

Talking to Children About Racism



Talking to children about racism is difficult — and necessary.

But it can be hard to know how to begin. For Black families, this conversation has never been optional. White parents can be allies by addressing racism openly with kids — early and often. Hard conversations take patience, compassion and openness.

We've put together a list of resources to help families start, and maintain, an open dialogue about race and racism.

TIPS FOR HAVING THE CONVERSATION

- **Be present, thoughtful and ready to speak to your child where they are.** Use age-appropriate language, and be willing to help your child explore hard or upsetting feelings.
- **Colorblindness is not a virtue.** Don't gloss over the fact that Black people and other people of color are often treated unfairly purely because they are not white. Likewise, remember that diversity is beautiful and differences are something to celebrate!
- **Model anti-racist behavior.** Actions speak louder than words. Conversations are important, but children also need to see parents actively standing up against racism and injustice. Show your children what being an ally looks like by speaking up when you see racist behavior, calling out systemic racism and actively working for change.
- **Educate yourself.** Make a point of consuming media by BIPOC authors, artists and thought leaders. Be intentional about reading, watching and sharing media that helps you expand your horizons and encourages new and diverse perspectives.
- **Acknowledge that everyone has biases.** Confronting your own biases and internalized racism is essential. Talk to your child about what bias means and be open about the work you're doing to change.
- **Try to be calm, but don't hide your emotions.** It makes sense to be upset by injustice. Letting your child know you're sad or angry gives them an opportunity to process their own feelings with you.

- **Keep the conversation open.** Confronting racism takes much more than one discussion. Weave conversations about race and racism into your daily life and make educating your children (and yourself!) about racism an ongoing practice.
- **Rely on your support system.** For parents of children of color, talking about race and racism can be exhausting and traumatic. Prioritize your own mental health, and lean on trusted friends, family or professionals for support when you need to.

TIPS FOR TALKING TO YOUNG CHILDREN

- **Kids are aware of racial differences early on.** Help your child begin to explore their understanding of race by asking questions like, "A lot of the people in our neighborhood have pinkish skin. Have you noticed that?" or "Which crayon should we use for the skin color of the people in your drawing?"
- **Normalize diversity** and celebrate representation by making sure your child is exposed to diverse toys, books and games early on. For example, Black dolls or action figures, stories written by BIPOC authors, and books, movies or games with protagonists of color.
- **Be clear, direct and factual.** Even little kids get a lot of confusing and inaccurate messages about race. That's why it's important to use plain, straight-forward language. Instead of, "People are upset because some groups treat other groups differently," say: "This is about the way that white people treat Black people unfairly." When we expect children to read between the lines, they can miss the message.

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- **Come up with ideas for what kids can say or do when they encounter racist behavior.** For example, a script they can use if someone makes a racist comment: “That wasn’t a nice thing to say. It was racist.” Or a plan of action, like agreeing they’ll tell a teacher, or a parent right away if they don’t feel safe speaking up.
- **Avoid assuming you know how your child feels.** Start with broad questions and go from there. “How did you feel about what you saw on the news? What did it make you think about?”
- **Encourage questions.** Your child may ask tough questions that you can’t answer — and that’s okay! You can set a good example by sticking with it even when you’re confused or uncomfortable. For example, if your child asks you why white people are mean to Asian American people, you could say, “Wow, that’s a good question. I’m not sure how to answer it yet. I’m going to learn more and we can talk it over together.”

TIPS FOR TALKING TO TEENS

- **Acknowledge discomfort but keep going.** Teenagers benefit from seeing parents push through difficulty and discomfort. Talking about racism is often hard, upsetting, frustrating and difficult but by sticking with it you’ll be setting an important example. “I find it really hard to talk about this. But it also makes me more hopeful about making change.”
- **Let your teenager lead whenever possible.** Teens and young adults are often very aware of issues around race and social justice — sometimes even more so than parents. Whenever possible let your teen take the lead and be curious: What are their thoughts? What are they seeing, hearing and learning from friends, at school and online? For example: “I saw that a lot of the protests are being led by teens. What do you think of that?” “Have you read anything you found interesting lately?”
- **Model being an ally.** Let’s be real, teens don’t always want to talk, but they are very aware of how parents act. It’s essential for white parents especially to show that racism, overt or subtle, will not be tolerated. Calling out racism when you

see it is a great way to model anti-racist behavior for your teen. For example, pushing back when someone tells a racist joke: “Jokes like that aren’t funny, they’re gross and harmful.” Acknowledging examples of systemic racism: “Every Black character in this TV show is a sidekick.” Or taking action: “I’m writing to our council person.”

- **If a child has experienced discrimination or racism, help them process it.** Racism and discrimination are facts of life for people of color. When kids encounter racism it may take time for them to process the experience and their feelings. Make a point of checking in regularly and let them know you’re there if they want to talk. “I just wanted to check in on how you’re feeling after what that racist guy said at the march today. I’m here whenever you need to talk.” Or, “I noticed your English teacher has only assigned books by white authors. How are you feeling about that?”
- **Let kids see you’re working, too.** One of the most valuable skills to model is a willingness to change your mind, even when doing so is uncomfortable or upsetting. “I used to stay quiet when I heard people say racist things because I was uncomfortable speaking up, but I’m working to change that.”

Resources to Expand the Conversation

- **Anti-racism resources for parents and teachers:**
<https://www.embracerace.org>
- **Talking About Race: From the National Museum of African American History and Culture**
<https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/audiences/parent-caregiver>
- **Colorlines: The Dos and Don’ts of Talking to Kids of Color About White Supremacy**
<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/dos-and-donts-talking-kids-color-about-white-supremacy>
- **Resources for Race, Equity, Anti-Racism and Inclusion**
<https://diversebooks.org/resources-for-race-equity-and-inclusion/>

For more tips and suggested resources, visit the Child Mind Institute’s article [Talking to Kids About Racism and Violence](#)

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