

People in Your Neighborhood

This summer, we've seen a lot of protests about police and racism across the United States. This week on *Today, Explained* we are taking a closer look at those protests and focusing on the ways systemic racism affects health, safety, and quality of life in our communities. We'll explore underlying ideas like bias and stereotypes, and put our ideals to the test, designing a new Island of Explained neighborhood.

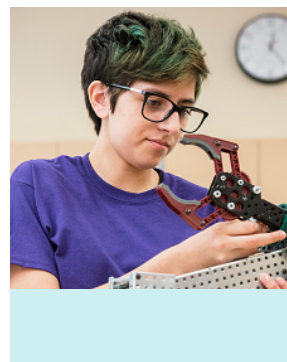
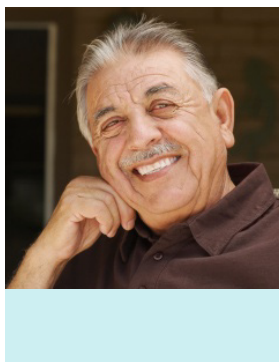
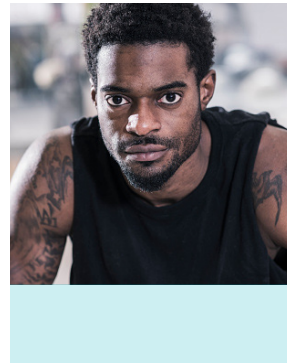
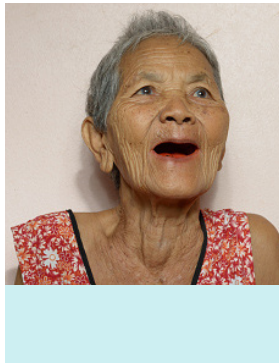
Materials needed:

- Pencil
- Paper
- Scissors
- Timer

Activity 1: Labeling

First things first: Clear your brain. Roll your shoulders up to your ears, then lower them. Now, slowly roll your head from one shoulder to another. Take a few slow deep breaths in through your nose, out through your mouth. Repeat this breath several times.

Now that your thoughts are calm, set a timer for 1 minute. You have just 60 seconds to write down one or two words for each of the individuals pictured below. Picture of a young child? Maybe your first thought is "baby." Image of a teen with a cellphone, designer bag, and \$\$ jewelry? Your gut might say "spoiled." Whatever your first thought is, write it down. Ready? GO!



Vocabulary terms

Bias: Favoring something, often in a way that is closed-minded or unfair.

Implicit bias: Unconscious attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes that affect how we think about and treat others.

Stereotype: The belief that most members of a group share similar characteristics.

Explicit stereotype: A stereotype that you deliberately think about and report.

Implicit stereotype: A stereotype that is subconscious and difficult to control.

Discussion

So now that your pictures are labeled, take a close look. Closer. Closer. Even closer, like nose to the paper. Do you write all your letters the same? Are vowels just like consonants? Do they have the same height, width, and pencil thickness? Ok, give your eyes a break! We did that to start our conversation about bias. **Bias** is when you favor something — often in a way that is closed-minded or unfair. Biases are learned from our days in the cradle, long before we can even talk. It's probably tough to see bias in your own handwriting, but if a grown-up in your house looked at it, they'd likely notice, "Oh, yeah, you always dot your i like that." Now, put your pencil aside — actually, chuck it under the table because we're about to unpack a related idea called implicit (unconscious) bias, and pencil erasers can get jumpy during these conversations. **Implicit bias** refers to the attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes we may not even realize we have that affect how we think about and behave toward others. We can process information and have behaviors based on unconscious feelings, opinions, or preferences, even when they're the opposite of what we "think" or "know" we really believe.

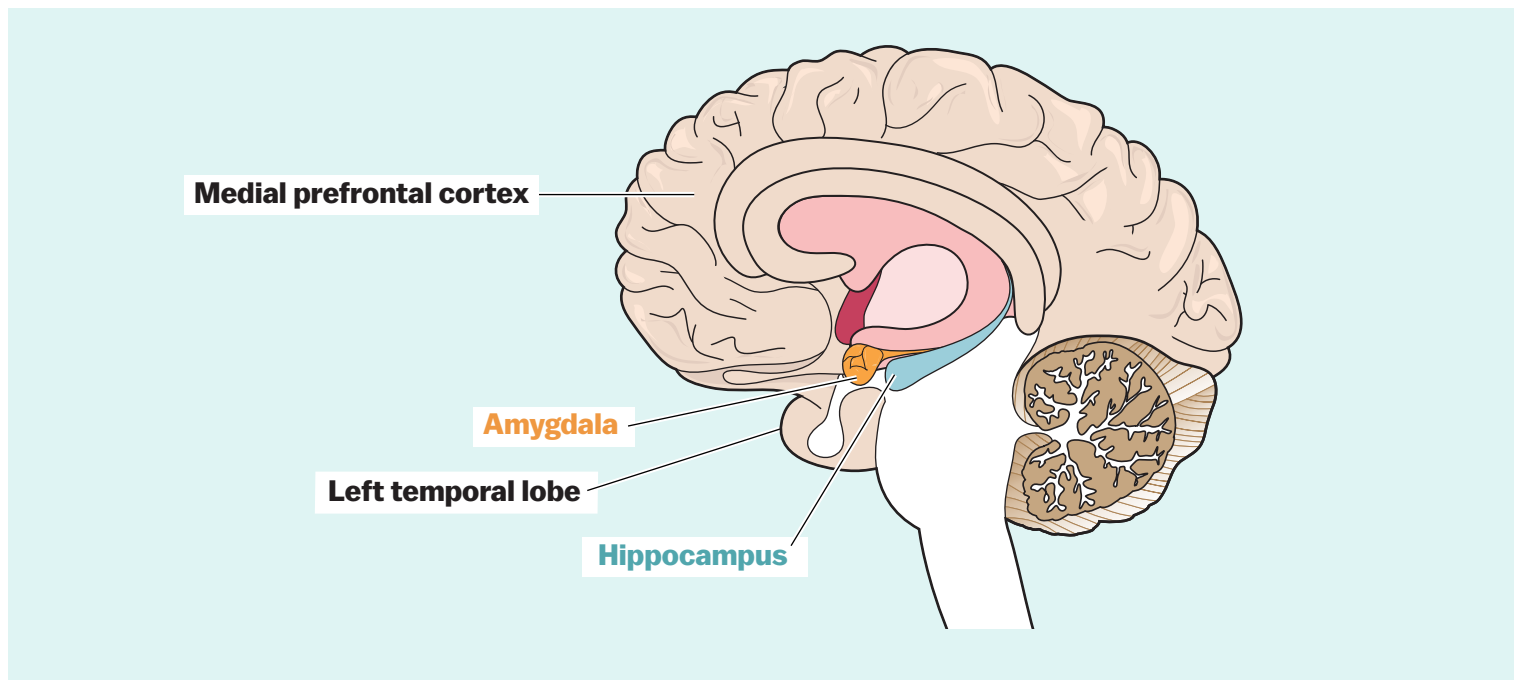
Let's say your family has rooted for Chicago teams for three generations. Grandpa says, "First slice of cake for you, since you know the best basketball player ever." For a split second your brain runs through Shaquille O'Neal, Lisa Leslie, Larry Bird, LeBron James, Diana Taurasi, Steph Curry, Sheryl Swoopes, but immediately, automatically, you say, "Michael Jordan." Your cousin rolls their eyes, knowing that your true favorite is elsewhere, nom, nom, nope, not LeBron, nom, nom, "Delicious cake, Gramps," but ... you're not actually a basketball fan. Soccer's your game.

This family scene didn't just reveal biases, it also found stereotypes. **Stereotypes** are the belief that most members of a group have some shared characteristics. So in this case, what stereotype did Grandpa have? That all three generations of his family are Jordan fans.

Just like biases, there are also explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) stereotypes. For example, an **explicit stereotype** is the kind that you deliberately think about and report. So if asked about the best soccer player, you might've consciously taken your time, and even though you went through Thierry Henry, Megan Rapinoe, Miroslav Klose, Lucy Bronze, Sam Kerr, Alex Morgan, Cristiano Ronaldo, you answered Pele, not because he's your favorite but because that's what a non-soccer fan like Grandpa would expect to hear.

It's harder to be aware of — and therefore be able to control — an **implicit stereotype**. The related stereotypes that basketball is a game for Black people while soccer is for white people are untrue, as your list of favorite players clearly proves. However, chances are this stereotype has at some point entered your mind.

What's happening behind the scenes in these moments? If we could peek inside your brain, we would see a series of amazingly brief (but absolutely epic) battles occurring in these areas: amygdala, hippocampus, left temporal lobe, and medial prefrontal cortex.



Even though the **amygdala** is just a tiny, 1-inch, almond-shaped structure, its main job is HUGE: forming and storing memories linked to emotional events (like braving the high-dive board at the pool or touching a hot stove). The brain has to process billions of events each day, all as quickly as possible, which means we don't have time to fully interpret all we see. Basically, the amygdala organizes this massive amount of information unconsciously (without "thinking"), like first instincts and first impressions. However, this split-second process usually includes biases we did not "think", yet our brain unconsciously identified and organized.

The amygdala is responsible for identifying and processing changes in facial features. So yeah, in our picture labeling activity you work-work-worked that amygdala! As we socialize and form personal memories, more unconscious biases are produced. These biases impact the amygdala, determining, for example, if a new face is immediately categorized as "like me" or "not like me."

The amygdala teams up with the **hippocampus**, which creates links between memories and makes meaning of the information. Together, the amygdala and hippocampus are where information and memories are processed.

From there, the party gets jumping in the **left temporal lobe** and frontal cortex. The left temporal lobe stores information about people and objects, and, super importantly, it makes the link between these and social stereotypes. Whoa, this party just got awkward! But no, the temporal lobe isn't a party crasher, it's got the tough job of integrating sounds and words into meaningful memory. And, of course, it came dressed in matching tracksuits with the legendary medial prefrontal cortex. The **medial prefrontal cortex** is all about making moves! It's in charge of empathy, most of our emotional responses, rational and logical thought, and language. As a reminder, the dance-dance-revolution of amygdala, hippocampus, left temporal lobe, and medial prefrontal cortex is happening super quickly, billions of times each day. As we'll see later, slowing down and reflecting on our biases is important for decision-making, especially when we're in leadership positions or other privileged roles.

Now that we've spent time deep-diving behind the scenes, let's zoom out and look at the labels you gave the eight pictures. Grab your scissors and let's move through the process below to discuss your experience.

Activity 1: Part 2

- 1 Cut out the labels you wrote and make two stacks in front of you, one for "Like Me" and one for "Not Like Me." Which pictures/labels do you immediately (unconsciously) put in each stack?
- 2 Now, since our old friend Eraserhead has probably kicked in, let's do the sorting again, this time focusing on which pictures/labels you hope or think belong in each stack.
- 3 Which items remained unchanged between the Unconscious and Eraserhead rounds? What might this mean about these aspects of your identity?
- 4 Moving on from stacks, let's make some Top 3 Lists. Filling in each prompt below, what are your:
 - Top 3 "Challenging pictures to label." Which stereotypes affected this?
 - Top 3 "Negative stereotypes of the people wearing glasses"
 - Top 3 "Pictures of people who stereotypically deserve help"

Bonus Activity

Wanna get someone else involved? Hand them one label from your list and ask them to describe what that person looks like. Then show them the actual picture and see what biases, attitudes, and stereotypes came into play for each of you. Move through your list with other labels and pictures. Repeat and reflect. Repeat and reflect. Just like a mirror in dance class!

Remember this: It's important to understand the science related to bias when discussing racism, prejudice, and stereotypes. When not monitored and examined, biases can unfairly impact certain groups of people and communities. For example, biases can determine how laws are created and enforced, where public resources are distributed, and which members of society struggle, survive, succeed, or thrive, as we'll explore more in the next activities.

Activity 2: Create your ideal community

You've been given the power to create your ideal community on the Island of Explained. Yep! Everything is in your hands! Before you jump in and just put a ton of parks and doughnut shops on every corner, think about the community **where you live now**.

- What businesses are there?
- Do you have a shopping district?
- How many grocery stores, hospitals, and schools are in your area?
- How do you get to all these places? Do you walk, take a bus, or drive?
- Think about your trash. Do you put it on the curb, at the end of your driveway, or in an alley?
- Do you have sidewalks? Do the crosswalks have walk signs? Do the signs make sounds?

A ton of small details go into designing a community.

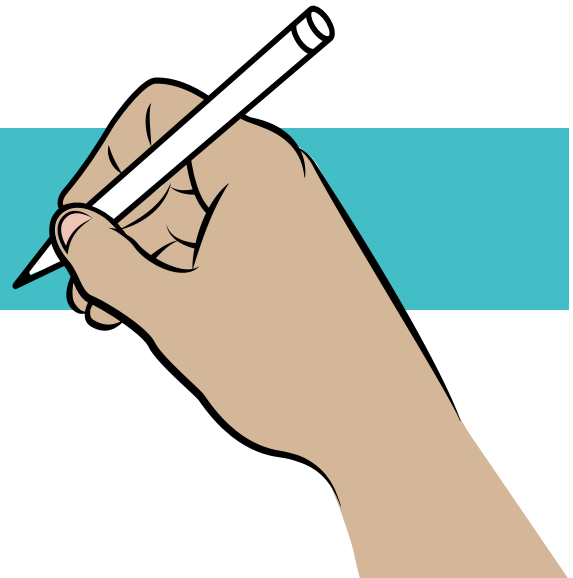
Now that you have an idea of the physical layout of **your actual neighborhood**, take a closer look at the folks who live there.

- Does everyone live in a house, or do some live in apartments?
- Do you see individuals experiencing homelessness?
- Are there more families with kids? Or more couples with dogs?
- Do most people drive or take public transportation?
- How often do you see police? Are they walking, on bikes, on horses, or driving cars?
- Do most people look like you? Do most people look like each other? How can you tell?
- Are there multiple places of worship for different religions?
- Do you see older adults (like grandparent or great-grandparent age)?

Now that you have a sense of what your neighborhood looks like, you can think about what would make it "ideal." Your map should include at least one of every item in the box below. Other than those, the rest is up to you. The more detailed, the better! Happy planning!

Places to include in your neighborhood:

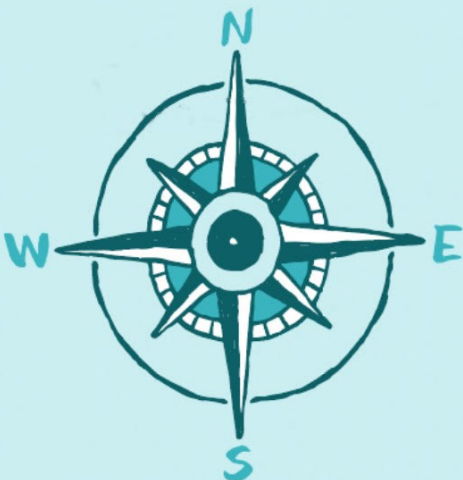
- School
- Grocery store
- Emergency response (police, fire, first aid)
- Town hall



Your ideal community

Emotion Ocean

Railroad



Discussion

Now that you've finished your ideal community map, it's pitch time! Find an audience, and for an added challenge, grab a timer. Give yourself 3 minutes to talk and 2 minutes for questions. Your goal is to convince them to visit, move to, or invest in your ideal community.

Walk them briefly through the buildings and structures, then spend time talking about "quality of life" in your ideal community. Aspects like recreation, healthy food options, and access to first responders are possible places to start.

When the Q&A begins, notice your responses. When do you find yourself reacting strongly, becoming defensive, feeling proud? What questions get under your skin, and which ones are you surprised no one asked? Take note of at least one factor you didn't consider, or a condition you overlooked, during your community planning.

Let's examine how a bias can play out by exploring crosswalks. What if the main crosswalk signs by the school intersection weren't designed to play audible signals (spoken counts, chimed tones that help visually impaired pedestrians). This could suggest a bias in favor of people who can SEE traffic signals. What if this happened everywhere throughout a community: wheelchair ramps, sidewalk cut-outs, fire alarm strobe lights? It would not only make it difficult for a person who can't see well to have a good quality of life, it could also increase the biases and stereotypes of everyone in the community. These biases underlie a set of stereotypes called ableism. Ableism is discrimination and social prejudice against people with, or perceived to have, disabilities. Ableism defines people by their disabilities and labels them as inferior to the non-disabled.

Hopefully, this crosswalk example shows the potential of unconscious bias when it's coupled with (unchecked) decision-making power. Is there a bias in your real community that you were able to challenge or correct when designing your ideal community? If so, let's think about how you can share that solution with a local decision-maker!



Activity 3: How trauma impacts a community

Oh no!! Disasters have hit your community on the Island of Explained!

How did they impact the residents of your neighborhood?

1. Hurricane

A hurricane has made landfall, affecting your community from the Emotion Ocean to the railroad tracks. The Now Party (remember them from the Elections episode?) diverted hurricane disaster preparedness money to build a bridge, which results in half the town being flooded with no help in sight. All buildings in the disaster area have been destroyed.



- How has the hurricane affected the community?
- Were people displaced from their homes?
- Do you have an evacuation location that everyone can get to?
- How were you personally affected?
- What services are now unable to function?

2. Rolling blackouts

The Now Party built too many houses and factories in one section of the island and now the power company is implementing rolling blackouts. Parts of your community are losing power for hours at a time, interrupting communication, eliminating refrigeration, and delaying transportation. These power outages are affecting all residents and buildings from the right of the railroad to the end of the map.



- How are these blackouts impacting social life in the neighborhood?
- What essential businesses are being affected?
- How are people outside the affected area reacting?
- How will lack of transportation affect people's lives? School? Work?
- Were grocery stores, farms, or other food sources affected?

3. Fire

There is a fire blazing on the opposite side of the island. While the fire isn't directly impacting your community, you've been asked to run a water pipe through the neighborhood to the Emotion Ocean to help control the blaze. You are a team player and agree, although it will cause significant neighborhood disruption during installation, with some permanent wildlife damage. Where are you going to put the pipe?



- What businesses and residences will be impacted by the pipe?
- Will it divide a neighborhood or change how neighbors interact?
- Will the pipe disrupt public transportation?
- Although many neighbors were opposed to the pipe, you had to act quickly. How do you address their concerns now that the pipe is installed?
- What community services will be unable to function?

Discussion

Though none of these situations were ideal, they each reflect situations facing public leaders every day. For this round, we only presented three natural disasters. However, can you identify three other wide-reaching challenges that the island might experience? For an added challenge, imagine that a new administration takes office and these leaders do not believe in biases, stereotypes, or racism. This new administration, the Gut Party, makes decisions incredibly quickly, without getting second opinions, staying true at all times to their motto (always shouted): Guts Don't Waiver — Not Now, Not Later!

Activity 4

With the Guts on the block, how must your ideal community change? Take a minute and draw their main office, a 15-story employee high-rise, six manager houses, and one remote field office. Based on their “Guts Don't Waiver- Not Now, Not Later!” philosophy, do community resources in Activity 2 need to shift? When faced with a community-wide disaster or challenge from Activity 3, how will your previous plans be adjusted? To complicate your job further, the Gut Party rolls out their NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) Plan. The plan states that the pending construction projects — landfill, jail, wind power plant, and homeless shelter — are now prohibited near Gut Party backyards. Time to brew up a cup of hot chocolate to keep you focused: How will you decide where to locate these four projects and not violate NIMBY?

Though the Gut Party is just an example, did you know NIMBY is a real thing? In fact, since the late 1980s, activists have fought against a type of systemic racism called environmental racism. Yes, minority group neighborhoods face unfair hazards like toxic waste facilities, garbage dumps, decaying buildings with asbestos, and playgrounds with lead paint. However, Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and other communities of color, both rural and urban, have joined together globally as an Environmental Justice Movement, to fight for healthy neighborhoods they deserve. Can you identify a couple of examples of environmental racism? What are some biases that might lead decision-makers to unfairly design communities this way? But even if you're not a CEO or elected official, Project Implicit of Harvard University reminds us not to let our biases off the hook! They say, “Small effects can build into big differences at both the societal level (across lots of different people making decisions) and at the individual level (across the many decisions that one person makes).”

We're pretty certain that “Guts Don't Waiver- Not Now, Not Later!” couldn't exist if the Gut Party allowed time to reflect on their decisions, acknowledge their biases, and lead with empathy. It would become more difficult to believe the negative stereotypes needed to sustain the various forms of systemic racism. You could finish your hot chocolate and get back to designing a community focused on creating equal and equitable opportunities.

Please snap photos of your picture cards, record a video of your ideal community pitch, or scan before and after maps of when the Gut Party came into town. Share your experience on Twitter and Instagram with #TodayExplainedLearning. Thanks for joining us on *Today, Explained to Kids!*

*Activity and discussion guide developed by early childhood education specialists
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