

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT RACISM

As a family, you may be thinking about how to talk to your child about current events, race and racism.

Though difficult, talking with children about the value of diversity and need for racial equality is important. This is true regardless of whether stories of injustice and racial violence are in the news or not.

Children of all races and ethnicities have questions about race and racism, so these conversations can be valuable in every household. Research shows that children can internalize racial bias as early as two years and have opinions about race before starting kindergarten. It is never too soon to start the conversation.



These are hard topics to discuss, and parents may be wondering how to talk to kids about racism. There is no single perfect way to do this, but a few suggestions are listed below to help you get started. It is likely we may experience some strong feelings as we think about how to talk to kids about racism, perhaps as we look at resources listed at the bottom of this article.

When discussing an important topic like racism with children, we want to make sure we are using developmentally appropriate language so that they are able to fully comprehend a big and meaningful topic. Also remember these conversations offer you an opportunity to learn from and with your child. Here are tips on how to talk to kids about racism in a developmentally appropriate way:

2-7 YEARS OLD:

At this stage, children watch and imitate other people's behaviors. As parents, modeling and embodying an attitude of respect toward others is critical. For younger children, using books and videos (see resources below) can especially be helpful for teaching about these issues. Children at this stage are also more aware of physical differences among themselves and their peers and may comment on it. Sometimes these comments or questions can sound very blunt or awkward. Try not to rush to silence your child if they say something uncomfortable, but instead use these opportunities to ask your child what they think about the differences they are observing. In these conversations, talk with them about how we can celebrate differences using kind and accepting language.

7-11 YEARS OLD:

Children in this stage engage in logical thinking and continue to be quite literal and concrete in how they perceive the world. Because of this, parents can have an open conversation with their child about what is right versus wrong and fair versus unfair.

12 YEARS AND OLDER:

In this stage, adolescents and young adults can engage in abstract thinking and are now able to consider moral dilemmas, philosophical and ethical issues, and may take on a sociopolitical stance. Finding shared ways to make a difference is important and is an opportunity for you to model to your adolescent how to respond appropriately and effectively when incidences of injustices occur.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

STARTING THE CONVERSATION CAN BE HARD.

Just know that starting the conversation and feeling uncomfortable is better than not having the conversation at all.

ASKING OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS CAN BE HELPFUL, ESPECIALLY WITH OLDER CHILDREN.

These questions can be woven into other conversations you have with your child. You can ask questions such as,

- “What do you think our family values are about people who are different from us?”
- “What are ways speech and actions can hurt people?”
- “What have you heard about racism and racial bias?”
- “What is free speech and what do you think that means?”

For younger children, you can respond to their questions and concerns or raise your own questions such as,

- “Has anyone hurt your feelings because of words they said about the way you look? What did that feel like for you?”
- “You’re right, your skin is darker than Grandma’s skin. What do you think of that?”
- “When you see that someone is different than you, it’s ok to be curious. What’s a nice way to talk about the differences you see?”
- “I think he is sad because other people were mean about the color of his skin. What could we say to him about that?”

ALL OF THESE FEELINGS ARE OK

Particularly with the events in the news, ask children what they may have heard and how they are feeling right now. Let children have the space to talk. They may be fearful; they may want to do something; or they may be sad or angry. All of these feelings are OK, and you can let your child know that.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ACKNOWLEDGE RACE

Taking a “colorblind” approach including statements like, “I don’t see race” can cause people who DO experience racism to feel as if you do not see that racism exists. Trying to teach children not to see race at all is unrealistic and can be confusing. Instead, acknowledge that racism is real and present in everyday life.

LIMIT EXPOSURE TO VIOLENT MEDIA AND VIDEOS

While we do want to acknowledge the reality of racial violence, we also know that children do not need to see videos of violence in order to know it’s there. Watching these videos directly, or even hearing detailed descriptions of the videos, can be traumatizing to children. It can also traumatize us as adults and make it more difficult to talk to our children.

BE OPEN TO LEARNING AND MODEL THAT LEARNING TO CHILDREN.

You do not need to have the “right” answer to every question, but you can show children that you are interested in learning and seeking answers together.

LEAVE SPACE FOR ANGER AND SADNESS

Often, we want to protect children from negative emotions, but anger and sadness are natural responses when children —or adults! — see violence and injustice in their communities. Let children know it’s OK for them to feel this way.

THERE ARE STEPS WE CAN TAKE TOGETHER

While these issues are often not something that we can completely address in a single conversation, we can show children that there are steps that we can take together to respond to injustice. Help children channel emotions into actions such as writing letters, creating art and volunteering.

CHILDREN LEARN ABOUT THE WORLD THROUGH THE MEDIA THEY VIEW

Children learn about the world through the media they view, and oftentimes, the media only shows images of black and brown people as criminals or victims. Be mindful of the images your child is seeing and seek out movies, images and stories that show people of color as strong, intelligent and capable.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:

[Talking to children about racism](#) —from the American Academy of Pediatrics

[Resources for empowering children and uplifting youth through healthy communication about race, includes parent handouts and activities for children](#) — from the American Psychological Association

[Thoughts on talking to children about police brutality](#) — from Aha! Parenting

“Coming Together: Standing up to Racism, a CNN and Sesame Street Town Hall for Kids and Families” The 60-minute special talk to kids about racism, the recent nationwide protests, embracing diversity and being more empathetic and understanding.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/app-news-section/cnn-sesame-street-race-town-hall-app-june-6-2020-app/index.html>