Responding to Racism

Given the power and pervasiveness of race in the lives and day-to-day experiences of people in the United States, honest and informed discussion about race and racism is an opportunity all young people need.

Editor’s Note: For a sensitive topic such as this we are grateful that the author wrote a longer introduction for the leader. Please read carefully through the entire lesson before leading it. In addition, The Thoughtful Christian offers a number of adult studies on racism that may be useful for adult leaders to read and use. See the additional resources listed at the end of this Leader’s Guide for a list of available studies.

Introduction
Talking about race can be hard. Talking about racism can be even harder. There are many reasons this is the case. Yet, given the power and pervasiveness of race in the lives and day-to-day experiences of people in the United States, honest and informed discussion about race and racism is an opportunity all young people need.

In the last twenty years the racial demographics in this nation have shifted dramatically. Since 1980, the Hispanic population has more than doubled, while the white population has shrunk from 80 percent to 66 percent. Most young people today have more experience with racial diversity than any generation prior. At the same time, profound shifts have taken place in the ways we think about race. Paradigms such as color-blindness, inclusion, multi-culturalism, diversity, and
even white privilege have all come to frame the ways that Americans talk about race in a post-civil rights era nation. These paradigms have been prevalent not only in society at large, but also in churches. Our young people are already, therefore, familiar with many of them—even if they are not always clear about what they mean.

And yet some things have not shifted. The existence of racial diversity has not meant the disappearance of racism. Just consider the example of New York City, one of the most diverse cities on earth. In NYC, people of color are in the majority and whites are in the minority. Yet on any significant measure of social well-being—poverty rates, access to quality education, representation in influential political and economic institutions, the criminal justice system—communities of color fare worse than do white communities. Shifting demographics have not resulted in changing equality.

In addition, just as diversity does not automatically translate into the existence of racial equity, the paradigms we use to talk about race and what it means often confuse, rather than clarify, meaningful dialogue about racism. Consider the contradiction, for example, in telling young people that difference doesn’t really matter (we are all human underneath our skin tone, after all) and then teaching them we should recognize, value, and affirm our many differences (“Black is beautiful!” and we need to celebrate African American culture). The simultaneous persistence of this colorblind paradigm and this diversity paradigm makes it harder for us to navigate the challenges of race and racism in our lives as faithful Christians.

A final challenge that young people and those who work with them encounter when it comes to teaching and learning about racism is perhaps the most obvious but least acknowledged. Our different racial identities tend to create such different experiences among racial groups that meaningful dialogue on race and action for racial justice can be complicated. This is often the case even among those who share an economic status but do not share a racial identity. To state it directly: white people in the United States tend to have a more difficult time talking about race and racism than do people of color because of their/our different experience with racist structures. Whites are more likely to fear discussions of race, less likely to believe that racism is an ongoing problem, and more likely to explain manifestations of racial injustice as isolated incidents rather than ongoing histories.

White youth are affected by these tendencies. Studies indicate, for example, that white parents, who likely perceive the immediate dangers of racism as less threatening or relevant to their children, typically begin discussing race with them later in their children’s lives, with less frequency, and usually with less facility and preparedness than do parents of African American or Latino/a children, who perceive a clear, immediate threat to their children from the presence of racism in society, for which they feel compelled to prepare them.

In short, we come to a conversation about responding to racism from different places—places deeply shaped by the racial differences that social structures generate in our lives. And this reality impacts work with youth. If white youth have had less support in identifying and discussing race, and fewer adult models of interrupting and responding to racism than have their peers of color, their lenses and understanding can make learning and dialogue about racism with their peers of color more difficult than might be the case with other topics. Or, in an all-white youth group, these same lenses might make it difficult for the ongoing power and impact of racism today to be taken seriously—even and perhaps especially because many of our youth are fluent in the language of diversity.

But, even though these challenges are real, fear not! The act of simply enabling a better understanding of how racism affects all our lives is itself one critical response to racism. Those of us who care deeply about justice and who understand work for justice to be central to our call as Christians do well if we continue to work toward clarity about what racism is (and isn’t), how our different experiences with it impact our relationships across racial lines, and how understanding both of these better equips us to respond effectively to racism itself.

As beautiful as it would be, our task is not to equip our youth to achieve transformation of the entire globe in one fell swoop tomorrow. If we equip them in developing a clearer understanding of racism, then we are, in fact, preparing them to be able to respond to racism that they encounter in their lives.

This lesson is designed with all these complexities in mind. Its structure supports productive dialogue, whatever the racial demographic of your youth group. It is designed to provide participants a chance to experience (through a simple simulation) the reality that we are all...
affected by racism and show how this impact affects our racial self-understandings and identifications and our interpersonal relationships across racial lines.

Racism or Prejudice?
One of the most prevalent beliefs about racism, which this lesson is designed specifically to address, is that racism is the problem of people having negative views of those who are racially different from themselves. This is the definition of racism that many of the youth with whom you are working are likely to hold.

While negative views of those who are racially different are a real and important problem, this is one of the most significant confusions to stymie effective responses to and productive discussions about racism. So the central focus of this lesson is on understanding the important difference between prejudice and racism. The benefits of this understanding matter in regard to all three challenges described at the beginning of this introduction. First, clarity about prejudice and racism will enable the participants to identify the presence of structures of advantage and disadvantage based on race (racism). Second, it will make it possible to understand more clearly that our different relationships with these structures not only shape the lenses through which we see them, but also impact our particular racial experience. Third, it will enable participants to distinguish racism and prejudice while recognizing that racism is the root cause of interracial tensions and creates perfect conditions for arriving at negative assumptions about other groups based on false or incomplete information (prejudice).

According to psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum, prejudice is best understood as the stereotypes and negative assumptions any of us might hold about another racial group based on incomplete or false information. Prejudice is interpersonal. Prejudice is not the same thing as racism. Racism, writes Tatum, is a system of advantage and disadvantage based on race. It’s structural. There are relationships between prejudice and racism, but they are distinct phenomenon.

Using Tatum’s analysis, anybody of any race can demonstrate or act out of prejudice and can do so in relation to any other group—whites against Latino/as, Latino/as against blacks, Blacks against whites, and so forth. But by definition, because of the nature of the structure of the United States (think back to the NYC example), only white people can be actively or passively complicit in racism. Our current social structures advantage white folks while people of color are disadvantaged. A person of color can certainly have prejudice toward a white person or white people generally, but in almost no case does their doing so create a systemic disadvantage for white people.

Distinguishing racism and prejudice is not a game of semantics. If we are not clear in understanding what racism is, our responses to it will be ineffective!

Consider this. What if we focused all of our energy on working against the phenomenon of people holding negative views of people racially different from themselves? If we woke up tomorrow after having successfully rid ourselves of all such prejudicial thinking (wouldn’t that be great?!), we would still wake up to lives lived in social structures where white Americans continued to benefit and receive privileges (advantages) while people of color continued to struggle (disadvantages). What a disappointment that would be and how far would we have missed the mark as we aimed to create racial justice.

Pursuing clarity here in our thinking and in the thinking of youth participants is critical to developing a vision for what our antiracist responses might look like.

Both prejudice and racism need to be challenged and responded to. But we can’t make serious inroads against prejudice if we don’t also work against racism. And we are less likely to be able to work together against racism if we don’t better understand how prejudice and interracial tensions relate to our different experiences with racist structures. So again, we’re not talking semantics!

Indeed, if we choose to believe the prophet Micah, that what is good and what is required of us is to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God, then careful consideration of one of the most confused and challenging dimensions of our life together in the United States makes this first (or ongoing) act of helping to explain and clarify racism central to our call. And it is more than that. Responding to that call is a doing and loving and walking that is deeply life-giving and hope-renewing as well.

Goal for the Session
Youth will identify the role that race plays in their own lives and the difference between prejudice and racism. They will then consider antiracist responses.
Preparing for the Session

• Read this Leader’s Guide and adjust any activities for the needs of your group.
• Watch the videos suggested in the Teaching Alternatives section at the end of this Leader’s Guide and consider how you might use them.
• Think about your own feelings and pray for guidance to make this experience a productive one for your group.
• Know your audience! We arrive to this topic with different experiences. White youth have a different relationship to racism than do youth of color. Youth of color have different relationships to racism relative to their own distinct identities and histories. All of this affects the way that a conversation about racism unfolds. If you are teaching this lesson in an all-white group, participants may have less experience with overt discussions of racism and be more likely to assume that racism is primarily an interpersonal problem (one that they are likely to say they don’t have). Emphasizing structural dimensions of racism is particularly important in this case. If you have a group in which there are only a few youth of color, it is important that the leader recognize the likelihood of these participants having had more experiences with racism that may make it more difficult for them to trust the safety of the discussion. The stakes in this conversation are likely higher for youth of color. Thus, while taking care to not put any participant on the spot is important, it is especially so for youth who are underrepresented in the group. This means never asking anyone to speak for “their” racial group, intentionally redirecting the conversation (in your role as facilitator) if another participant asks them to do so, and taking care to actively avoid making assumptions about anyone’s racial experience.
• Make copies of the Participant Handout for each participant.
• Lay out the paper and supplies for the Arrival activities.
• Chairs are best placed in a circle so they can be easily clustered into three small groups during the game.
• While the game used in the Exploring section works best with a group size of at least six persons (two persons in three different groups) and can be used with as many as thirty, it requires just three people to play. In such situations, each participant would work individually. The facilitator would utilize the same messages and tactics to emphasize the competitive nature of the game with three groups of one, as he/she can with larger groups. If the group size is less than three, the game will not work and the facilitator should use a Teaching Alternative.
• Consider what prize you will use for the game. The easiest and cheapest prize might be a bag of candy. Other healthier alternatives include bottles of juice, fruit, muffins, or non-food items such as pens.

Materials Needed

• Board
• Two pieces of newsprint, one labeled “True,” another “False”
• Tape
• Container such as a basket to hold racial statistics for Arriving activity
• Two copies of Resource Sheet 1. Keep one copy for yourself and cut the other copy into strips to place in the basket for the Arriving activity.
• Copies of Resource Sheet 2 for groups. Note: read through the instructions carefully to be sure you make the appropriate number of copies of each sheet.
• Marker
• Prizes for the game

Teaching Tip

The changing demographics of this nation sometimes mean that youth are actually more comfortable discussing race than many adults are. So even while the challenges described in the “Introduction” section are real, do not assume that participants will find the discussion difficult. In fact, this insight pertains to one of the most important tips for facilitating a teaching/learning exercise with race. To the extent possible, actively avoid making assumptions about any participant’s experience, racial identity, or perspective on race and racism. Race can surprise us, and participants should always be allowed to speak for themselves and be heard on their terms. Establishing this basic principle as a shared guideline for the group (that is: trying to not make assumptions and to allow each person to speak
for himself or herself) may actually be a great statement to make to set the tone as you begin your time together.

**Arriving (10 minutes)**

**Racism Is / Racism Isn’t**

Place the individual facts/statements (resource sheet 1) together in a large basket and have two sheets of newsprint posted—one labeled “True” and one labeled “False.” As participants arrive have them draw one statement from the basket and tape it to either the true or false piece of newsprint depending on their answer. There are twelve statements. Depending on your group size, have participants draw more than one slip. Once most have arrived, distribute the remaining slips and ask youth to tape them to the piece of newsprint where they believe each belongs.

**Gathering (5 minutes)**

**Review Answers**

Gather the group and go through the true/false list with the participants. Clarify any statement that was placed on the wrong piece of newsprint and move it to the correct one. Address any questions that participants may have about the statements.

**Opening (5 minutes)**

1. **Prayer and Scripture**

Distribute the Participant Handout and have a volunteer read the prayer or say it in unison. Have youth read Micah 6:8 from their Bibles and, if youth have a different version, compare it to the NRSV text on the Participant Handout.

2. **Do Justice?**

Invite participants to come up with a definition of justice. Then briefly discuss what it means to “do” justice. Ask them to look at the newsprint from the Arriving activity and think about how justice relates to the set of true statements. Ask:

   - Where do you see evidence of injustice on this list?
   - What would justice look like?

**Exploring (15 minutes)**

3. **The Game**

The unfair set up of this game (about which participants begin unaware) ensures group 1 will always win handily and group 3 will always struggle. To make it most effective, the group leader should wander among the groups as they work on their “clues,” praising the succeeding group and expressing dismay toward the group(s) who struggle. Participants will quickly begin to react differently to the game and develop negative feelings toward the other groups. The unfair set up of the game will then become the example of racism. The negative assumptions and attitudes participants begin to experience toward the other groups become the example of prejudice.

To begin, form three separate groups and explain how the game works:

- The game will be conducted in two rounds of two and a half minutes each. In each round, groups will work together to identify a list of objects using a set of clues that are written down on a sheet of paper.
- Whichever group has the most points after the two rounds wins and earns a prize. (Only one group can win.)

Give them the rules:

- Groups must not talk to other groups during the game or get up out of their seats.
- Within each group everyone has to agree on what their final answer is for each set of clues.
- The groups must write their answers down on the paper that lists the clues.

After explaining the game and the rules, pass out the first set of clues to each group (resource sheet 2).

Note: the clues are different but, at this point, don’t tell this to the participants! Give each group their questions for round 1 face down. Each participant in groups 1 and 2 gets a copy of the questions, but only give one copy to group 3.

When you say “go,” the groups may turn their clues over and start the two and a half minute round. Walk around the groups as they work, smiling at group 1 as you see them successfully identifying each item, sharing your consternation or confusion about why group 3 is struggling (perhaps even saying to them things like “you need to work harder and quicker”).

When you call time, begin with group three and ask them to share their answers. On the board or sheet of newsprint award twenty points for each correct answer. Make clear your disappointment if/when they do not
get an item correct. Do the same with each group, showing them the discrepancies in the scores before they begin round two.

Follow the same procedure for round two. Then declare group 1 the winner! (They always win.)

4. Debrief the Game
As soon as the game is concluded and you have declared a winner (but have not distributed the prize!), tell the participants that you are stepping out of the role you have been playing as game leader and that you need to admit to them the game was rigged. Ask someone in group 1 to read one of their clues and then someone in group three to read theirs.

To debrief, questions should include the following:

• What are your initial reactions to learning that the game was rigged?
• Ask each group how it felt while playing the game.
• Ask each group what they started to feel toward or think about other groups.
• What do you think your relationships with each other would have started to look like if we played this game for a long time and there was a really big reward at the end (like free college tuition for whichever group came out on top)?

The following themes will almost certainly emerge and should be emphasized:

• The successful group may have begun to think the other groups were “dumb” or had something wrong with them (because they assumed the game was fair; this is the most common conclusion).
• The middle group is likely to have experienced a desire to just “work harder.” Close to keeping up, they buckle down and focus, thinking “if only” they do so, they can catch up.
• The third group is likely to have gotten frustrated, wanted to quit, and begun to have negative feelings toward the successful group.

Point out to the participants the way the unfairness of the game affected the way they felt toward each other.

Invite member(s) of the “winning” group to take their prizes, then offer the “losing” group to choose their prize before then offering prizes to everyone else.

Responding (15 minutes)
5. Prejudice and Racism
Explain to the participants that their reactions to the game help illustrate the difference between racism and prejudice, as well as the relationship between these two terms. Direct them to the Participant Handout where the definitions are. Ask participants the following questions:

• How does your experience of the game help illustrate the difference between racism and prejudice?
• How does your experience of the game help you understand the way in which prejudice is a result of racism?
• How does learning that the game is rigged (racism) help you rethink your experience of prejudice?
• How do the structural rules of the game impact how you see the list of true statements that we compiled in our first activity?

Emphasize these teaching points:

• Structures of racism mean that some groups “get more” than others and it has nothing to do with intelligence, effort, or ability.
• Because we don’t always see that racism is at work, we interpret its effects as meaning that something is wrong with other groups (“people of color don’t work hard enough” or “white people cheat”).
• Racism negatively affects some groups, unfairly gives others advantages, and makes tensions between racial groups higher.

6. What Does an Ally Look Like?
Invite the participants to strategize how they could disrupt the game. Questions to discuss:

• Groups 1 and 2: Once you know the game is rigged, what could you do to interrupt it (call the game master out, refuse to play, share the clues with other groups, and so forth)?
• Groups 2 and 3: What kinds of behaviors would you want from group 1 so that you would know that you could trust that they were going to help you challenge the rules of the game and make it more fair?
Closing (10 minutes)

7. One Thing We Can Do
Spend a minute and allow any person in the group to say one thing they will consider doing about racism. It might be an individual effort or an idea for a group of people. An alternative option is to invite each person to say one thing they learned from this lesson.

8. Covenant Prayer
Say this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of justice,
we want to learn
what is good and how to do justice.
We commit together to keep
learning, growing, and challenging
together
those structures that harm your beloved children
and keep us from caring for each other as we
should.
Give us courage and vision
to challenge prejudice and racism
and to encourage those around us to do the same.
Amen.

Teaching Alternatives
• For a more energetic group, during the Arriving activity tape each individual statement to a small ball. Place all the balls on a sheet or parachute and have the participants shake it. As the balls pop off, have participants take turns saying if they think a statement is true or false. True statements get thrown back into the parachute/sheet and false statements get put in a trash can in the room.
• Watch the following video together: http://www.upworthy.com/watch-as-one-boy-lays-out-an-experience-most-white-people-will-never-have-to-worry-about. Discuss your reactions to the video. Where does racism here show up as a structure? How is this young man affected by his experience as an African American youth who encounters the structure of policing?
• Watch the following video together: http://www.upworthy.com/know-anyone-that-thinks-racial-profiling-is-exaggerated-watch-this-and-tell-me-when-your-jaw-drops-27c=ub1. Discuss the function of prejudice and racism as they play out in this video.

• Find a recent newspaper story on a racial incident or statistic (unemployment data, racial profiling, and so forth; the more local the better). Lay out the story and have the participants work together to write out on a piece of newsprint all the significant aspects of the story they can find in relationship to both the structures that are clear in the story and the prejudice that is resulting from the way these structures are at work.

Key Scriptures
Micah 6:8
Luke 19:1–10

For More Information

Books

Web Site Resources
Black Youth Project: http://www.blackyouthproject.com
“For Whites (Like Me)” series at formations: http://livingformations.com
Southern Poverty Law Center: http://www.splcenter.org

Adult Thoughtful Christian Studies on Race
Racism 101
Why Is It So Difficult to Talk about Race?
The Bible and Racism
A History of Racism in the United States
White Privilege
Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?
Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?

These studies are also available as a study pack titled “The Racism Study Pack.”
Endnotes
1. See a recent study by the National Center for Educational Statistics at http://nces.ed.gov.
2. For a discussion of the impact this “colorblind” paradigm has on young people, see my publication “Dear Parents of White Children,” which can be found at the blog formations in the series “For Whites (Like Me)”; http://livingformations.com/2013/08/06/for-whites-like-me-on-white-kids/.
3. The exoneration of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin was perhaps the most recent example of the stark divide in how whites and African Americans interpret such events. See polling on the case here: http://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/Washington Post/2013/07/22/National-Politics/Polling/release_252.xml.
5. Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Conversations on Race is one of the best sources for explaining the different places from which young people enter this conversation and the ways these different places impact the nature of the conversation.
6. The game (How Does Racism Work?) used in the Exploring section is a modification of an exercise first created by Anne Rhodes and a group of students at Ithaca College who wanted to better teach about power, privilege, and the structural impact of racism.

About the Writer

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Resource Sheet 1

Instructions for Leader

Print two copies of the following true and false statements. Keep one complete copy for yourself with the answers. Cut the second copy into strips, excluding the answers, and place them in the container for the Arriving activity. Be sure to remove the bracketed information that follows some of the statements when cutting them out for the activity.

True Statements

In almost every state white students graduate high school at higher rates than Latino and African American students (in some states as much as a 40 percent difference).

A white male who is a convicted felon is as or more likely to be hired for a job than an African American male with the same qualifications and no criminal record.

Since the end of the civil rights movement, African Americans have consistently been unemployed at rates two to two and half times that of white Americans.

The gap in annual income between black and white Americans is as large today as it was at the end of the civil rights movement.

African Americans are only 13 percent of the U.S. population, but they make up 56 percent of those executed or on death row.

Latina women earn $0.56 for every $1.00 white men earn in the United States.

Since the 1980s, the enrollment of students of color has increased 57 percent at the college level.

[Note to leader: analysis suggests that this is one success of Affirmative Action policies in education.]

The civil rights movement led to big changes in how we talk about race in the United States.
False Statements

Leader: Note that all of these have bracketed information that will need to be removed when cutting these out for the activity.

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Affirmative Action has evened the playing field among blacks and whites.

[Note to leader: college educated African American women on average make $19,000 less per year than college educated white men even though Affirmative Action is supposed to address gender and race.]

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People of color make up 40 percent of those in U.S. prisons, even though they are a minority of the U.S. population.

[Actually, people of color make up 60 percent of the U.S. prison population. Studies show that this is mostly the result of drug sentencing, even though data also shows that white Americans use drugs at the same or higher rates than communities of color.]

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Since 2008, the wealth gap between Hispanic and black families (who have less wealth) and white families (more wealth) has gotten smaller.

[Since the recession began, Hispanic and black families have suffered even more greatly because they have been more heavily affected by the housing crisis (a significant source of wealth) and by higher rates of unemployment.]

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The poverty rate among black families is twice that of white families.

[Poverty is at least three times as high for black families as it is for white families.]
Resource Sheet 2

Instructions for Leader

This page includes the answers for the game used in the Exploring section. Print one copy for yourself to use. Then make copies of the pages that follow to be distributed to the groups during the game. Copy enough for one sheet per player, except for group three, which should only receive one sheet for the entire group to share. Note: group and round information is found at the top of each page to help you keep track of which sheet goes to which group.

Answers for the Game

Round One
Item 1: ruler
Item 2: chalkboard
Item 3: apple
Item 4: shoes

Round Two
Item 5: calendar
Item 6: microwave
Item 7: roller blades/skates
Item 8: jump rope
Group 1, Round 1

ITEM 1
Has a rectangular shape
Has lines
Used for measuring
Contains numbers that go up to twelve

ITEM 2
Can be square or rectangular
Comes in different colors
Used with a dusty substance the color of snow
Usually found in places of learning
Usually found on the wall

ITEM 3
Many colors and sizes
Has thin or thick exterior
Grows on trees
Can be found in pies or on a stick

ITEM 4
Ranges in size
Comes in pairs
Has a sole
Worn on the lower half of the body
ITEM 5
Shows the months, weeks, days of the year
Keeps you organized
Is made out of paper or kept electronically
Might hang on the wall or be in the form of an app

ITEM 6
Rectangular
Uses energy
Has door and timer
Heats up objects

ITEM 7
Form of transportation
Has eight wheels (each in the pair has four wheels)
Can be entertaining
Brakes are usually made of rubber
Only one person can use them at a time

ITEM 8
6' to 8' end to end
Made of wood or plastic and twisted fiber
Has handles
Used by children and athletes
For fun, exercise
Involves jumping or skipping
Group 2, Round 1

ITEM 1
Has a rectangular shape
Has lines
Has many uses
6” to 36” long

ITEM 2
Way to communicate
Can be square or rectangular
Comes in different colors

ITEM 3
Many colors and sizes
Has thin or thick exterior
Has many uses
Grows on trees

ITEM 4
Ranges in size
Comes in pairs
Used for protection
ITEM 5
Keeps you organized
Is made out of paper or kept electronically
Has to be updated on a regular basis

ITEM 6
Rectangular
Three dimensional
Uses energy
Heats up objects

ITEM 7
Form of transportation
Has eight cylinders
Can be entertaining
Big during the 1980s

ITEM 8
6’ to 8’ end to end
Made of wood and fiber
Has handles
For fun, exercise
Group 3, Round 1

ITEM 1
A stick of wood or plastic

ITEM 2
Way to communicate
Can be square or rectangular
Comes in different colors

ITEM 3
Many colors and sizes
Edible

ITEM 4
Ranges in size
Can be open or closed
Group 3, Round 2

ITEM 5
Is made out of paper or can be electronic
Has to be updated

ITEM 6
Found in a home
Has three dimensions
Has a timer

ITEM 7
Form of transportation
Has eight cylinders

ITEM 8
Made of wood and fiber
Has handles
Flexible