

How to Talk to Kids about Race and Racism

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There's no question: talking about race can be sensitive, and yes, even a bit messy. And "choosing" whether or not to talk to your kids about race is an option many parents, specifically those of color, don't have; some children may inevitably learn about it by confronting racism in their everyday lives.

This can make the "conversation about race" even trickier, as what is discussed can change depending on a variety of factors, such as a family's make up, their socioeconomic class, or the community they live in. Therefore, the context will vary, depending on who is talking and what their personal experiences are with race and racism.

In short? There's no "one way" to dive into this topic. There's no such thing as "quick tips" or foolproof advice when it comes to discussing the complexities of race. But, there are better ways to go about it and each parent will have to decide for themselves what makes the most sense for them and their family. Above all, it's a conversation *all* parents need to have, no matter your background or experience. So, if you're curious how to get this conversation started, here's what the experts have to say.

Actually talk about it.

For some families, talking about race is a regular part of daily life. For others, it's a subject that can be difficult to discuss. But for everyone, it's an incredibly important conversation and shouldn't be avoided. And, research backs that up.

Dr. Margaret Hagerman, a sociologist and author of **White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America**, spent two years studying 30 affluent, white families in a Midwestern community, during which she found, "kids are learning and hearing about race regardless of whether parents are talking to them about it."

But how? **Dr. Erin Winkler**, an associate professor at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, says children notice skin color, just as they'd notice any other physical difference (i.e., glasses, long hair, or height). At the same time, "children are learning to categorize – shapes, colors, and people, too," Winkler explains.

So, what ends up happening? "Not talking about race causes children to come to a lot of harmful, problematic and factually inaccurate conclusions," Hagerman says. If we teach children that racism is simply a thing of the past, and that today we are all equal – and all equally capable of achieving the "American Dream" – children "may mistakenly assume that the unequal racial patterns they see are earned or justified," Winkler says. Like anything else, children begin filling in the information gaps themselves, and their data points may not always be coming from the most reliable sources.

Still, some parents don't talk about race because they don't want to raise their children to be aware of differences – insisting it enables children to see one another as more "equal." While the intentions may be inherently good, Parent Toolkit expert and Director of Social Engagement for **iCivics**, **Amber Coleman-**

Mortley cautions parents from adopting a “colorblind” perspective of the world. “At our core, we are the same. We all want to feel safe, accepted and loved. But teaching kids to be colorblind sets them up for failure,” Coleman-Mortley says. “Moreover, walking around acting like you don’t see differences can actually do more harm.”

But to be clear, this isn’t a discussion reserved for white parents and their kids. While ensuring we raise children who are aware of other people’s experiences is a facet of the overall conversation, parents with children of color need to talk to their kids, too. “Like it or not, due to historical practice and present biases, in some communities and schools children of color have a profoundly different experience than white children do,” Parent Toolkit expert and author of *How to Raise an Adult* and *Real American*, a memoir on race, Julie Lythcott-Haims, explains. “Parents need to take stock of the community in which they are raising their kids, talk about the racial differences and how people are sometimes treated unfairly on the basis of race, and prepare their child to be self-aware, smart and safe out there.”

Set the example.

So, where should parents begin? Parent Toolkit expert and founder of Cultures of Dignity, Rosalind Wiseman, says in order to have thoughtful – and productive – conversations about race with children, parents need to be comfortable discussing it themselves.

What if you find yourself intimidated by the topic? Make a point to learn more. “It takes an active effort to consume information about people different than you,” Lythcott-Haims explains. She says documentaries, such as 13TH, or books,

such as *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race*, are good places to start. “It’s not about whose perspective is right or wrong, it’s about acknowledging there are perspectives other than your own and making an effort to learn about them,” Lythcott-Haims says.

While it’s important to be informed, the best way to overcome stereotypes is by making sincere connections with a variety of individuals. Sometimes, whether by choice or by design, we aren’t exposed to people who are different from us. Think: Does your network of friends look the same? Ask yourself why. “If you’re encouraging your children to have a diverse network of friends, but everyone who enters your home looks the same, that will leave an impression on them,” Winkler explains.

Lythcott-Haims encourages parents to give themselves access to other people’s experiences. Just hearing a person’s story can completely change the way we perceive the world. “When we break into small groups and say, ‘I want to tell you about my life and hear more about yours,’ then we see each other less as labels and more like human beings,” Lythcott-Haims says. This doesn’t just go for parents, but kids as well. “Adults can facilitate this by bringing kids together to share their stories with one another,” Lythcott-Haims suggests. “Watch how commonality and bridge-building happens.”

“From my research, what we say is only one piece of it,” Winkler says. “Children don’t buy, ‘do as I say, not as I do.’ They’ll notice our patterns.” So, if you want to raise socially aware children, keep the phrase “actions speak louder than words” in mind. After all, while conversations are crucial, our children will inevitably learn most from the examples we set for them.

Help your child navigate their curiosity.

As any parent knows, it's natural for children to ask questions. And as any parent who's ever sported a new haircut knows, children don't always ask questions as delicately as we'd hope. But we don't want to discourage our children from learning more, so what can we do?

"Teaching your kids how to be respectfully curious can be difficult," Coleman-Mortley says. But why does it seem especially hard when it comes to talking about race? Michele Chang, Director of Facilitation and Curriculum for **Challenging Racism**, explains, "Race used to be taboo topic of conversation. It was considered impolite to talk about." So, how does this affect kids? "Young children have natural curiosity about differences, but they don't put any value on what it means, until they pick it up from what their parent says, or what the media tells them," Chang says. "So, when a child asks their parent, 'Why does that person look like that?' and their parent shushes them, it shuts down the conversation and signals to the child there's something wrong."

Parents also need to be aware of what the child is *actually* asking about or noticing. "There's so much out there on how to talk to kids – we need to think more about how to listen to kids," Hagerman says. For example, if your young child says something that you think could potentially have racist undertones, Shari Benites, **Challenging Racism** Facilitator and Trainer, recommends taking a moment to stop and ask yourself: What are they saying? What are they noticing? Ask them, "What makes you think that?" Their observation may be completely different than what you initially assumed. And the only way to truly know what your child meant after saying a "questionable" statement is by asking them to clarify or explain further.

When children begin growing curious about the world around them, they usually look to their parents to explain. But, what if you honestly don't know what to say? Benites says, "Parents need to know it's okay *not* to know. It can be natural to want to have all the answers, but sometimes the best answer is, 'I'm not sure. But let's look into it and learn about it together.'" This way, you're not just showing your children the importance of admitting when you're uncertain about something, but also keeping the conversation moving forward in a positive direction. Additionally, it's okay to return to a question if you don't know what to say right away, Winkler says. There's always time to loop back; we've never "missed the moment."

Intention, interpretation, and impact are all worth addressing when a child asks a question. So, understand *why* the question is being asked. Is it coming from a place of judgment, or a sincere effort to know more? And where does the *need* to know more stem from? Then, break down *how* the question is being asked. "Prefacing it with, 'Hey that's really cool...?' or 'I've never seen that before, can you tell me about it...?' can show the other person you're genuinely curious," Coleman-Mortley says.

Although we want our children to ask questions, *who* they're asking matters. It's one thing to have a child confide in their parent, it's a completely other thing for them to blatantly ask someone they don't know. "One child's curiosity doesn't trump another child's privacy," Chang explains. Moreover, Chang emphasizes it's not a person of color's responsibility to "teach" people. "If your child is curious, you can read about it, find out more, and from there, have a sincere conversation about it," Chang says.

Make it relatable.

How many times have your kids whined about something being unfair? The concept of fairness matters to children – a lot. And because of this, unfairness is the perfect way to explain and conceptualize racism to young children, Winkler says.

Since children notice patterns, they may mistakenly assign their own meaning to understand why racism exists, Winkler explains. But, it's not exactly easy to break down structural or institutional racism to a child, either. So, Winkler came up with her own method, which she calls the "spider web activity."

In her piece, [Here's How To Raise Race-Conscious Children](#), Winkler explains, "Give children balls of string and ask them to move around the room unraveling their balls of string to make a very tangled web. Once they are finished, ask them to untangle it. They will soon find that it is much more difficult to untangle the web than it was to create it in the first place. Then explain that working to make society fair is a lot like untangling this web."

Racism can be difficult to explain to children, no matter who you are. Some parents may worry that introducing the concept of racism could be damaging, or scary, especially if that child could be the target of racism, or if the parent has experienced racism themselves. But, instead of staying silent, it's crucial to empower children. "Parents cannot responsibly teach children about racism and then say, 'Well, sorry! That's the way it is,'" Winkler says. Instead, Winkler advises parents to explain, "Even though there is unfairness, there have always been people working to change it, and we can be a part of it, too." This way, you are showing your child racism *is* possible to untangle, and they can be a part of that solution.

Be open about addressing mistakes.

Try as we might, mistakes still happen. “If someone says something offensive, it’s important to keep in mind their experience probably does not include your experience,” Coleman-Mortley says. But, what should children actually say to someone who has offended them? Chang recommends equipping children with three words: “Tell me more.” Open, honest communication begins with a willingness to talk and understand. “There’s no better way to shut down a conversation than to call someone a racist,” Chang says. “Saying, ‘tell me more’ gives the other person the opportunity to explain their point of view.”

Of course, there are times when open, honest communication just doesn’t suffice, and more needs to be said – or done. If your child comes to you upset about something they heard, Benites recommends saying, “It is not your job to educate your classmates about race, but with that in mind, what do you want to do about it?” The focus should be on figuring out what the child needs, and going from there.

What should we tell our children when *they* accidentally say the wrong thing? Explain to your kids, “The key is to listen *before* you react. Don’t just rush to say, ‘That’s not what I meant,’ before understanding why the other person is upset,” Benites says. “We need to teach our children they are always obligated to listen to what people say and how they feel.”

Once your child understands why the other person is offended, they can sincerely offer an apology. “The best thing you can say is, ‘I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to offend. What do I need to do to ensure I am not making that mistake

again?” Lythcott-Haims says. It’s not about being perfect; it’s about taking ownership when we’ve made a mistake, and using it as a learning opportunity to be more aware in the future.

Sometimes there’s confusion over what is deemed “offensive.” And the truth is, it isn’t always clear. One thing to keep in mind? Historical context. Encourage your children to study the past so they can better understand the present. “In order to appreciate cultures, we also need to have respect for historical framework,” Coleman-Mortley says. Hagerman echoes this citing her research that, “kids who understood history were the most aware.”

Racism isn’t always as explicit as someone using a slur or telling an offensive joke. In fact, whether we realize it or not, even those who consider themselves “not racist” may have deeply-held beliefs or narratives that wrongly stereotype an entire group of people. “We all have biases, but we can overcome them,” Lythcott-Haims says. That starts with acknowledging to ourselves that we are having those thoughts, rather than ignoring them.

By actively taking note of an implicit bias beginning to surface, we’re already starting to undo it, Lythcott-Haims says. But, it doesn’t stop there. “Tell yourself, ‘I’m going to try to treat this person as if they are my best friend.’ By tricking the mind, now you can offer generosity and dignity to this person,” she says.

When it comes to our own implicit biases, should we tell our children? Or will that set the wrong example for them? “Parents should be open and honest with their kids about their implicit biases. It doesn’t make us bad people, it just makes us people,” Wiseman says. “If we own it, we have more power over it.” But, again, it’s not just about addressing the bias. “We must also tell our children what we are doing to overcome the bias,” Lythcott-Haims says.

Be an advocate.

No matter who you are, or where you come from, it's important to be an advocate for all people. "The focus is often on white America, but it should be about all cultures and how each of us can live in a way that is acceptable for everyone," Coleman-Mortley says. But what does "being an advocate" actually look like? "With advocacy, you want to allow people to speak for themselves," Coleman-Mortley says. That means passing the mic when it's someone else's turn to share their experience. "But, you're also supporting them when they need assistance."

When is it time to speak up, and when is it better to listen? If you have older children, and they're knowingly saying something racist, that's when it's time to be super concrete, Wiseman says. "I tell my children, 'Sometimes we joke, or sometimes Mom drops an F-bomb, but there is a very large difference between swearing because you stubbed your toe, and saying something to intentionally put someone down,'" Wiseman says. If you don't intervene, or say something in the moment, that will signal to your child that you're okay with that type of language or behavior.

What if the person saying something inappropriate isn't your child? "You are never neutral when someone is being disrespectful or using bigoted language," Wiseman says. If it's a friend or relative who is saying something racist, you can tell them directly, "I don't want that type of language around my children." Then, talk to your children after. "This will empower your kids to use their own voice in appropriate ways."

An important part of being an advocate is not just *saying* people are equal, but acting in a way that reflects that thinking. “It’s not good enough to say, ‘We are not racist.’ You are not off the hook,” Wiseman says. Instead, Lythcott-Haims says parents should pledge to be actively antiracist. But what does it actually *mean* to be antiracist?

Author Beverly Tatum explains the concept of racism versus “antiracism” in her book, *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*, by comparing it to a moving walkway in an airport. Those who are actively racist are walking fast on the conveyor belt, knowingly and willingly leveraging their privilege to get ahead at the expense of others. Those who are passively racist are standing still on the conveyor belt. Sure, they may not be exerting the same force as those who are actively racist, but they’re still happily moving forward at the expense of others. Then there are those who see the inequality and make a point to turn around, but Tatum emphasizes, “Unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt – unless they are actively antiracist – they will find themselves carried along with the others.”

“The world is not getting any less diverse. People will never stop marrying each other, engaging with each other,” Coleman-Mortley says. The only way, she says, to *really* talk about race and racism, is by activating a growth mindset. Coleman-Mortley adds, “It’s really important for parents at home to impress upon their kids that humanity has to come first. We have to be okay with being vulnerable, okay with being wrong, and okay with challenging the things we’ve learned.” This is the path to continue moving forward – honestly talking about race and reckoning with our past – in the effort to one day overcome racism in the future.