

PARENTING/AGES 3 - 5

How to Talk to Young Children About Race and Racism

Tips from early education experts for raising race-conscious kids

BY GEMMA ALEXANDER (/AUTHOR/GEMMA-ALEXANDER) |

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The protests of 2020 shined a light on the many ways that racism continues to exist in America, often invisible to those who are not subjected to it. Thanks to those protests, many people realized that it's not enough to simply not be racist – if you are not actively working to eliminate racism, you are passively allowing it to thrive. One of the most important aspects of that work is raising anti-racist kids.

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Like all difficult topics, it's tempting to put off conversations about race. Often, we want to prolong our children's innocence without the burden of heavy knowledge. Or we think that they are too young to understand such complicated topics – after all, many adults struggle to understand race in America. But there's another reason we avoid this difficult conversation: We simply don't know how to talk to our children about race.

Early and often

Experts agree that it is never too early to start talking about race with our children.

“Even as babies, [our children are] categorizing what looks different from me, what's the same. Our brains are hardwired to notice differences,” says Melanie Brooks, an early childhood education expert with Bright Horizons. As early as age 2, children start to assign good and bad traits to the differences they see. Although many children are kind and thoughtful, the cognitive basis of empathy – understanding that someone else might have different thoughts and feelings even in similar circumstances – doesn't really develop until kids are about 5 years old. That gap often leads to a young child's loud, inappropriate statements in a public place. These incidents are mortifying, but they don't mean your child is already racist.

“It's that they are observant. They are noticing differences and they want to talk about them,” says Brooks. “That's why it's important to not adopt the ‘color blind’ approach. Color is a thing for children. We bring it up to them all the time, ‘What color is this?’”

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Rachel Robertson, Bright Horizons' vice president of learning and development adds, “The important thing is not to shame them or tell them not to talk about it, because that sends a message, too.” This is also true for play. “Play is one of the best ways children learn and make sense of their world.” Instead of taboos, we should think of embarrassing comments and disconcerting games as openings for conversation.

“Don't wait until they ask the questions,” says Robertson. And don't think that one conversation is

enough. Keep conversations short and age-appropriate, knowing that you'll have many opportunities to add nuance (and correct your mistakes) as your children grow.

How to talk about race

Such conversations will be different for every family. Black families must prepare their children for the inevitable experience of discrimination, while children in some white families may not have seen people of color except on television. Depending on your religious background, faith might also inform the conversation. But while conversations should be specific to your family's context, fairness and inclusion are useful frames.

"Children are very focused on what's fair. They care about it for themselves, but they also care about this a lot with others. So, what a prime opportunity to teach lessons about equity and justice," says Robertson.

When you talk to your toddlers and preschoolers, ask your child questions to learn about their perspectives and encourage them to make observations. When you answer their questions, share simple facts instead of complex answers. Remember that you are teaching your child about race even when you are not talking about race: Use inclusive language in all your conversations, be matter-of-fact about skin colors and other types of differences, and encourage empathy and inclusiveness in their games.

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As kids get older, racist behavior and bullying often overlap. Teaching your kids to recognize bullying and [how to be an upstander instead of a bystander](https://www.parentmap.com/article/bystander-power-how-kids-can-prevent-bullying) will help prepare them to take a stand as an antiracist.

If you aren't sure how to start the conversation, read books together. The picture book "[Something Happened in Our Town](https://www.amazon.com/Something-Happened-Our-Town-Injustice/dp/1433828545?ie=UTF8&tag=parentmap-20)" is particularly helpful, because it addresses the topic while demonstrating the parenting skills we want to use. But it's only one of [many age-appropriate options](https://www.parentmap.com/resources-anti-racism). (Bright Horizons has compiled [this list of diverse books](https://www.brighthorizons.com/-/media/BH-New/Podcast-Images/TPL/Mirrors-and-Windows_Choosing-Picture-Books.ashx).)

Don't just read books about racism, though. Also read books featuring diverse casts of characters and books with protagonists who represent different races, religions and cultures. Look for diversity in the dolls and toys you buy, too. This normalizes difference and builds empathy to help kids see "people" instead of "others."

Louder than words

Books and conversations are a great place to start, but our kids are paying attention to more than our words. That means we as parents need to be alert for our own unexamined racist attitudes and try to correct them.

“Make a conscious effort to be part of groups that are more diverse,” says Brooks. Consider volunteering for anti-racist and diverse organizations and make a point of spending time in neighborhoods unlike your own. Try to model anti-racism whenever you can, and when you fall short or don’t know what to do, model your thinking.

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“It helps children see how you are thinking critically about something and how you’re learning. Because we don’t ... have all of the right answers and we’re all growing, and that’s what we want. So, you could say, ‘I don’t know how to answer this question’ or ‘I’m feeling uncomfortable right now.’ Don’t feel pressured to do it all at once,” says Robertson.

Be curious

Too often we think of race as a scary topic full of pitfalls instead of an opportunity to learn. Introduce a theme of curiosity to your approach to understanding and talking about race. There is so much to learn about different cultures, and the people who share our world have so many experiences we can’t imagine. Meaningful conversations about race and diversifying our lives require us to get comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. But the payoff of understanding the world better and contributing to a more equitable society is worth the effort.

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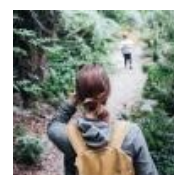
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