Talking to Children About Race and Racism

At very early ages, children form opinions about race and become curious about differences between people.

Race and the diversity it represents should be celebrated. However, given the recent tragic, racially driven events in our country, many parents are grappling with how to talk with their children about racism. Although it may be uncomfortable, the earlier parents start introducing race and diversity, the better children are able to accept and embrace the differences in people around them.

Children are never too young to be exposed to diversity. Infants as young as 6 months can notice race-based differences, and toddlers start observing racial biases. By age 4 or 5 years, some children begin to exhibit obvious bias. Approaching race in an age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate manner with openness and honesty, using simple words and concepts that children can understand, may help to reduce the chance that children will develop future prejudices.

Discussing racism with a preschool-aged child should focus on teaching them to recognize differences among people while celebrating similarities. Picture books showing various types of people, toys such as multicultural dolls or figures, or television shows demonstrating similar concepts are great tools to supplement your discussion. Having playdates at playgrounds in different communities may help to expose your children to other types of people. Because children are keen observers, consider asking them: “what did you think about that playground and the people who you saw there?”

Discussing racism with an older child should focus on encouraging the child to talk about their feelings and to ask questions. As a parent, it is okay to not know all the answers. Having these discussions empowers children to challenge racial stereotypes. Teaching children about influential leaders and historical figures of color helps them understand how our history connects with what they are seeing in the world today. Talk with children early about law enforcement and explain their purpose and role in the community. They are intended to be community helpers to serve and protect, but even they sometimes act in ways that are contrary to this. We as a Black and Brown society largely feel that police are to be feared and not revered because of a history of inequality and profiling. This feeling is analogous to those of the civil rights oppression; the cord of trust has been severed. Parents of Black and Brown children can no longer wait to discuss police brutality with their children, especially their male children.

Regardless of a child’s age, parents should seek out community resources, multicultural exposures, or community mentors of color. Because children spend a significant portion of time in school, parents should ask what their classmates look like. Parents should feel empowered to ask their child’s teacher how they are working to foster an environment of diversity and inclusivity in the classroom.

The discussion of racism with children is not an easy one, but it is necessary and it is never too late. Before talking with children about racism, parents should examine their own beliefs because they are the lens through which their children see the world. Parents should reflect on how diverse their friendships are. Children will learn of racism either from their parents or society. By talking with children, parents can positively influence the views that their children develop and ultimately how they perceive themselves and others.

For More Information
https://naacp.org/
https://theartofeducation.edu/2020/07/20/july-100-childrens-books-about-diversity-and-inclusion/
https://bookriot.com/childrens-books-about-diversity/

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Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

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