</i> : books + training.	198	6–11 yrs (England)
Diversity workshops (1) <sup>30</sup>	Children watched brief plays focused on inclusivity + engaged in art-based activities + discussions focused on understanding + respecting diversity.	201	6–7 yrs (England)
History lessons (1) <sup>26</sup>	Children received six lessons focused on the positive attributes + contributions of famous Black Americans as well as the racism they faced.	48	6–11 yrs (United States)

## Pro-diversity TV programs failed to reduce racism

The results of the interventions varied considerably. The pro-diversity TV programs failed to change white American children's strong pro-white bias. This conclusion was based on children's responses to a series of questions about their preferences for Asian, Black and white individuals, measured using photos and dolls as proxies for people.<sup>27</sup>

## Books can help to change attitudes

All three types of pro-refugee books increased positive attitudes toward refugees relative to the control condition. The books on *dual identity* were significantly more effective than those that stressed *positive personal qualities* and *shared characteristics*. All three types of books also resulted in non-refugee participants viewing themselves — and English children in general — as being more similar to refugee children. However, the books had no significant impact on tasks where children were given hypothetical scenarios and asked how they would respond. (For example, participants were asked to imagine meeting a refugee child they knew and to identify how much they would like to play together or have them to their home for a meal and sleepover.)<sup>28</sup>

## Teaching children to think more broadly did not help

The second study on pro-refugee books involved comparing them to classification skills training as well as evaluating the impact of combining both books and training. The pro-refugee books and the combined intervention increased positive attitudes toward refugees relative to the control condition — and relative to training alone. In contrast, classification skills training on its own had no impact on attitudes toward refugees. As well, none of the interventions had a significant impact on tasks where English children were given hypothetical scenarios and asked how they would respond (described above).<sup>29</sup>

## Diversity workshops did not diversify friendship preferences

White children who received the diversity workshops maintained their preference for choosing white children as friends when presented with photos of Asian and white children, with no statistical difference compared to controls.<sup>30</sup> The diversity workshops also had no impact on white children’s reported happiness at being friends with an Asian child — also assessed with photos — compared to being friends with a white child.<sup>30</sup>

## Educating the way to equality

Children who received history lessons on the experiences of Black Americans had significantly more positive and significantly fewer negative attitudes toward Black people than children who received history lessons without reference to discrimination.<sup>26</sup> Intervention children also favoured what the authors called “counter-stereotyped views” and valued racial fairness significantly more often than controls. Perceived similarity between Black and white people was the only outcome where the intervention did not make a significant difference.<sup>26</sup> Table 2 summarizes the outcomes for all five RCTs.

<b>Interventions</b>	<b>Follow-up</b>	<b>Outcomes for white children</b>
Pro-diversity TV programs <sup>27</sup>	None	<b>All three pro-diversity television programs</b> Ns Preference for white children over Black children Ns Preference for white children over Asian children
Pro-refugee books <sup>28</sup>	1–2 weeks	<b>All three pro-refugee books</b> ↑ Positive attitude toward refugees ↑ Perceived similarities with refugees between self + other English children Ns Hypothetical behaviour toward refugees
Pro-refugee books vs. classification skills training vs. both interventions combined <sup>29</sup>	1 week	<b>Pro-refugee books</b> ↑ Positive attitude toward refugees Ns Hypothetical behaviour toward refugees <b>Classification skills training</b> Ns Positive attitude toward refugees Ns Hypothetical behaviour toward refugees <b>Both interventions combined</b> Ns Positive attitude toward refugees Ns Hypothetical behaviour toward refugees
Diversity workshops <sup>30</sup>	None	Ns Preference for friendships with white children over Asian children Ns Happiness at having a friendship with an Asian child
History lessons <sup>26</sup>	1–2 days	↑ Positive attitudes toward Black people ↓ Negative attitudes toward Black people ↑ Counter-stereotyped view of Black people ↑ Valuing of racial fairness Ns Perception of similarities between Black + white people
Ns No significant difference between intervention and control group. ↓ Or ↑ Statistically significant improvements for intervention compared with control group.		



## Childhood interventions can reduce racism

Based on this systematic review, we found two childhood interventions that reduced racist attitudes. Pro-refugee books, alone and when paired with classification skills training, increased positive attitudes toward refugees. As well, history lessons led to improved attitudes toward Black people and to the increased valuing of racial fairness. Notably, both interventions were relatively brief — only two hours duration. Interventions that had no impact included pro-diversity TV programming, diversity workshops and classification skills training (when delivered alone). No interventions were successful in changing children’s responses to hypothetical scenarios, and no studies assessed actual behaviours. As well, we found no assessments of interventions that focused on reducing anti-Indigenous racism. This work is greatly needed.

Still, these results offer an important starting point. Given the success of pro-refugee books, parents, teachers, librarians and practitioners may want to invest in antiracism reading materials with relevance for the current Canadian context. To this end, the [Canadian Children’s Book Centre](#) provides a reading list for tackling racism.<sup>32</sup> As well, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and [UNICEF](#) provide helpful antiracism guidelines and resources — suitable for differing development stages from the early years to the teens.<sup>33–34</sup> Similarly, the [Canadian Paediatric Society](#) offers antiracism resources for child and youth health care providers.<sup>35</sup> Finally, given that teaching history has proven benefits, a recent publication aimed at adults, which could be used with youth, provides helpful information on [the history of racism in BC](#).<sup>36</sup>

Beyond supporting anti racism interventions aimed at children, every adult has a role and has the responsibility to address the individual and systemic forms of racism affecting all our communities, places of work and institutions of learning. There are myriad ways in which white adults, in particular, can confront and reduce racism. This includes educating oneself about racial disparities, recognizing one’s own racial biases and taking steps to reduce them, and speaking out and taking action on racially biased beliefs and behaviours and policies wherever these occur. As citizens, we hold a collective ethical responsibility to engage in ongoing antiracism efforts — thereby creating a fairer, safer and more equitable world for all children. In the words of Cindy Blackstock, a long-time child advocate: “In my lifetime, I hope to see a generation of First Nations children who can live the lives they wish to have, and a generation of non-Aboriginal children who never have to grow up to say they are sorry.”<sup>15</sup> 🖐️

We hold a collective ethical responsibility to engage in ongoing antiracism efforts.

## METHODS

We use systematic review methods adapted from the *Cochrane Collaboration* and *Evidence-Based Mental Health*. We build quality assessment into our inclusion criteria to ensure that we report on the best available research evidence, requiring that intervention studies use randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluation methods and meet additional quality indicators. For this review, we searched for RCTs on interventions aimed to reduce racism in childhood. Tables 3 and 4 outline our database search strategies.

**Table 3: Search Strategy for Systematic Reviews**

<b>Sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Campbell Collaboration Library, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, Medline, PsycINFO and Google Scholar</li></ul>
<b>Search Terms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anti-racism, racism, cultural diversity or minority groups</li></ul>
<b>Limits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Peer-reviewed articles published in English from database inception to 2021</li><li>• Pertaining to children aged 18 years or younger</li><li>• Systematic review or meta-analysis used</li></ul>

Using this approach, we identified one systematic review that examined interventions to reduce prejudice in early childhood.<sup>37</sup> Because this review included only articles published until 2010, we hand-searched its reference list and also conducted an updated search for original studies. We used the same search terms used in the systematic review, which are identified in Table 4.


**Table 4: Search Strategy for Original Studies**

<b>Sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• CINAHL, ERIC, Medline and PsycINFO</li></ul>
<b>Search Terms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Anti-bias, prejudice reduction, multicultural curriculum, empathy training, intergroup training, diversity training, jig-saw classroom, racial bias, prejudice, inclusion, exclusion, ethnic bias, ethnicity and attitude, attitude change, peer relations, friendship and ethnic, cross-ethnic, interethnic or interracial <i>and</i> intervention, program or evaluation</li></ul>
<b>Limits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2010 and 2021</li><li>• Pertaining to children aged 18 years or younger</li><li>• RCT methods used</li></ul>

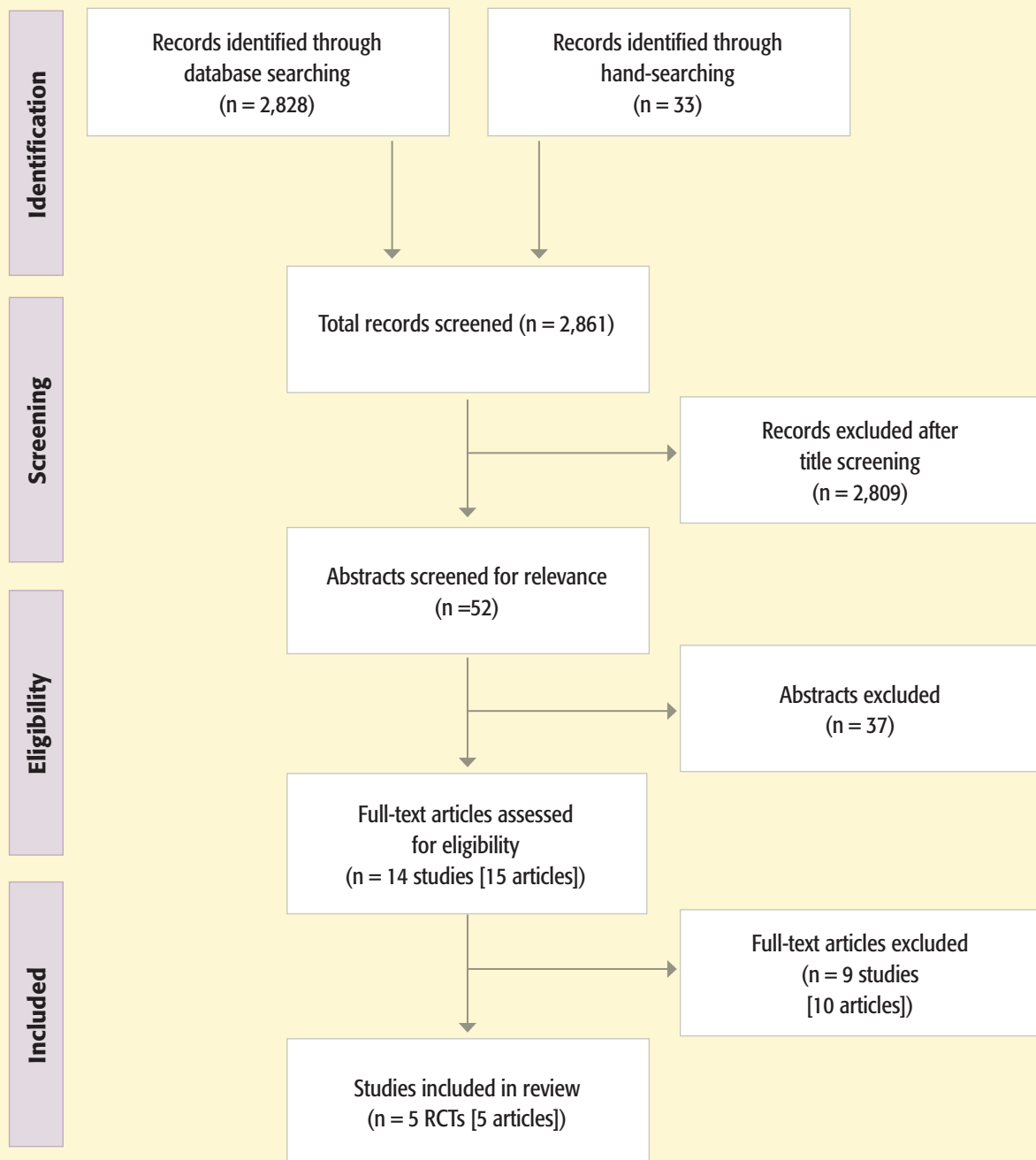
Using these search strategies, we identified 14 studies. Two team members then independently assessed each study, applying the inclusion criteria outlined in Table 5.

**Table 5: Inclusion Criteria for RCTs**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Participants were randomly assigned to intervention and control groups (i.e., no treatment or active control) at study outset</li><li>• Studies provided clear descriptions of participant characteristics, settings and interventions</li><li>• Interventions were evaluated in settings comparable to Canada</li><li>• Attrition rates were 20% or less at final assessment</li><li>• Child outcome indicators included attitudes or behaviours toward racialized children</li><li>• Statistical significance was reported for primary outcome measures</li></ul>
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Five RCTs met all the inclusion criteria. Figure 1 depicts our search process, adapted from *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*. Data from these studies were then extracted, summarized and verified by two or more team members. Throughout our process, any differences between team members were resolved by consensus.. 



**Figure 1: Search Process for RCTs****For more information on our research methods, please contact**Jen Barican, [chpc\\_quarterly@sfu.ca](mailto:chpc_quarterly@sfu.ca)

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BC government staff can access original articles from [BC's Health and Human Services Library](#). Articles marked with an asterisk (\*) include randomized controlled trial data that was featured in our Review article.

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The *Children's Mental Health Research Quarterly Subject Index* provides a detailed listing of topics covered in past issues, including links to information on specific programs.

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