

Age Appropriate Tips for Talking to Kids About Racism

Excerpted from the Children's Health article "How to Talk to Children About Racism" with Dr. Hillary Kimbley: <https://www.childrens.com/health-wellness/how-to-talk-to-children-about-racism>

Kids will hear about and be affected by race and racism even if parents don't talk about it. By initiating the conversation, parents have the opportunity to support their child, filter out misinformation, and build empathy and compassion.

"It's never too early to start the conversation with your child about race and racism," says Children's Health pediatric psychologist Dr. Hillary Kimbley. Research indicates that even in infancy, children will start to show preference for certain skin colors and faces, and that children as young as 2 or 3 years old can start to use race to explain behavior.

Dr. Kimbley offers the following advice for teaching children about race and racism in age-appropriate ways:

Toddlers and preschoolers

At this age, children learn through play, storytelling, and experiences. Introduce concepts of diversity through play, picture books, or exposing them to different cultures.

As children start to ask questions about how people look, explain that different people have different colors and different features – and those differences make us all unique. Look for ways to celebrate diversity, while also teaching how we're all connected as human beings.

School-aged children

As children grow older, they start to make expressions about racial prejudices or preferences for peers based on physical characteristics like race. This is an important age to start and continue conversations about race and racism.

Parents can look for opportunities to ask children questions, such as if they've heard about events in the news, or if they or any of their friends have ever been treated unfairly. Suggest resources to explore together, such as books, movies, or experiences. Set an example by wanting to learn more about others and by treating them with respect.

Tweens and teenagers

The middle and high school years can be challenging socially, and often, racial situations may become more apparent. This is an age where parents can be clear and acknowledge that racism and prejudice exist, it's not acceptable, and here's what we can do to make a change.

Talk to your child about how to respond in an uncomfortable situation and let them know you're there to talk when they need it. Suggest age-appropriate ways to take action, such as joining a diverse organization or multicultural group. You can share your own experiences and continue to grow along with your child in learning more about race and racism.

Tips for talking to kids about racism

How you address race and racism with your child depends on their age and level of understanding, as well as your own family's background and experiences. However, these general tips can help you have an ongoing conversation.

- **Start the conversation early and have it frequently.** Race is embedded in our society. It affects our everyday lives and how we interact with each other. Introduce the idea of differences early and look for opportunities to keep the conversation open with your child. The more you talk about race, the more normal these discussions become and the more comfortable you will feel in having them.
- **Seek educational resources together.** There are books for every age that introduce the concept of race and racism. Make a list of books to read or movies to watch, and engage with these resources together, so that they can encourage your conversation to continue.
- **Use experience as a teacher.** Seek experiences that expose your child to diverse cultures and races, whether traveling, visiting a museum, attending a multicultural event, trying different foods, learning a new language, or any other sport or school related activity. Engage in observances such as Black History Month, National Indigenous Peoples Day, etc. and seek to understand unique perspectives.
- **Broaden your circle.** Make an effort to diversify playgroups and encourage authentic friendships with families of other races. This may mean stepping out of your community or comfort zone and seeking activities that attract a diverse group of people.
- **Get involved.** Talk to your children about what we're able to do as citizens to promote change and equal rights. That may mean seeking to educate yourself further, joining a group that promotes racial justice, or participating in age-appropriate and safe methods of activism.
- **Model positive behavior.** One of the most important ways parents can teach children about race is by being a good role model. From a young age, children watch and imitate parents. Demonstrate respectful interactions, watch what you say and acknowledge if you make a mistake. It's important to be honest in your own journey to become more aware, or how you're coping with your own experiences.
- **Acknowledge and address your child's feelings.** Racism and acts of violence can affect children in different ways. If your child is upset, make sure to listen to and validate their concerns, without being dismissive. "Acknowledge what is happening and that it is scary, and let your child know it's okay to be upset about a scary event," says Dr. Kimbley.