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White Italian Parents' Ethnic-Racial Socialization and Young Children's Prosocial Behavior Toward Outgroup Peers

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ABSTRACT

White parents adopt various ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) approaches that shape children's understanding of race and ethnicity, sometimes fostering awareness of ethnic-racial inequalities and encouraging positive attitudes toward individuals from diverse backgrounds, and sometimes perpetuating a dominating perspective of whiteness as an invisible, natural privilege that is assumed while "othering" non-White racial and ethnic groups. Whereas a growing body of research has examined ERS among White parents in the United States, less is known about these dynamics in European contexts, where ethnic-racial relationships are increasingly salient. To address this gap, we examined ERS among White Italian parents and its association with children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers. The study involved 296 White Italian parents and their preschool children, recruited from different regions of Italy. Parents completed an adapted Italian version of the White Racial Socialization Questionnaire (WRSQ), assessing three ERS approaches: Conscious, Discussion-hesitant, and Evasive. Children's prosocial behavior was measured through parental reports and a sticker-sharing task, in which children were asked to share resources with ingroup and outgroup peers. Factor analysis confirmed three dimensions in our adapted version of the WRSQ. Results from a path analysis, controlling for children's age, sex, and parent education, showed positive and significant associations between parents' conscious ERS and their children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers, as reflected in both parental reports and the sticker-sharing task. Conversely, parents' evasive and discussion-hesitant approaches were not significantly related to their children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers. No significant associations emerged between ERS approaches and prosocial behavior toward ingroup peers. Findings provide further evidence for the role of parental ERS in young children's interpersonal behavior, providing valuable insights for fostering inclusive social development in early childhood.

1 | Introduction

Ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) refers to the social, cognitive, and developmental process by which parents convey ideas, beliefs, values, and social norms about race and ethnicity to their children (Hughes et al. 2006; Hughes et al. 2016). This process is related to children's understanding of their ethnic-racial membership and may guide their development of attitudes and behaviors toward people from diverse backgrounds (Loyd and Gaither 2018). Although early research on ERS focused primarily on Black families in the United States (Hughes et al. 2006; Umaña-Taylor and Hill 2020), increasing attention has been paid to ERS in White families given their role in transmitting norms, privilege, and intergroup attitudes (Nieri et al. 2024; Wu et al. 2022).

The resulting body of work on White families has been instrumental in revealing associations between White parents' ethnic-racial attitudes, their socialization practices around race and ethnicity, and children's developing ethnic-racial attitudes. For example, Mesman et al. (2022), in a Dutch sample, showed that a conscious maternal ERS approach was linked to children's more positive and less negative attitudes toward ethnic-racial outgroups. Although most research on ERS has been conducted in the United States (Perry et al. 2025), this evidence suggests that White parents' ERS practices may likewise play a role in shaping children's attitude formation within different European contexts.

However, considerably less attention has been paid to how parents' ERS relates to children's expressions of prosocial behaviors toward peers from different ethnic-racial backgrounds, even though such behaviors are critical for fostering inclusive peer relationships, promoting social cohesion, and supporting positive intergroup interactions from an early age (Taylor 2020). In Italy, this question is particularly salient in light of the country's ongoing demographic transformation. Over the past few decades, sustained migration flows and the increasing presence of second-generation children have contributed to making educational settings increasingly multiethnic, with children from a migratory background now representing about 12.5% of all preschoolers (Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito 2024). As a result, intergroup contact has become an everyday reality for both children and educators in Italy.

Focusing on early childhood, the present study examined the associations between different ERS approaches used by White Italian parents and their children's prosocial behavior toward ingroup and outgroup peers. To our knowledge, this is the first study in Italy to examine how White Italian parents engage in ERS with their young children, and how these practices relate to children's prosocial behavior toward peers from different ethnic-racial backgrounds. By situating these processes within the Italian sociocultural context, our study may offer useful insights for understanding how they unfold in societies undergoing comparable demographic transformations and public debates around migration, diversity, and social integration.

1.1 | Theoretical Frameworks

The present study adopted an ecological perspective on children's intergroup social development, emphasizing parents as central agents of ERS. As proposed by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986), children's development occurs within nested and interacting environmental systems, ranging from the family microsystem to the broader cultural and historical macrosystem. Within this framework, parents' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors about race and ethnicity are informed by societal norms and values; in turn, parents convey these to their children through everyday interactions.

Building on this ecological foundation, Hazelbaker et al. (2022) proposed a developmental-contextual model of anti-racism development, which further specifies how White children and youth acquire the cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that support equity, justice, and empathy across group boundaries. This framework situates anti-racist development within interrelated ecological systems, ranging from proximal contexts such as the family and school to broader sociocultural structures that shape ethnic-racial meaning and privilege. Within families, parents' ERS practices act as proximal mechanisms that shape these competencies by providing opportunities for perspective-taking, critical reflection on privilege, and engagement in equity-oriented behaviors. Through open dialogue and modeling of inclusive values, parents can foster children's moral reasoning, intergroup sympathy, and empathy, promoting both awareness of systemic inequities and prosocial motivation toward outgroup members.

Examining these parental influences during early childhood is particularly critical. According to the Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT; Nesdale 1999), children's awareness of group membership and associated evaluations begins to emerge during the preschool years, progressing from simple categorizations of social groups to the internalization of group norms and biases. By this stage, children as young as 3 years old are able to recognize ethnic-racial categories and form early preferences for ingroup over outgroup members. Consequently, the ERS messages that children receive from parents during this formative period may play a decisive role in shaping whether they reinforce ingroup favoritism or develop more inclusive and prosocial orientations toward others. Integrating these perspectives, and consistent with recent conceptualizations of ERS (e.g., Perry et al. 2025), the present study considered parents as primary ecological agents whose ERS approaches may either foster or hinder children's prosocial tendencies and behaviors toward peers from different ethnic backgrounds

1.2 | White Parents' Ethnic-Racial Socialization in Early Childhood

White parents' ERS approaches have been thought to fall into two broad categories (Nieri et al. 2024): those that ignore or minimize the role of race and ethnicity in their children's lives, and those that seek to confront and challenge these systems, aiming to promote kindness and foster an anti-racist ideology in children (Gillen-O'Neel et al. 2022). When parents ignore the historical, economic, and legal impacts of race and ethnicity in children's lives, parents are thought to perpetuate a "new" or covert form of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2021). These child-rearing practices and the messages they convey can be explicit or implicit and are often embedded in everyday family interactions and the

ecological niches parents choose for their children (Hagan et al. 2024; Wu et al. 2022).

Ethnic-racial silence[1] is characterized by an avoidance of discussing race and ethnicity. Sidestepping these issues by simply "not seeing" them is common among White parents of young children (de Bruijn et al. 2025; Leneman et al. 2023; Vittrup 2018). In fact, in a nationally representative study in the United States, about 60% of the White parents of preschoolers reported *never* discussing race and ethnicity with their children (Lesane-Brown et al. 2010).

Hagan et al. (2024) have noted two types of ethnic-racial silence socialization approaches: evasive and discussion-hesitant. Parents who use an evasive ERS approach do so for a variety of reasons. Compared to individuals from ethnic-racial minoritized groups, race and ethnicity tend to be less salient for White people in majority-White Western societies in their daily lives, and so they do not think to address this topic in regular conversations with their children, or they consider it irrelevant to them (Vittrup 2018). Based on previous qualitative and quantitative studies, these parents report believing that their children are "too young to see race/ethnicity" or "too young to understand these issues" (Hagan et al. 2024; Vittrup 2018; Wu et al. 2022). Sometimes they also assume that disparities in social outcomes are the result of individual choices rather than structural inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2021).

In addition to the avoidant, evasive ERS strategy, there is the discussion-hesitant approach, characterized by parents feeling unsure about how or when to proceed with discussing race or ethnicity with their children (Hagan et al. 2024).

These parents may be uncomfortable discussing topics related to race and ethnicity and are afraid of saying something prejudicial. Parents who adopt a discussion-hesitant approach often report feeling unprepared to navigate discussions about race and ethnicity with their children, which leads to their avoidance (Williams and Banerjee 2021). Moreover, they believe that by avoiding such discussions, they foster equality and prevent the development of prejudice in their children (Vittrup 2018; Wu et al. 2022). However, this ethnic-racial silent approach may inadvertently perpetuate both the cultural and institutional dimensions of ethnic-racial oppression by discouraging the recognition and critical examination of ethnic-racial inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 2021; Neville et al. 2013).

Rather than avoiding discussions of race and ethnicity, some White parents adopt a conscious ERS approach (Hagan et al. 2024; Hagerman 2014). One component of this approach is to encourage children to recognize ethnic-racial differences in a positive and non-stigmatizing manner. Parents who proactively adopt a conscious ERS approach aim to normalize diversity and reinforce the value of inclusivity in their children (Abaied and Perry 2021). Another component of this approach is to recognize some of the systemic, institutionalized ways in which inequalities by race and ethnicity are perpetuated. Parents who adopt the conscious ERS approach are committed to introducing their children to the concepts of race and ethnicity, helping them understand their broader social significance and the factors contributing to ethnic-racial discrimination and social inequalities (Vittrup 2018). Parents may also promote experiential ERS by supporting interethnic friendships or teaching strategies for confronting racist actions by others (Hagan et al. 2024; Hagerman 2017). However, it appears that only a minority of White parents use conscious ERS strategies with young children between 4 and 5 years old (Vittrup 2018).

Importantly, these types of approaches may matter for children's subsequent ethnic-racial attitudes and behaviors; further, the impact of these approaches may begin early in development. Given that young children are highly attuned to social cues, they construct their understanding of race and ethnicity based on the messages and signals they are exposed to in early childhood (Williams et al. 2020). When race and ethnicity are treated as taboo subjects, or when parents demonstrate hesitancy or anxiety when discussing the topic, children may indeed internalize the idea that ethnic-racial differences are either unimportant or too dangerous to talk about (Halberstadt et al. 2022).

Although the majority of the research on White parents' ERS has focused on the U.S. context, the growing ethnic and cultural diversity in Europe highlights the need for further study within European countries. In Italy, for example, the population with a migratory background has grown significantly in recent years (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2023, 2024). Many migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East are also racialized as non-White in the Italian context, making racial and ethnic diversity a concrete and visible feature of early childhood education settings. These demographic changes have made migration a central topic in Italian public discourse, often associated with issues of integration, ethnic-racial diversity, and social tension (see, e.g., Nese 2023; Pellegrini 2023; Pellegrini et al. 2025). At the same time, racism constitutes a pervasive and multifaceted reality in Italy (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2024). Although frequently denied or framed as an issue external to Italian society, ethnic-racial discrimination manifests in both institutional practices and everyday interactions, sustaining racialized hierarchies that position whiteness as the implicit norm (Quassoli et al. 2023). Taken together, these interconnected demographic and socio-political dynamics have brought race and ethnicity to greater prominence in Italian family life, yet this remains a largely unexplored area.

Therefore, it is crucial to examine how race and ethnicity are constructed and negotiated within Italian families, particularly in relation to young children's developing views of social identities and preferences, as well as their socio-emotional behaviors toward outgroup peers. Indeed, studies in at least three European countries show that whiteness serves as an implicit marker of national identity and White parents often reinforce it as an unmarked norm while avoiding discussions of race and ethnicity (de Bruijn et al. 2024; Kaiser et al. 2025; Oppenchaim and Thalineau 2023).

1.3 | White Parents' Ethnic-Racial Socialization and Children's Intergroup Attitudes and Behaviors

Accumulating theory and evidence suggest the importance of families and communities in young children's early development

of ethnic-racial awareness and preferences (Hazelbaker et al. 2022; Perry et al. 2025; Waxman 2021). The trajectory of this developmental process is likely related to exposure to social norms, with parents acting as primary agents in shaping children's early understandings of race and ethnicity. Associations between parent and child attitudes are shown as early as the preschool age; indeed, White mothers' implicit ethnic-racial prejudice in Italy was associated with less positive attitudes toward Black peers in their 3- to 6-year-old children (Castelli et al. 2009). Meta-analytic evidence supports this finding, indicating consistent associations between parent and child intergroup attitudes (Degner and Dalege 2013).

Taken together, these findings highlight the potential relevance of parental ERS practices, as different approaches may shape the social environments children experience and their developing intergroup attitudes. For example, parents may reproduce ethnic-racial segregation through the environments they create for their children, such as their choice of social circles, neighborhoods, and schools (Hagerman 2018). In the context of silent ERS, Pahlke et al. (2012) found that White preschool children are more likely to express favorable attitudes toward White individuals while exhibiting biases against ethnic-racial minoritized groups. Additionally, previous research suggested that youths exposed to ethnic-racial silence are less likely to recognize instances of ethnic-racial discrimination and are less inclined to question prevailing ethnic-racial norms (Apfelbaum et al. 2010; Farago et al. 2019). The silence surrounding discussions of race and ethnicity can itself function as a powerful socializing mechanism, subtly communicating to children that these topics are off-limits or unimportant, which in turn shapes their attitudes and beliefs in ways that may unintentionally sustain systemic inequities and hinder critical awareness of social injustices (Botto and Kerr 2024).

In contrast, parents' willingness to engage in conversations about race and ethnicity has been associated with elementary-school children's less negative outgroup attitudes (Mesman et al. 2022; Wu et al. 2022) and greater racial heterogeneity in friendships (Hagan et al. 2024). Further, intervention studies suggest direct effects when parents are willing to talk about race and ethnicity with their children: when White families in the United States watched ethnically and racially diverse programs and were willing to discuss them with their children who were between 5 and 7 years, children expressed more positive attitudes toward Black others (Vittrup and Holden 2011). And when White U.S. parents were guided in parent-child conversations that encouraged awareness and empathy (a more conscious approach), implicit ingroup bias in their White children was effectively reduced (Perry et al. 2024). Moreover, conscious ERS in White families may also play a role in disrupting the intergenerational transmission of racial bias (Hazelbaker et al. 2022). When ethnic-racial conscious conversations begin early, such as during the preschool years, they can lay the foundation for the development of a White ethnic-racial identity characterized by openness to learning from other groups and exploring new ways of thinking about race and ethnicity (Belizaire et al. 2024).

Because previous research has primarily focused on the role of ERS in shaping children's ethnic-racial attitudes, we do not know much about what children do in response to these messages. However, when White preschoolers were exposed to a race-conscious book-reading curriculum in school, they frequently initiated conversations about race and ethnicity at home (Botto and Kerr 2024). Also, among White children who were between 3 and 12 years old, parents' use of a conscious approach was associated with more ethnic-racially diverse peer friendships, whereas discussion-hesitant strategies were linked to ethnic-racially homogeneous peer groups (Hagan et al. 2024). Moreover, Xu et al. (2023) have shown that parents' implicit ethnic-racial attitudes predict their 5- to 9-year-old White children's prosocial behavior toward Black peers, suggesting that this association may operate through how parents socialize their children about race and ethnicity. These findings highlight that ERS is not only linked to outgroup attitudes but may actively contribute to how children engage with race and ethnicity in their everyday interactions.

To our knowledge, however, no studies have investigated the relation between White parents' ERS approaches and preschool children's prosocial behaviors—that is, voluntary behaviors to benefit others (Eisenberg et al. 2015)—particularly toward individuals from different ethnic-racial backgrounds. Addressing this gap is crucial, as outgroup prosocial behavior, which reflects other-oriented reasoning and a concern for social equity, may help reduce intergroup biases in childhood, promoting social cohesion and positive intergroup interactions (Hazelbaker et al. 2022; Taylor 2020). Indeed, children's perceptions and attitudes toward others are thought to be closely linked to their prosociality toward outgroup members (Rutland and Killen 2017). In this regard, White children's prosocial behavior toward the outgroup may reflect an emerging awareness of ethnic-racial inequalities and a concern for fairness, both of which are foundational to the development of anti-racist attitudes and behaviors (Spinrad et al. 2023).

1.4 | The Current Study

Guided by a developmental-ecological perspective on children's intergroup social development (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Hazelbaker et al. 2022), the present study aimed to examine the associations between different parental ERS approaches and children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers among White Italian families. Drawing on prior research on White ERS (Hazelbaker et al. 2022; Mesman et al. 2022) and children's prosocial behavior toward ethnic-racial minoritized peers (e.g., Xu et al. 2023), we hypothesized that a conscious ERS approach, characterized by open discussions and intentional efforts to address ethnic-racial issues, would be positively associated with children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers. We further expected that both the evasive and the discussion-hesitant ERS approaches would each show negative associations with children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers, as parents' negative nonverbal signals and behaviors are related to their young children's bias (Castelli et al. 2008; Skinner et al. 2016).

Given the growing prominence of ethnic-racial diversity, the increasing salience of migration in public discourse, and persistent evidence of racialized inequalities and discrimination, investigating these dynamics in Italy is both timely and relevant. However, no Italian instrument currently captures parental ERS from a comprehensive perspective. Therefore, as a necessary

TABLE 1 | Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

Variable	*n*	%
Parent role		
Mothers	268	90.0%
Fathers	30	10.0%
Maternal education level		
Lower secondary or below	28	10.0%
High school diploma	96	32.0%
Bachelor's degree or higher	166	56.0%
Professional qualification	6	2.0%
Paternal education level		
Lower secondary or below	57	19.0%
High school diploma	136	46.0%
Bachelor's degree or higher	101	34.0%
Professional qualification	2	1.0%
Region of residence		
Northern Italy	80	27.0%
Central Italy	94	32.0%
Southern Italy	122	41.0%
Child sex assigned at birth		
Girls	143	48.0%
Boys	155	52.0%

preliminary step, we translated and adapted the White Racial Socialization Questionnaire (WRSQ; Hagan et al. 2024) for use with White Italian parents of preschool children and examined its psychometric properties. Its adaptation for the Italian context provided a crucial foundation for addressing our primary research question.

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants

The sample consisted of 296 Italian White parents (90% mothers), who were between 23 and 57 years old (M = 38.98 years, SD = 5.62), and their children (48% girls; 100% born in Italy), who were between 37 and 71 months old (M = 51.79 months, SD = 8.52). Table 1 provides a detailed summary of the sample's sociodemographic characteristics.

2.2 | Procedures

The present study was part of a broader national research project examining children's kindness toward outgroup peers titled "Caring for Children with an Immigrant Background: A Cross-Sequential Longitudinal Study on Kindness Pillars and the Role of Dispositional and Contextual Factors in Early Childhood", funded by the European Union—Next Generation EU, PRIN 2022. Several preschools from various regions of the country were contacted and invited to participate, resulting in a convenience sample. Parents were recruited through participating preschools and gave informed consent for their participation and for their children. They then completed an online survey regarding themselves and their children, which took approximately 20 min to complete.

Children provided verbal assent to participate and were individually interviewed by female trained research assistants during preschool hours in a quiet area within the preschool building. The interviews were conducted to measure and observe the children's prosocial behavior. At the end of the interview, the children received a small gift as a token of appreciation for their participation. Data collection was conducted from April to September 2024. The study and its procedures were approved by the Ethics Committees of Sapienza University of Rome, University of Bari Aldo Moro, and University of Bergamo.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Parents' Ethnic-Racial Socialization (ERS)

Parents' ERS approaches were assessed using an adapted version of the WRSQ (Hagan et al. 2024). The original version of the scale is composed of 17 items, rated on a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*), which measures three specific parents' ERS approaches: Conscious approach (seven items; e.g., "It is important to guide children's understanding about race and race relations"), Discussion-hesitant approach (six items; e.g., "Talking about race with my child will cause them to form stereotypes about others"), and Evasive approach (four items; e.g., "I don't want my child to worry about racial issues").

A blinded forward–backward translation procedure was employed to adapt the original scale to the Italian national and cultural context (guidelines by Sousa and Rojjanasrirat 2011). Specifically, the initial translation was conducted by bilingual members of the research team, and the back-translation into English was carried out by a different independent translator not involved in the study, who was blind to the original English items. Any discrepancies were reviewed and resolved through discussion by a focus group of project researchers, ensuring conceptual and linguistic equivalence. During this process, we decided to replace the term *race* with *ethnicity*. This choice was the result of deliberations within the research team to ensure culturally and historically appropriate wording for the Italian context and was informed by ongoing European discussions on the use of the term *race* in reference to human beings (Lentin 2008).

2.3.2 | Children's Prosocial Behavior Toward Ingroup and Outgroup Peers

2.3.2.1 | Parent Report of Children's Prosocial Behavior. Building on Padilla-Walker et al. (2011), children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup members was assessed using five items adapted from the Kindness and Generosity subscale of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (Peterson and Seligman 2004), rated on a five-point response scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*A*

great deal). Although the original measure focused on behaviors toward strangers/friends/family, the items were adapted in this study to specifically evaluate prosocial behavior toward members of different ethnic or national groups (e.g., "My child helps people who are different from him/her (e.g., different nationalities or countries of origin), even if it is not easy for him/her"). The scale demonstrated excellent reliability in our study ($\omega = 0.93$).

2.3.2.2 | Child Behavioral Measure. Children's prosocial behavior toward ingroup and outgroup peers was assessed using a forced-choice sticker-sharing task (Spinrad et al. 2023). In this task, children were presented separately with pictures of 10 same-sex peers (five ingroup and five outgroup peers) and asked to choose between two alternatives for each peer. These alternatives differed in the cost to the child and the generosity toward the other. For instance, in one trial, children choose between receiving one sticker while giving none to the other child or giving two stickers to the other child and receiving none themselves. The forced-choice options were presented for both ingroup and outgroup peers (counterbalanced), resulting in a total of 10 trials. A continuous score was computed separately for the number of stickers allocated to ingroup and outgroup peers (Spinrad et al. 2023).

Sticker-sharing tasks have been widely used as valid and reliable measures of prosocial behavior in early childhood (e.g., Malti et al. 2016; Paulus and Moore 2017), as they capture children's willingness to forgo personal gain to benefit others. In the present study, children were also asked how much they liked the stickers in a brief pre-task measure, to ensure that the task involved items of genuine value to them. Outgroup peers were visually represented as Black, in line with previous research showing that young children use visible phenotypic characteristics, such as skin color, to distinguish between ethnic and national groups (Nesdale et al. 2004; Nesdale et al. 2005; Oppenchaim and Thalineau 2023).

2.3.3 | Socio-Demographic Information

Parents provided information regarding their child's sex assigned at birth, date of birth (which was used to calculate the child's age in months), as well as their own sex assigned at birth, highest level of educational attainment, and total years of education completed.

2.4 | Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted using R software (R Core Team 2024). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the WRSQ items using principal component analysis with promax rotation to inspect the factorial structure of the scale. Initially, Bartlett's test of sphericity was performed, along with the evaluation of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy. To determine the appropriate number of factors, parallel analysis was then conducted using Horn's procedure with 5000 parallel datasets and an alpha level of 0.01.

Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the psychometric validity of the factorial solution derived from the EFA. Omega (ω) reliability coefficients were calculated for the final model to verify internal consistency. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed. In addition, a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to explore whether parents' use of the three ERS approaches (i.e., conscious, discussion-hesitant, and evasive) varied according to the child's sex and age. Three analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were conducted to examine sex and age differences in children's prosocial behaviors.

Finally, a path analysis was estimated to examine the associations between parents' ERS approaches and children's prosocial behavior toward ingroup and outgroup peers (both parents' reports of their children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup individuals and the number of stickers children shared with outgroup peers during the corresponding task). Child sex assigned at birth, age, and parental years of education were included as covariates in the model. The maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard error was used for all analyses, and standardized coefficients were reported.

3 | Results

3.1 | Exploratory Factor Analysis

Preliminary tests indicated that the data were suitable for factor analysis. Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.001$), and the KMO value exceeded 0.60 (KMO = 0.81). Results from the parallel analysis suggested a three-factor solution: the first three observed eigenvalues exceeded those obtained from randomly generated data, whereas the fourth did not, providing empirical support for retaining three factors. Consistently, principal component analysis on the initial 17 items revealed three correlated factors that accounted for 52% of the variance. Nevertheless, to refine the factor structure and enhance the scale's robustness, we excluded five items with loadings <0.40 and communalities <0.50 (Hair et al., 2019). The KMO for the 12-item model was 0.80, and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.001$). This three-factor model (five, four, and three items per factor) accounted for 66% of the total variance. Notably, unlike the original version by Hagan et al. (2024) with children who were in primary school, item 13 (i.e., "My child is too young to understand or talk about ethnic issues") loaded on the third factor, defined as the ERS evasive approach, instead of the second, relative to the ERS discussion-hesitant approach. Table 2 presents the standardized factor loadings, communalities, and the literal content of the 12 items retained in the final EFA model.

3.2 | Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA was performed to evaluate the scale's metric properties and validate the three-factor structure. CFI and TLI values above 0.90, and RMSEA and SRMR values below 0.08, were considered indicative of an acceptable fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). The analysis included three correlated factors and 12 items; however, the model did not adequately fit the data, $\chi^2(51) = 146.57$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.91; TLI = 0.88; SRMR = 0.07; RMSEA = 0.09; 90% CI [0.08, 0.11]. Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2019), we inspected the contribution of each item and decided to remove

TABLE 2 | White Racial Socialization Questionnaire items and factor loadings obtained from EFA.

WRSQ—Italian version	λ			h^2
Factors and items	**1**	**2**	**3**	
ERS conscious approach				
4. È importante guidare il bambino/la bambina a comprendere i rapporti tra persone di diversa etnia.	0.81			0.72
3. Parlo con mio figlio/mia figlia delle disuguaglianze etniche presenti in Italia.	0.78			0.68
2. È importante parlare delle questioni etniche con i bambini e le bambine affinché possano identificare la discriminazione razziale quando si verifica.	0.75			0.64
5. Parlo con mio figlio/mia figlia della violenza verso le persone di colore.	0.72			0.57
6. Desidero che gli/le insegnanti parlino delle questioni etniche quando l'argomento viene fuori, piuttosto che fare finta di niente.	0.69			0.56
ERS discussion-hesitant approach				
8. Ho il timore che se parlo di questioni etniche, mio figlio/mia figlia diventi razzista.		0.86		0.72
10. Parlare di questioni etniche con mio figlio/mia figlia, lo/a renderà pieno di pregiudizi verso gli altri.		0.84		0.79
9. Parlare di questioni etniche con mio figlio/mia figlia gli/le farà sviluppare stereotipi sugli altri.		0.81		0.69
12. Sono a disagio nel parlare di questioni etniche con mio figlio/mia figlia.		0.70		0.57
ERS evasive approach				
13. Mio figlio/mia figlia è troppo piccolo/a per capire e parlare di questioni etniche.			0.81	0.68
15. Non voglio che mio/a figlio/a si preoccupi delle questioni etniche.			0.78	0.64
16. Non voglio che mio figlio/mia figlia si concentri su argomenti troppo seri come le questioni etniche, ma soltanto sul gioco e sulle cose da bambini.			0.77	0.61

Note: Items were numbered following the same order as the original version (Hagan et al. 2024). The following items were excluded based on low factor loadings (<0.40) and communalities (<0.50): *Item 1 ("Nella mia famiglia parliamo del fatto che la discriminazione etnica esiste ancora"), Item 7 ("Creo opportunità per mio figlio/mia figlia di interagire con persone culturalmente diverse"), Item 11 ("Ho il timore di dire la cosa sbagliata se affronto questioni etniche con mio figlio/mia figlia"), Item 14 ("Non voglio che mio figlio/mia figlia si concentri solo sul colore della pelle delle altre persone"), and Item 17 ("Mio figlio/mia figlia non ha mai fatto caso al colore della pelle delle altre persone").*

Abbreviations: ERS, ethnic-racial socialization; WRSQ, White Racial Socialization Questionnaire.

one item (i.e., "I talk to my child about violence toward people of color") due to its standardized residual correlations exceeding 2.5 with two items of the same factor, and one item of another factor. Subsequently, the CFA conducted on the remaining items showed that the three-factor model exhibited an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(41) = 86.89$, $p < 0.01$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.93; SRMR = 0.06; RMSEA = 0.07; 90% CI [0.05, 0.09]. As shown in Figure 1, the final version of the WRSQ used in the present study consisted of 11 items: four items assessing the conscious ERS approach, four items assessing the discussion-hesitant approach, and three items assessing the evasive approach. Standardized loadings ranged from 0.56 to 0.90, and the ω was 0.79 for the conscious approach, 0.86 for the discussion-hesitant approach, and 0.74 for the evasive approach, indicating sufficient reliability across the subscales. The three factors were all weakly to moderately correlated with each other.

3.3 | Descriptive Analyses

A MANCOVA examining differences in parents' ERS approaches as a function of child sex and age revealed a significant difference associated with child age, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.95$, $F(3, 291) = 5.05$, $p < 0.01$. Univariate analyses indicated that child age was not significantly associated with parent-reported use of conscious ERS approach, $F(1, 293) = 0.36$, $p = 0.55$, nor with the discussion-hesitant ERS approach, $F(1, 293) = 0.20$, $p = 0.65$. However, parents of older children reported significantly lower use of the evasive ERS approach, $F(1, 293) = 10.44$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. No statistically significant differences based on child sex were observed, Wilks' $\lambda = 0.999$, $F(3, 292) = 0.14$, $p = 0.94$. With respect to parent-reported prosocial behavior and child observed prosocial behavior toward ingroup and outgroup, no significant differences by sex or age were found. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are reported in Tables S1 and S2, respectively (see Supporting Information).

3.4 | Path Analysis

Path analysis examining the links between parents' ERS approaches and children's prosocial behavior indicated that a conscious ERS approach was positively associated with both parent-reported and observed child prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers. By contrast, neither the discussion-hesitant nor the evasive ERS approach showed a significant association with

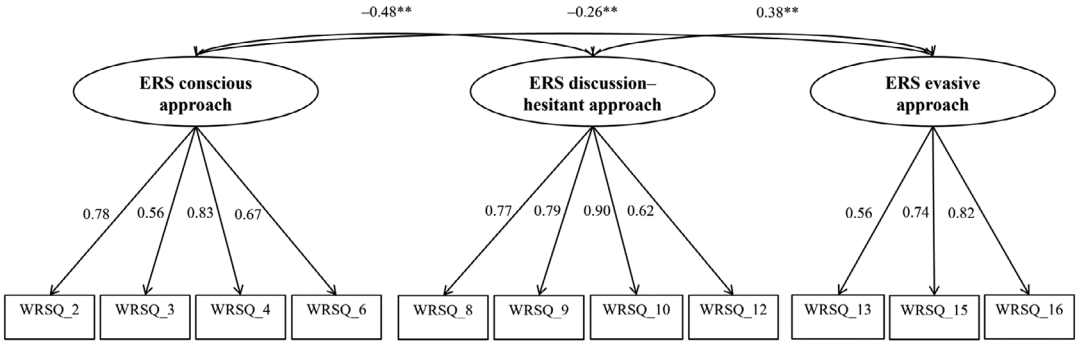

FIGURE 1 | Path diagram of the CFA for the Italian version of the White Racial Socialization Questionnaire. *Note:* Item 5 (*"Parlo con mio figlio/mia figlia della violenza verso le persone di colore."*) was removed because its standardized residual correlations exceeded 2.5 with multiple items, indicating local misfit within the model. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$. CFA, confirmatory factor analysis; ERS, ethnic-racial socialization; WRSQ, White Racial Socialization Questionnaire.

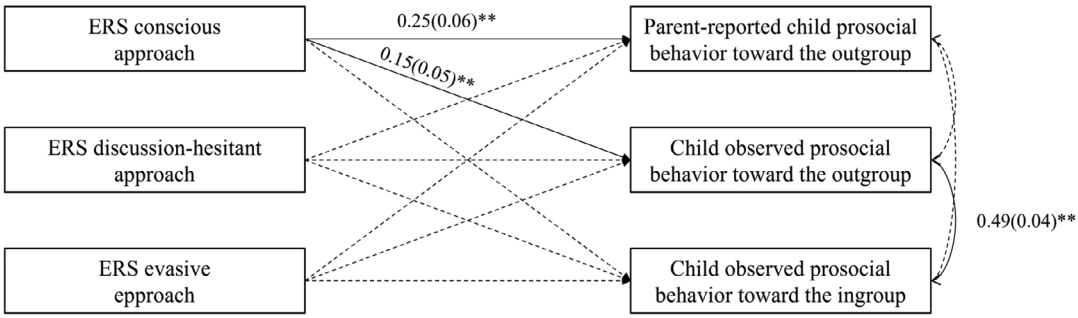

FIGURE 2 | Links between parents' ERS approaches and children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers. *Note:* Child sex, child age, and parent education were included as covariates on all endogenous variables. *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$. ERS, ethnic-racial socialization.

child prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers. Importantly, none of the ERS approaches were significantly related to child prosocial behavior toward ingroup peers. Neither child sex, age, nor parental education was significantly related to child prosocial behavior toward ingroup or outgroup peers, as reported by parents and by the children themselves. Figure 2 displays the path diagram with standardized coefficients and their standard errors in parentheses.

4 | Discussion

Although much of the existing literature on White parents' ERS originates from the United States, examining White parents' ERS in the European context is a pressing concern, as racial and ethnic heterogeneity is rapidly expanding, and children of diverse backgrounds are increasingly engaging with each other. Grounded in an ecological-developmental perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Hazelbaker et al. 2022), our study represents the first investigation of White Italian parents' ERS approaches and their associations with preschool children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers.

Below, we highlight two kinds of contributions. Preliminarily, by adapting and using the WRSQ in the Italian context, we found further evidence of the validity of the WRSQ and, in so doing, provide a valuable tool for future research on Italian parents' ERS. Specifically, we identified the same three distinct ERS approaches: conscious, discussion-hesitant, and evasive. These results confirm the dimensional consistency of the WRSQ for White parents with children of different ages (preschool instead of school-aged children) and in rather different cultural contexts (Italy instead of the United States), thus extending the generalizability of the three approaches. Notably, this shortened version of the scale maintained its conceptual robustness and efficiency in measuring the three approaches, representing one of the few existing instruments for understanding how White parents face ethnic-racial issues with their young children.

Second, as the main contribution, we identified a significant association between parents' use of a conscious ERS approach and their children's prosocial behavior toward the outgroup, while controlling for prosocial behavior toward ingroup peers. This pattern emerged in both parental reports of children's prosocial tendencies in real-life settings and children's choices in offering desirable stickers to outgroup peers in a sharing task. As hypothesized, White Italian preschool children whose parents reported a conscious ERS approach showed greater prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers, as indicated by parents and the children themselves. This aligns with previous studies in the United States and Europe, which have indicated that explicit conversations about race and ethnicity enhance children's ethnic-racial awareness and foster positive intergroup attitudes (Mesman et al. 2022; Perry et al. 2024). Although prior research has noted the cognitive and attitudinal benefits of explicit communication about race and ethnicity, our findings extend this work by

showing that parents' conscious ERS approach is also linked to children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers, as reflected in developmentally appropriate and widely used indicators such as the sticker-sharing task and parent reports.

Finding associations between White parents' use of a conscious ERS approach and their children's prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers highlights the role of caregivers as active agents of socialization. In line with Hazelbaker et al. (2022), a parental conscious ERS approach creates a promotive context in which White children can begin to recognize ethnic-racial differences, develop sympathy and perspective-taking, and internalize moral reasoning about intergroup relationships. Specifically, through emotionally sensitive communication and deliberate engagement with topics of issues of ethnicity, privilege, and inequality, White parents scaffold children's social understanding and guide the formation of the socio-cognitive and moral foundations that underlie prosocial and potentially anti-racist behavior toward outgroup peers. In doing so, these interactions may challenge the invisibility of whiteness and nurture an emerging moral agency oriented toward equity and inclusion.

Malti and colleagues have similarly argued that prosocial behavior emerges not just from children's cognitive maturation but from parental styles embedded in social contexts, including the modeling of inclusive behaviors and open communication about social differences (Malti and Dys 2018; Malti and Speidel 2024). Therefore, a conscious ERS approach may nurture a form of caring that encourages children to recognize and respond compassionately to the experiences of others from minoritized backgrounds. Furthermore, prosocial development involves a gradual shift from socially desirable behaviors to actions rooted in genuine concern for others (Malti and Dys 2018). Such moral concern is shaped by early relational experiences and is sustained through opportunities for emotional reflection and moral evaluation. In this light, the conscious ERS approach may not only promote social awareness but also contribute to the internalization of moral emotions such as guilt, sympathy, and ethical responsibility, which are known to predict sustained prosocial behaviors over time (Malti et al. 2016).

Contrary to our expectations, discussion-hesitant and evasive ERS approaches were not significantly associated with children's prosocial behavior, suggesting that avoiding conversations about race and ethnicity neither fosters nor inhibits these specific interpersonal behaviors toward outgroup peers, at least in the preschool years. These findings call for further research on the three ERS approaches, given that work conducted in the United States with older children has suggested that ethnic-racial silence may be associated with children forming friendship groups that are more racially homogeneous (Hagan et al. 2024). It is possible that hesitancy and evasiveness when socializing with younger children are less problematic than with older children, and that these patterns may serve as markers of broader socialization processes that are less evident to younger children. Such processes might include nonverbal distancing and negative reactions toward ethnic-racially different groups, avoidance of settings that could promote positive engagement with diverse children and families, and missed opportunities to explore diversity issues in constructive ways. Given their increasing cognitive and interpersonal skills, older children may be more sensitive to the hesitant and evasive messages of parents in ways that are not yet possible for preschoolers. Moreover, beyond the family, children's developing understanding of social meanings and intergroup relationships is shaped by other socialization agents embedded within their everyday ecologies. As previous authors emphasize, ERS is a multifaceted process that unfolds across interconnected systems—including family, peers, teachers, schools, and media—that collectively transmit cultural meanings and social norms about race and ethnicity (Hazelbaker et al. 2022; Perry et al. 2025). These different contexts can reinforce, complement, or even counteract parental messages, offering children diverse opportunities to engage with issues of difference and fairness. From this ecological standpoint, parental ethnic-racial silence does not necessarily preclude children's exposure to race-related experiences; rather, it underscores the need to consider how messages across contexts converge or diverge in shaping children's emerging intergroup orientations. Understanding these intersecting influences may clarify the relation between parental ethnic-racial silence and preschoolers' prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers, as children's broader social ecologies might provide alternative pathways for learning about diversity and inclusion.

It might also be that the relations between these ERS approaches and children's prosocial behavior could be mediated or moderated by factors not considered in this study, warranting further investigation. For instance, children's developing ethnic-racial attitudes may serve as a key mediating mechanism between ERS approaches and prosocial outcomes. Parents' evasive or discussion-hesitant messages could foster implicit biases and limited awareness of social inequalities (Castelli et al. 2009; Degner and Dalege 2013), which, in turn, may reduce motivation to engage prosocially with outgroup peers. Conversely, when parents openly discuss ethnicity and inequality, they may nurture more inclusive and positive attitudes toward outgroup members, which are likely to translate into prosocial motivations in intergroup contexts.

Notably, children are not passive recipients but active interpreters of parental messages about race and ethnicity. Thus, children's temperamental dispositions may moderate the association between ERS approaches and prosocial behavior. Sociable, well-regulated children may be more adept at discerning implicit cues about inclusion and fairness and, consequently, more likely to behave prosocially even when parents are hesitant or avoidant in discussing race and ethnicity. By contrast, children who are more inhibited or less socially attuned may depend more heavily on explicit parental guidance to navigate intergroup contexts; in these cases, parental ethnic-racial silence could lead to uncertainty or reduce motivation to engage with outgroup peers. Future investigations are needed to clarify the mechanisms linking parental ERS approaches to children's emerging intergroup orientations and prosocial behavior.

Consistent with U.S.-based research (e.g., Loyd and Gaither 2018; Nieri et al. 2024), we found that parents of older children were less likely to adopt an evasive ERS approach than parents of younger children. This difference may reflect a developmental change in parental perceptions, as they increasingly recognize the significance of ethnic-racial interactions as children approach school age. The apparent reduction in parents' tendency to

avoid discussions about race and ethnicity with their 5-year-old children may also be linked to children's growing ability to understand ethnic-racial categories, which becomes more evident as their cognitive development progresses (Nesdale et al. 2004).

It is intriguing that, according to the mean scores, conscious practices appeared to be the most reported form of socialization in our sample. This finding contrasts with previous research suggesting that most White parents tend to adopt hesitant or evasive approaches, particularly with young children (e.g., Vittrup 2018). A plausible explanation for this discrepancy lies in the use of a convenience sample and potential self-selection effects. Participation in the study was voluntary, and recruitment took place within a broader project focused on children's kindness toward outgroup peers, which may have disproportionately attracted parents who were already more interested in, or positively oriented toward, issues of diversity and inclusion. As a result, the prevalence of conscious ERS practices observed in the present sample may not be representative of the broader population of White Italian parents and should be interpreted with caution. It is also plausible that the exclusion of several items reduced the extent to which the conscious ERS subscale captures certain aspects of parents' engagement with ethnic-racial issues, including discussions of violence toward racialized people. Given that such conversations may be relatively infrequent and perceived as developmentally inappropriate for preschool-aged children, the removal of these items may have influenced the scale's mean levels and the specific facets of ERS that were most strongly represented. Further research is needed to identify the individual and contextual factors linked to White Italian parents' ERS approaches with their young children.

4.1 | Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provided valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, although the parents reported coming from different regions in Italy, our findings are based on a convenience sample of White Italian preschool children, which may limit the generalizability of our results to the broader Italian population or different national contexts. Future research should investigate how White ERS approaches relate to prosocial behavior in representative samples of preschool children from various national backgrounds. Second, the cross-sectional design of the study precludes causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify the developmental trajectory of prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers and the long-term effects of ERS approaches on children's intergroup attitudes and behaviors. Third, in the sticker-sharing task, outgroup peers were represented as Black, based on how children in European countries tend to conflate whiteness with national identity (Oppenchaim and Thalineau 2023) and the salience of skin color in ethnic-racial categorization during the preschool years (Nesdale 1999). However, future studies could assess the robustness of our findings across distinct ethnicities by examining whether similar patterns emerge when outgroup peers are depicted with different minoritized ethnic-racial backgrounds (e.g., Asian or Latin American). Fourth, we have not assessed the motivations underlying prosocial behaviors toward the outgroup. Although previous research demonstrated that such behaviors may arise from sympathy and moral concern (e.g., Ongley and Malti 2014), they can also be driven by social desirability or by *White Savior* beliefs (Di Angelo, 2018). White children may, even unintentionally, assume that peers from ethnic-racial minoritized groups need their help based on a sense of unwarranted privilege or paternalism (e.g., "because I am White, I might know more or be wealthier than you"). Such prosocial behaviors may not always be needed or welcomed (Sierksma and Poorthius 2025) and can lead to unintended negative consequences that reproduce unequal social dynamics (Sierksma and Shutts 2025). Future research should examine the motivations underlying children's prosocial behavior toward the outgroup, including inequity beliefs and moral assumptions similar to those observed in adults (Legette et al. 2021; Legette et al. 2023), in order to clarify the racialized meanings that drive these behaviors.

We also did not directly examine the mechanisms that may explain the associations between White parents' ERS approaches and children's prosocial behaviors toward outgroup peers, a topic that should be addressed in future research. Intergroup empathy, for instance, may mediate this link, as prior studies show that higher empathy positively predicts prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers (Sierksma et al. 2014; Taylor and Glen 2020). Parents, as key socializing agents, may influence children's empathy, outgroup attitudes, and opportunities for intergroup contact, highlighting their central role in fostering prosocial behavior toward outgroup peers (Moran et al. 2024).

Moreover, the exclusion of several WRSQ items warrants attention. This is likely due to the young age of the children, as the scale was originally developed for parents of school-aged children (Hagan et al. 2024), for whom discussions of racialized violence, discrimination, and structural inequalities could be considered developmentally appropriate. In contrast, parents of preschoolers may perceive such discussions as inappropriate and instead focus on other aspects of ERS.

Despite the limitations noted above, our results highlight the importance of intentional parental discussions about race and ethnicity in fostering inclusiveness from an early age and across different cultural contexts. This socialization approach can also benefit children from migrant backgrounds or other marginalized ethnic-racial communities by fostering positive intergroup interactions in early childhood. Intervention programs and workshops could help guide parents in adopting a conscious ERS approach by providing them with tools for discussing ethnic-racial issues in age-appropriate ways (e.g., Kerr et al. 2025; Perry et al. 2024). One example is the EmBARK project (Scott et al. 2024), an intervention designed to support White parents in addressing issues of race and prejudice with their children who were between 5 and 7 years old. Following the intervention, participating parents reported increased concern about their children's ethnic-racial biases, as well as greater self-efficacy in addressing these issues.

Another contribution of the current work lies in distinguishing between evasive and discussion-hesitant ERS approaches as distinct motivators for parents' lack of engagement in conversations about race and ethnicity with their children. Knowing why parents are not adopting more ethnic-racially conscious approaches in their childrearing can help intervention efforts tailor their communications with parents. For example, it may

be that evasive parents need information about the reality of systemic influences on ethnic-racial advantages and disadvantages; discussion-hesitant parents may need substantial work in role-playing conversations with their children.

Despite our focus on disentangling different types of ERS approaches and their role in children's intergroup orientations and behaviors, it is also important to acknowledge that racism operates across multiple, interconnected systems rather than solely within individual or dyadic interactions (Hazelbaker et al. 2022). These systems influence both the opportunities and barriers that families face in engaging in meaningful ethnic-racial dialogue. Recognizing these broader influences underscores the need for interventions at multiple levels, rather than confining them to the family level. For example, school-based interventions could complement parental efforts in nurturing children's positive attitudes and behaviors toward outgroup peers. Teachers' implementation of inclusive curricula through reading books, doing activities, and holding discussions in the classroom has already been shown to raise children's awareness of ethnic-racial differences and inequalities, and these studies provide a strong foundation for choosing to adopt these practices (Botto and Kerr 2024; Boutte 2008; Vera et al. 2016). This approach may be particularly effective in preschools, where the foundations of socio-emotional development are laid.

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and its procedures were approved by the Ethics Committees of Sapienza University of Rome, University of Bari Aldo Moro, University of Bergamo.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data and syntax used for this study are available at the following link: https://osf.io/cbgve/?view_only=2a9c60eef29042b9a7e37fd7025cede7.

Endnotes

[1] Originally referred to as "colorblind" and sometimes "colormute" socialization, although these terms are now recognized as ableism and thus are rarely used.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting File 1: sode70049-sup-0001-tablesS1-S2.docx