



Talking with Children about Racism – Guidelines by Age

General Tips:

- **Expect and embrace discomfort.** Racism is a heavy topic—it’s important to be brave and lean into the discomfort. It’s partly *because* it’s so uncomfortable that we must talk about racism, with a goal of helping children understand and cope with their emotions.
- **Create norms for respectful conversation.** For example, you might plan to listen with an open mind and only to talk one at a time.
- **Listen and validate.** Sometimes, it’s tempting to minimize children’s feelings by saying something like, “Don’t worry.” Instead, try to validate their feelings—for example, “It’s normal to worry sometimes. I’m always here to listen and to remind you that you’ll be okay.”
- **Recognize that identity is complex.** Our identities include much more than race, such as gender, nationality, hobbies, and so forth. Point out commonalities and celebrate differences.
- **Avoid assumptions.** Ask children what they think, what they know, and what they prefer rather than making assumptions.

Talking with Children 0-3 about Racism

- **Start early.** Babies begin to notice race around 3 months old, and by the time they enter kindergarten, children associate some groups with higher status than others.
- **Address the topic head-on.** Adults often worry that talking about race will make kids biased, but the opposite is actually true. When we’re silent about race, it makes kids have to draw their own conclusions or assume it’s a bad topic. We want to normalize and celebrate differences, and that means we have to talk about them.
- **Make diversity a regular part of children’s lives.** Young children—infants, toddlers, and preschoolers—learn from what they see. So make sure they’re seeing people of different races on a regular basis, playing with dolls and toys that represent different races, reading books and movies that represent diversity, and so on.

Talking with Children 4-6 about Racism

- **Expect observations.** As children get older, they grow more curious and more able to express their curiosities verbally. Part of this will be expressing their unfiltered observations, like loudly noticing someone’s skin color at the grocery store.
- **Welcome the conversation.** Try to resist shutting down children’s observations—we want to avoid making kids think that race is taboo. It’s not racist to notice someone’s race. For instance, in the grocery store example, the response could be “Yes, her skin color is different from yours, and both are beautiful.”

- **Celebrate diversity.** Focus on celebrating differences and on helping children learn about the valuable contributions made by people of color. Books are a key tool here.
- **Explain relevant concepts.** While kids of this age won't be ready to talk about complex issues like systemic racism, they *can* talk about concepts like fair and unfair, right and wrong, and so forth.
- **Start defining racism.** At this age, teach the basic concept of racism: when people think one skin color or race is better than another and treat them unfairly because of how they look.

Talking with Children 7-9 about Racism

- **Celebrate inclusivity.** By the time kids are in early elementary grades, they're often more inclusive when it comes to race. Celebrate this.
- **Note commonalities.** Emphasize the idea that we're all different AND alike. For example, you might note that two people have different colors of skin but that both love to eat pizza.
- **Continue seeking diversity.** It's crucial to continue reading books and watching TV and movies that reflect diversity. At this age, children also are ready for you to start sharing age-appropriate news stories (avoid anything graphic).
- **Make discussing racism an ongoing conversation.** Rather than having a one-time conversation, discuss racism on a regular basis, noticing and discussing examples.

Talking with Children 10-19 about Racism

- **Check your feelings first.** At this stage, children are likely more aware of current events, meaning they are ready for deeper, more challenging conversations that can bring your own uncomfortable feelings to the surface. Reflect regularly on your own emotions about the subject so that you can stay calm when having these discussions.
- **Encourage children to reflect.** Using an age-appropriate news story can be the perfect launching point for a meaningful conversation about racism—its roots and its impact. To build empathy, ask children how people in the news story must feel.
- **Discuss emotions.** Racism is an emotional topic. Encourage children to express what emotions this brings up for them—journaling may be a helpful start—and help them practice strategies for coping with uncomfortable emotions.
- **Make a plan.** Tell children that their voice matters and can help make a difference. Invite them to make a plan to use their voice for positive change. The template on the following page may help.
- **Make discussing racism an ongoing conversation.** Rather than having a one-time conversation, discuss racism on a regular basis, noticing and discussing examples.