

Talking to Toddlers About Race June 1, 2020

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At what age is appropriate to introduce the concept of race to your child? Is there a limit to how deep a parent should dive in based on age? Many people are concerned with the question, “Is my child too young to begin talking about race?” There is actually no limit on when you can start talking about this to children. Research demonstrates that children’s awareness of racial differences and the impact of racism begins quite early (Tatum 2003; Winkler 2009). Multiple studies document the ways that young children take notice of racial differences and note that as early as preschool, children may begin excluding their peers of different races from play and other activities (Winkler 2009). Children become aware of stereotypes about racial groups by age 5, so the earlier we start the conversations, the better. If you notice your child making stereotypical assumptions about their race or another’s race, you can respond with non-judgmental and open-ended questions like, “Why do you think that? What makes you say that?” to facilitate some dialogue.

If children are asking questions, it means they are curious and looking for answers as they are born with a sense of justice and fairness. Don’t be afraid to embrace their curiosity. There are plenty of developmentally appropriate ways to talk to young children, even toddlers about race so nothing has to feel off limits

How can a parent approach the topic in a way that empowers their child to help make the world better rather than causing them fear?

Parents can show our children that although these are complicated and sometimes difficult topics to talk about, they are still important and appropriate to bring up. Managing our own stress and modeling an openness of being able to engage in a conversation like this is a great way to encourage of children to come to you with questions or thoughts they may have. Tending to ignore or discourage questions can send the message that certain topics are off limits or negative to talk about. We can let them know that it’s okay to notice and feel what they do. It has long been an assumption that it is best to teach our children not to see “color” but colorblindness fails to acknowledge the impact of racism on all people and does not push white people to do important work of reckoning with the legacy of white supremacy. (Cole & Verwayne 2018; Derman-Sparks, Ramsey, & Edwards 2006; DiAngelo 2012).

For young children there are some great books to help with the conversation. Picture books are an easy and safe way to help a child identify with and develop empathy for a character from the story, particularly those that may be different from themselves. Make sure that the stories, TV shows, or movies they are surrounded by have a healthy balance of diverse characters that are engaging in everyday positive and ordinary situations in addition to ones that show diverse characters overcoming adversities and focused on anti-racism. It is important to foster positive development of every children’s racial identity and pair it with opportunities for young children to learn where and how injustice and inequality operate in our society. Then as they grow, they can work toward building a more equitable society for all of us (Cole & Verwayne, 2018). Here is a list of some great book recommendations that are developmentally appropriate for children.

<https://www.whatdowedoallday.com/books-to-inspire-kids-to-change-the-world>

<https://www.embracerace.org/resources/26-childrens-books-to-support-conversations-on-race-racism-resistance>

Are there any resources you recommend parents use to help navigate this?

I have found these very helpful in my own work and research and believe they provide a good start for us to do our own work around implicit bias and anti-racism and teaching that to our children

<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/24/716700866/talking-race-with-young-children?fbclid=IwAR262i36JkNreR2lYg0pPPHDPL9u6iyHSVkMV2vrR3Ehdl-1oG-0ZIXKMrY>

<https://www.prettygooddesign.org/blog/Blog%20Post%20Title%20One-5new4?fbclid=IwAR1M4F55uczJ5YqzKfKiBqmeo1PD2Z5mYUJgvvyCXfloz0m46gjb-fGduNY>

<http://www.raceconscious.org/>

<http://www.westories.org/stories-of-change>

<https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/cross-class-capacity-tool.html>

What would you say is the most important thing parents should do when introducing/approaching the subject?

We as parents can do is do our own work around racism and remember that it is a practice that takes ongoing work. This will likely help us feel less discomfort in talking about it with our children and talking about it is the most important thing we can do regarding racism. Silence about racism has a far more negative impact on children and communities. Heather Greenwood Davis stated in her article Talking to Kids About Race, “Not shying away from these conversations is the first step in raising an anti-racist child.” Usually discomfort has more to do with our own issues around race that we learned from growing up and has less to do with any difficulty that children have in talking about it. We may feel nervous about going there with them, but that is okay too. We can expect that there will be questions that we don’t know how to answer but we do not have to know all the answers. If you make a mistake, that fine, we all do. These mistakes are opportunities for us to learn from and can model to our children that they can repair things when they need to as well. These conversations can be ongoing and build off each other this should not be a one-time conversation.

Any additional thoughts?

For too long in our society has the burden of dismantling racism been put on communities of color and it is not their responsibility because they did not create it. It is the responsibility of the White community to do our own anti-racist work and teach our children at a young age to learn about inequality, embrace diversity and stand up for anti-racism. For parents wanting to know where to start on their own journey of anti-racist work they can check out this link for resources <http://newsite.karenhousecw.org/understanding-ferguson-white-privilege-readings>. There is also a webinar coming up for White parents to learn more hosted by the Raising Race Conscious Children <http://www.raceconscious.org/2020/05/interactive-webinar-for-white-people-on-june-21st-and-june-28th/>

References:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/family/in-the-news/talking-about-race/>

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/may2018/teaching-learning-race-and-racism>

Cole and Verwayne. 2018. "Becoming Upended: Teaching and Learning about Race and Racism with Young Children and Their Families" *Young Children*. 73(2).

Derman-Sparks, L., P.G. Ramsey, & J.O. Edwards. 2006. *What If All the Kids Are White? Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families*. New York: Teachers College Press.

DiAngelo, R. 2012. "What Makes Racism So Hard for Whites to See?" Chap. 10 in *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*, 167–89. New York: Peter Lang.

Tatum, B.D. 2003. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*. Rev. ed. New York: Basic Books.

Winkler, E.N. 2009. "Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race." *PACE: Practical Approaches for Continuing Education* 3 (3): 1–8.