

Talking to Kids About Race and Racism

 kidshealth.org/en/parents/talk-about-race.html

Race and the harmful effects of racism are common topics of conversation for some families. Other parents, though, might talk about racism and discrimination with their kids rarely, or not at all.

But when parents stay silent, kids can get the message that racism doesn't matter or that it's someone else's problem. To help put an end to racism, everyone has to take an active role, no matter who they are.



Helping Kids Embrace Diversity

Dr. Roger Harrison offers parents advice on how to nurture empathy and embrace diversity from an early age.

Why Is it Important to Talk About Race and Racism?

When we teach kids early on that it's OK to talk about race, we help them to understand, respect, and appreciate the differences between people.

This builds empathy and compassion for others so that kids are better able to see when things in their world seem unjust or unfair — and can do something about it.

What's the Best Way to Talk About Race and Racism?

There's no "right" way to talk to your kids about race or racism. For each family, that conversation will be different, depending on your own race, nationality, and personal experience with racism.

Here are some ways to get the conversation started, and keep it going:

First, get the facts. By learning about the issues, you'll be better able to report them. Listen to a podcast, watch a show, or read up on the history of racism and civil rights so that you're prepared to talk and answer any questions.

Clarify your family's values. Use your words, your example, and your actions to show your children what you believe in. Values to focus on can include equal treatment for all, justice, standing up for those who are suffering, and respecting all people no matter the color of their skin, the language they speak, or other differences.

Speak in simple terms. Don't overwhelm kids with too much information. State the facts, simply and clearly. If you want to address something that's happened in the news, be honest about what happened, but don't give kids more info than they need.

Be age-appropriate. Topics of race and racism are big-picture issues, and this can be hard for younger kids to grasp. Here are suggestions for addressing it by age:

- **Preschoolers:** Kids this age are learning about right and wrong, and have a keen sense of fairness (and they'll let you know about it!). So talk about what's fair and what's not. Give examples kids can relate to, such as: "What if someone made a rule that says everyone with [your child's hair or eye color] has to eat a different snack at snack time than the rest of the class? Does that seem fair?"
- **School-age kids:** Use practical examples from everyday life to help school-age kids understand how they might feel if they're discriminated against or left out on purpose. Something like, "How would you feel if someone held on to all the swings during recess and didn't give any other kids a turn?" Or, "How would you feel if you saw a fifth-grader bullying a first-grader?" Then, connect these questions to real-life examples of groups of people who have been discriminated against. Asking questions like these helps to increase kids' empathy and spark their passion to stand up for others.
- **Preteens and teens:** Older kids and teens are better prepared to tackle tougher topics. They can understand how someone might feel if they are a target of racism, but they may feel helpless to do anything about it. Brainstorming ways to help — such as speaking up for a friend who's bullied or excluded because of skin color, or writing letters to school principals or elected officials — can help kids feel empowered.

Ask questions — lots of them. Help your child process thoughts and feelings by asking questions like, "What do you think about what you saw on TV?", "What have you heard?" or "What are your friends talking about?" This helps you get a sense of your child's understanding so you can fill in any gaps with facts or emphasize the values that you hold in your family.

Create a safe place to share feelings. Tough conversations like these bring up strong emotions, like anger, sadness, confusion, and others. Kids who have been victims of racism, or have family members who have been, might have even stronger feelings or fears around these topics. Let your child know that their feelings are important and OK. It helps to share your own feelings in a healthy way. Say something like, "I feel sad right now and that's OK. I won't always feel this way." This helps kids put things into perspective.

Keep the conversation going. Talking to your kids about race and racism shouldn't be a one-time thing. Encourage your child to come to you with questions and continue to talk about it.

Race and Racism: What If I Don't Have an Answer?

It's OK not to have all the answers. If you don't know how to answer something, be honest and say so. Tell your child that you'll find out and share what you've learned.

Race and Racism: What Else Can We Do as a Family?

Parents can do many things to raise compassionate kids who want to help others. Here are some to do together as a family:

Befriend people who are different. Consider choosing a school, daycare, or club with kids from other areas and different backgrounds. This way, kids learn that they can find friends anywhere.

Learn about other cultures. Learn together about people from other places and cultures. Read books, watch movies, listen to music, and learn about celebrations that aren't part of your own traditions. Attend cultural fairs and museums that highlight stories, art, and the history of people who are different from you.

Speak up. When you see something that isn't fair, do something about it. Say something. Write a letter. Create art that supports a cause — or start one. And encourage your kids to do the same.

Talk often as a family and do things together to learn about and celebrate the differences between people. You'll help nurture your child's empathy for other people, and your own.