

P is for PREJUDICE

Psychologist Frances Aboud has found that children as young as four show signs of racism. Could the urge to discriminate be in our genes? By Allen Abel Photograph by Beth Perkins

A FIVE-YEAR-OLD GIRL WE'LL CALL Danielle crosses the hallway from her kindergarten class to a tiny meeting room at a public school in central Montreal. Waiting for her are McGill University professor of psychology Frances Aboud and one of her graduate students.

Dr. Aboud has brought a binder of pictures for Danielle to consider. The illustrations are simple drawings of boys and girls, men and women, two to each page, each pair identical except for the colour of their skin and the texture of their hair. Each page is linked to a question, which the graduate student reads to the little girl.

Some boys are mean. When they come home from school, and their dog comes to meet them, they kick their dog. Who is mean?

Danielle points to the brown-skinned boy.

The testing goes on: *Some boys are clean . . . Some girls are not good-looking . . . Some boys are kind . . . Some boys are nice . . . Some girls won't let others play . . . Some men don't share. Who won't share?*

Five times out of six, Danielle, who is white, selects the white character for a positive attribute. And five times out of six, she chooses the black subject as the negative.

It is easy to suspect that she answers in this way because her parents have sown the seeds of hate within her, or because she is living in a racist world. Perhaps her teacher has failed, or television has tainted her mind. But Dr. Aboud believes that little Danielle is prejudiced because she is developing normally, and because she is five years old. Discrimination was wired into her brain at conception — as it is into my brain, and yours.

"Prejudice is biological," the professor says. It is a powerful statement on which she has staked her academic reputation.

FRANCES ABOUD IS A TALL, SLENDER fifty-four-year-old Christian Lebanese-Arab-Canadian with wavy brown hair, greenish eyes, and light brown skin who grew up in Toronto's largely Jewish district of Forest Hill. She is married to a pediatrician of Norwegian descent and they are the parents of a fourteen-year-old daughter and a sixteen-year-old son.

At McGill since 1975 — interspersed with three terms of public-health work in rural Ethiopia — Dr. Aboud has specialized in childhood racial awareness, testing >

thousands of children as young as three with picture books and flash cards to calibrate – and perhaps someday to cure – the impulse that may be inborn.

"Any parent knows that when you walk down the street with a two-year-old, they comment on the colour of people," she says. "There's a pink lady; there's a brown lady.' At that age, they don't distinguish between the colour of the clothes and the colour of the face. They just see colour.

"At about the age of four or five, they begin to realize that skin colour is a constancy and it's attached to you.

"At that age, it kicks in that they are part of a group, and they prefer people whom they can identify as part of their group. Many things are important clues in figuring out who belongs to which group, but skin colour and hair texture are the two big ones. This is where prejudice comes in." Dr. Aboud says that at five years of age, about 50 to 60 percent of children have negative "out-group" feelings, which is to say that they distrust anyone outside their own group. "It's not that they don't like the other groups, but they prefer their own," she says. "It's not hatred of the others – it's suspicion of differences."

What causes this attitude? One researcher, Dr. Harold Fishbein of the University of Cincinnati, postulates that out-group recognition and avoidance were vital in early human societies – embedding a wariness of "outsiders" in our chromosomes. "What I argue," he says, "is that this is an inbuilt genetic characteristic. It was very functional in hunter-gatherer days."

At age four or five, Dr. Aboud notes, children do not have the verbal skills to express their racial attitudes, and parents who are careful not to discuss racial issues in the home are often shocked to learn that their kids have registered as preju-

diced on her "Who is mean?" tests.

"I tell the parents, 'It doesn't come from you.' So they blame the school – they think it has to come from *somewhere*. I tell them that it doesn't come from school, either.

"So they think we cause it by doing our tests."

NEARLY EVERYTHING IN OUR POLITICAL and popular culture argues that Frances Aboud must be wrong. Oscar Hammerstein declares it in *South Pacific*, when a white Ameri-

into your head, there's no reason you should become so."

In his foreword to Ben Jelloun's book, Bill Cosby weaves the same cloth: "It is disheartening to see that children are still shaped by racism – racism that these children learn from parents, relatives, and friends in lessons reinforced by the media and society at large."

Against this backdrop, Frances Aboud tested thirty-nine white children and their mothers in Montreal in 1995. The children were shown a



can sailor falls in love with a Polynesian girl:

"You've got to be taught before it's too late;

Before you are six or seven or eight!
To hate all the people your relatives hate.

You've got to be carefully taught."
The French novelist and poet Tahar Ben Jelloun affirms it in *Racism Explained to My Daughter*: "No one is born racist. If your parents or the people around you don't put racist ideas

series of illustrations similar to those shown to Danielle. The mothers were asked to agree or disagree with statements such as: *On the whole, black people don't stress education and training* and *This country would be better off if it were more willing to assimilate the good things in black culture.*

It might seem that parents, presented with questions such as these, would attempt to please the interviewer by answering in an overtly non-prejudiced fashion, even if they

*of children in pairs,
Five times out of six,*

*each pair identical except for
she chooses the black subject*

held racist beliefs at heart. But her tests are designed in such a way that parents would reveal those beliefs inadvertently. Her results showed, Dr. Aboud later wrote in a paper, that "the actual parent-child correlation was nonsignificant. . . . There is little support for the widespread assumption that children acquire their racial attitudes from parents and friends."

Psychologist William Bukowski at Concordia University is convinced that Frances Aboud is getting it right. "What she has shown is that children of a certain age are *all* prejudiced, regardless of what views their parents have," Dr. Bukowski tells me. "Prejudice gives you a very simple way of seeing the world. Life is complex — and when you're a child, you've just begun to see that complexity. The desire for simplicity is a human frailty, and that is translated in a child's mind into a preference for in-group members."

"Prejudice is a temporary byproduct of the developing social mind," he says. "The expression 'Prejudice is childish' is true."

IF LITTLE DANIELLE CONTINUES along the normal path of human cognitive development, her preference for people with her skin colour and hair type over "different" people will intensify until she is seven, then diminish measurably.

"Eight is the age of reason," says Frances Aboud. "They come out of their egocentric state and realize that there are other perspectives: whites can be both positive and negative; blacks can be both positive and negative. The same kids, when we test them at five, they're prejudiced, and when we test them again at nine, they're not."

"Studies in Israel show the same changes. Prejudice goes down at age eight — the Jewish kids can tell a 'good' Arab from a 'bad' Arab. And it even happened in my own

family, where we studied this stuff."

Dr. Aboud tells me of an incident that occurred when her son was eight and her daughter was five. Her husband, Dr. C. P. Larson, arrived home one night and announced that a well-dressed black man had stopped him on the street and asked for change of a loonie.

"When I gave it to him," Dr. Larson told his family, "he thanked me and said that he had asked a lot of other white people for help and that I was the only one who stopped."

"Why do you think your Dad stopped?" asked Dr. Aboud.

The five-year-old had no ideas to offer. The eight-year-old said, "I think he *likes* black-skinned people. . . and he's generous."

Dr. Aboud's son had, in her terms, "broken the glorification of his own group" to recognize that an "out-group member" could be worthy of kindness. But clearly — and tragically — not all children achieve this transformation.

"The question is, Why do some kids remain prejudiced?" says Professor Anna Beth Doyle of Concordia, Dr. Aboud's long-time collaborator. "Why, as adults, do they develop the kind of prejudice that is such a problem for our society?"

"It may be that that sort of prejudice finds a home in kids who have a predisposition to see things in black and white terms, to make a bad pun. What we need to find out next is what happens to some kids that they *don't* continue to see things that way, and to some kids that they *do*."

"I KNOW I'M NOT PREJUDICED," Frances Aboud says.

She recalls pushing her half-Arab, half-Norwegian son in a stroller through the rarefied air of Westmount, and someone coming over and saying, "Oh, what a nice baby! Whose is he?"

"I'm thick-skinned," she says. "It

skin colour. "Who is kind?" she's asked.
as the negative

rolls off my back. I think Arabs are viewed negatively in Canada, especially the Muslim ones. I remember one time, some gal saying to my father, 'Oh you've got a wonderful tan, Mr. Aboud!' And he handled it so diplomatically.

"I don't know how the kids I'm testing see me. They would probably see me as 'white.' But in Vancouver, people ask me if I speak Punjabi. I feel that I'm not as white-skinned as a lot of white-skinned people. I'm sort of brown-skinned. I wouldn't

when my father's family came to Toronto, they tried to get lodging and were continually being turned away because everybody thought they were Jewish. So he said, 'To hell with it - we'll just go to the Jewish neighbourhood.'

"My mother used to speak out against *all* bigotry. My mother was very white-skinned - she said she must have been a leftover from the Crusades. One time we were in a department store in Toronto and the service person was avoiding serving a

she says, is the nominal mixing of the tribes. "It's not just integrating the schools, where you put them together," she says. "You have to have them in the same class, intensively working on projects in mixed pairs or in mixed groups. Having a succession of cross-race friends - friends you respect and trust - has a positive impact later on. But it's got to be more than one, and it's got to be at the level of real co-operative learning and working together."

But in North America, most families, most neighbourhoods, and most schools are either all white or all black. Children in homogeneous communities have no opportunity to form cross-race friendships. The only influences on them are parents, teachers, and media. Still, Dr. Aboud is optimistic.

"Prejudice *can* be changed," she says, "but you've got to overdo it - you've got to be explicit about it. You have to talk specifically about bias, and how to intervene to stop it.

"Prejudice isn't entirely due to ignorance. A lot of teachers feel, 'Our goal is to make kids more knowledgeable, so we'll just give kids more knowledge.' But that kind of information can make kids more prejudiced. If you tell a kid that the Chinese eat with chopsticks, he thinks that *all* Chinese people eat with chopsticks, and if he invites a Chinese girl to his house, she's got to eat with chopsticks. If she doesn't, he's angry because she doesn't fit the stereotype - and that's happened in my own home."

"Why have you devoted your entire career to this work?" I ask the professor.

"If I thought prejudice was a problem that only five percent of the population had," says Dr. Aboud, "I wouldn't be doing this." ■

FOR MORE ON DR. ABOUD'S STUDIES, INCLUDING A SAMPLE OF HER TEST FOR RACIAL ATTITUDES IN CHILDREN, VISIT OUR WEB SITE AT WWW.SATURDAYNIGHT.CA.



want to be *really* white."

We roll up our sleeves and compare our skin tones. I am slightly darker than Dr. Aboud, even though she has just spent a week on the coral reefs of Belize. I'm a Jewish New Yorker, I tell her, but on my trips to the Middle East, I have always been mistaken for Egyptian.

"I grew up in a Jewish neighbourhood, so I like Jewish people," she says. "Because I'm Arab, people think it should be the opposite. But

black-skinned person and my mother spoke out very loudly: 'This person has been waiting a long time - don't you think you should serve him?'

"I don't know what her motivation was, but this person was being discriminated against, and to her, that wasn't right."

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF RESEARCH have taught Frances Aboud what works in building tolerance, and what doesn't. What does not work,