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Listen, Learn, and Act: Talking Race With Children

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As the nation erupted in widespread protests following the deaths of George Floyd and other people of color, the need to talk to kids about racial inequities has never been more critical.

After all, children are remarkably observant—not just about current events, but about racism itself: The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that babies as young as six months can tell one ethnicity from another. And somewhere between two- and four-years-old, kids start to understand the building blocks of racist ideas, learning about intentional *and* unintentional racial bias.[1]

But it's not until another decade or so that children form belief systems that they may carry for many years later. That makes these early years a pivotal time when parents should talk about racism, as well as help fight against it in their household and communities.[2]

The Need for Tough Talks—and How to Start the Discussion

Some parents may believe that the most helpful way to teach their kids about race is to teach colorblindness.[3] But many families, especially those of color, don't have the luxury of pretending racial biases don't exist.[1,3,4]

"Parents shouldn't just hope that their kids aren't aware of what's happening, particularly Black children," says Keisha Thompson, PhD, an associate professor of psychology in New York City. "The Supreme Court ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education voted the work of psychologist Kenneth Clark (doll studies), which determined that very young children were internalizing the separate but equal laws and climate in unhealthy ways. It's imperative that parents of Black children have affirming conversations with them about their race."

Another damaging aspect of this, she adds, is that if race is a taboo topic at home, it implies that it *should* be ignored. This stymies dialogue and means that tough issues get swept under the rug, instead of getting addressed,

and hopefully, changed.

“Children are watching how we react to the news and to real-life situations that invoke privilege and issues of race,” Dr. Thompson said. “So, ignoring it for non-Black parents is sending the message to children that they, too, should ignore it. Angrily switching off the television or snapping at them about questions they may have is sending the message that they should also be angry or that their childlike concern is upsetting.”

Instead of ignoring racial differences or telling kids *not* to see color, experts suggest acknowledging biases, celebrating what makes us all different, and taking actions to set a positive example.

Here are some tips to try, beginning today:

Ask and Listen

Children who feel supported about their questions, concerns, and worries tend to be more emotionally prepared to tackle life’s tough moments.[1] So if kids come to you, advance the dialogue by asking questions like *“What else have you heard about that?”* or *“How does that make you feel?”* Hear kids out when they answer, acknowledge their feelings, and address fears they may have for themselves or others.[2]

Above everything else, very young children need reassurance that they’re loved and safe. As they age, older children may be able to handle more complicated topics—like whether or not they’ve experienced racism or seen it with others. Look for changes in their mood, and check in with the pediatrician if you’re worried about their mental health.[4]

Find Everyday Teachable Moments

Look for daily opportunities to recognize and celebrate racial and cultural diversity. For children of color, it can be especially helpful to help them build up their own sense of cultural identity, heritage, and pride in who they are. Doing so may help protect them from the negative effects of discrimination, one study in *Child Development* notes.[1]

Research has also shown that when children have exposure to diverse role models, their own racial biases can improve.[5] In addition to encouraging social relationships with people of all ethnicities, you can also help expose children to racial diversity by reading books and watching movies with main characters of color.[4]

Also, focus on providing children meaningful experiences that help them understand dynamics beyond their own neighborhood. Traveling to other communities, for example, can help kids engage in more activities to expand their worldview.[2]

Act for the Greater Good

The most powerful words are those followed by action—and your own positive actions could help shape policy for generations to come, while teaching important lessons.[6]

So instead of merely telling children that racism *exists*, teach them that we can undo it. That means setting an example for your kids by calling a local representative to speak out against injustice, joining an antiracism advocacy group, or volunteering with a group focused on ending racial justice.[3]

It also means reckoning with your own racial biases and working to overcome them. Discuss your learnings and experiences with your children. And most importantly, act with everyday kindness and compassion for everyone.[2]

After all, children watch what grownups do, so make your actions count.

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