

# The N-Word: Four Empowering Responses for Black Youth



EVIDENCE  
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes strategies for Black youth to respond to the use of the N-Word as a racial slur and address the hurt and emotional powerlessness that this use can cause. Key issues for youth workers, educators, and caregivers are also outlined, as are details about the reasons why this word has resisted attempts to ban its use. Developed by Dr. Kuir ë Garang, a postdoctoral fellow at YouthREX.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT: FIVE KEY FACTS ABOUT THE N-WORD

For many Black people, the N-Word is not only emotionally offensive; its evocation is **racially dehumanizing** because of the role it has played to justify past oppressive practices, including lynching and racial segregation. Because of this history, scholars and activists have tried to ban its use.

However, the word has survived. Its use within the Black community makes it difficult to ban, but even this use as a collegial term of endearment remains contentious. As a result, the N-Word has no globally accepted usage in literature,<sup>1,2</sup> history,<sup>3</sup> or Black music.<sup>4</sup>

The N-Word will remain controversial, both as it continues to be used to cause emotional harm to Black people and within the Black community to create a sense of connection.

### The N-Word...

#### 01. ...contributes to institutional alienation.

While some people believe the use of the N-Word as a racial slur should be ignored,<sup>5</sup> researchers argue that the N-Word exacerbates the alienation of Black youth and children in schools,<sup>1</sup> contributing to the hostility and marginalization that Black

students already experience in educational and social institutions.<sup>6</sup>

When the N-Word is used in schools by non-Black teachers and students, the school environment no longer remains a safe space where Black students feel welcome.

#### 02. ...causes emotional hurt and powerlessness.

When Black youth are insulted using the N-Word, their response is either anger or emotional powerlessness.<sup>7</sup> When emotionally hurt and disempowered by racial slurs, Black students sometimes resort to physical violence,<sup>5</sup> which may be the only way to alleviate their emotional hurt. This, in turn, makes Black youth offenders, so they suffer more consequences, even when they are the victims of racism.

For Black youth, these physical fights may be caused by their inability to verbally respond with an historically equivalent racial slur.<sup>8</sup> For example, racial slurs used against white people, such as “honky” or “cracker,” do not measure up to the historical hurt and dehumanization caused by the N-Word.<sup>9</sup>

### 03. ...survived attempts to ban its use.

In 2007, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) held a symbolic ceremony to bury the N-Word.<sup>10</sup> This public banning of the word was aimed at encouraging others, Black and non-Black, to condemn it – to recognize the social and moral disdain with which the Black community held the word. Unfortunately, the N-Word has not only survived, but it also continues to cause hurt and controversy.<sup>2,3</sup>

Today, the Black community, Black activists, and school administrators grapple with the presence of the N-Word in renowned literary works by white authors, including Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mocking Bird* or Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While Black students continue to feel the pain caused by the N-Word in these works, there are those who believe that Black students should get ‘used to’ the N-Word in these contexts – whether as a historical or linguistic necessity, or as an example of freedom of speech.<sup>11</sup>

### 04. ...presents challenges to institutional leaders.

When Black students report racial slurs like the N-Word to school administrators, no enduring solutions are provided to the problems caused by the emotional weaponization of the slur. Unfortunately, teachers and school administrators often only ask the offending student to apologize and promise not to use the offensive word again.

An apology becomes the solution until another student utters the offensive word and the same approach to resolution is applied. For Black students, this is like a rite of passage they cannot escape<sup>12</sup> – it has become a cultural pain they must go through at some point in their lives.

### 05. ...has importance in Black culture.

While many people argue that the N-Word should not be normalized under any circumstances, there are people within the Black community who disagree and believe the word has linguistic and cultural importance.<sup>13</sup>

Writing against the decision by the National Football League to ban the use of the N-Word, African American author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates argued that some words are meaningful when used within certain contexts and inappropriate in others.<sup>14</sup> He contends, for example, that calling someone else’s spouse “honey” can be offensive, while calling one’s own spouse “honey” is appropriate. Coates argues that the N-word is appropriate for Black people within a similar context.

## SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR EMPOWERING RESPONSES FOR BLACK YOUTH

### 01. Deepen understandings of the debasing history of the N-Word.

Youth, Black and non-Black, must understand the debasing history of the N-Word. While youth may know that the use of the N-Word is racist, they may not understand the history behind why it is racist.

Being familiar with the history of the N-Word can equip Black youth with historical knowledge they can use to respond to racial slurs. This may have an emotionally stabilizing effect that can prevent violent responses. Instead of anger, they may decide to protect themselves by teaching their offenders the history of the N-Word as a **resistive practice**. It is difficult to offend someone who understands who they are and where they come from; emotionally stable youth may first ready themselves to educate rather than fight.

### 02. Recognize that the N-Word debases both Black and non-Black people alike.

While the N-Word was used to debase, exclude, and treat Black people as non-human, it also debased those who used it against Black people.

This historical understanding forces non-Black people to critically examine their association with the inhumane and ritualistic violence enacted by those who use the N-Word. Uttering the N-Word is to associate inadvertently with these unspeakable historical practices; offenders may intentionally avoid using the N-Word if they identify this association.

The **self-debasement** associated with the use of the N-Word is important for both youth and adults to recognize. Young offenders also debase themselves when they weaponize the word, and

the emotional satisfaction from using the N-Word as an insult against Black people may lose any perceived value because of this realization.

### 03. Be attentive to impulsive responses.

Black youth should understand the ways in which children and youth can be heartbreakingly and mindlessly mean when they feel hurt. These impulsive responses to emotional hurt and frustration can also be found in adults, of course; American journalist Ted Gup, who considers himself a liberal, related a story about how he angrily uttered the N-Word at a group of Black men speeding dangerously behind him, and later felt ashamed of himself for having uttered a word in a manner uncharacteristic of his regular demeanor and values.<sup>15</sup> The N-Word may be used without any thought; it is often used to offend because it is linguistically available and highly offensive.

Black youth can pause and regulate their emotions when faced with this racial slur to understand the context in which the N-Word has been deployed.

### 04. Take back emotional power.

Knowing the history of the N-Word in its historical contexts – and that those who use it to offend them may be compensating for their own emotional hurt – can support Black youth in managing their emotions. They can use the opportunity to not only educate their offenders, but to also take back power by having the moral upper hand.

In this way, Black youth can ‘flip the script’ on their offenders, by realizing that the use of the N-Word as an insult comes from emotional vulnerability. The N-Word is not used for denigrating purposes by emotionally secure youth.

## ENDNOTES

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