

Reflection Guide for Caregivers Raising Asian American Children

One of the most powerful things we can do to help our children grow to be thoughtful, informed, and brave about race is to engage in deep self-reflection about our own feelings, thoughts, and experiences around race. Use this resource as a guide to help prompt your own reflection. Read the different responses from real Asian American caregivers, and see how your own thinking is similar or different. After reflecting on your own, consider talking about some of these questions with family or friends.

How comfortable do you feel discussing race, ethnicity, and racism with your children?

My reflections:

How comfortable do you feel discussing race, ethnicity, and racism with your children?

I think it's hard trying to explain to a six-year-old, like what is racism, in a way that she can understand. Because when you're defining something and then you use other words to define it, it's hard for her to understand what that is. Like even the word respect, she doesn't know what that means. I guess we don't really talk more about the serious stuff with our kids as much, but that's something maybe to do.

-2nd generation Hmong American mother of 6-year-old Hmong American girl

I believe you can talk to kids about anything as long as you break it down on an age-appropriate level. I remember a friends' daughter once asked him about what some word meant, and he said, "If my daughter is old enough to ask me, then she's old enough to deserve an answer." I've really tried to take that to heart, including having these conversations about racism. That's just our parenting philosophy, to not unnecessarily shield her from anything that she has a right to know about. We've tried to be honest and open and also constructive, so not to scare her or to make her feel like things are so hopeless or terrible. But yes, there are bad things that happen in the world, but then also, here are some constructive things that are happening and things that we can do to help things get better.

-2nd generation Taiwanese American mother of 8-year-old Taiwanese-Mexican American girl

I think the most difficult thing was more of just how much should I say about my experiences? Because now, knowing that, at his age, he hasn't really experienced it. I'm thinking well, okay, when did I experience that? It was probably more in middle school and he's going into middle school. And, it's like do I instill that fear in him? That anxiety about that or not? I think that's probably the difficult part for me, as a parent, and [figuring out] at which point I should share that.

-2nd generation Filipina American mother of 10-year-old Filipino American boy

It's kind of hard to talk to kids about racism against Asians. We do talk about racism, especially in the Trump era there's so many examples of it. But in spite of all that, we don't ever talk about racism against Asians. I don't really know how to talk about it. It's easier for me to talk to them about racism against other races. I don't really know what to say or how I can talk about racism against Asians with my kids.

-2nd generation Taiwanese American mother of Taiwanese-White American kids, ages 10 and 5

What subtle or direct messages about race and racism did you receive growing up? How might these messages influence how you talk about race and racism with your own children?

My reflections:

What subtle or direct messages about race and racism did you receive growing up? How might these messages influence how you talk about race and racism with your own children?

“Whenever racist situations happened to me, my parents’ reaction was like, ignore it. Just walk away. Just focus on your studies. You don’t need to worry about that. I remember I was like five or six when it happened to me and I told my mom or dad, ‘Why’d they say that about me?’ And then they’re like, yeah, just don’t pay attention and just keep walking away. That’s why I feel like my first gut reaction is to just ignore it and walk away. Just pretend you didn’t hear it. Like, I think in Chinese, don’t pay attention and just walk away. I still have memories in my head now, and hear them saying it in my head.”

-1.5 generation Chinese American mother of 11-year-old Chinese-Korean American girl

“A challenge of being adopted is that my parents had never been through racism, and so they didn’t know how to prepare me. They always listened and they always believed in me, and that helped. But there wasn’t really anyone to tell me that people might say certain things, or what do you say if someone’s making fun of your eyes or you get treated differently at a store. And so, I’ve tried to prepare the kids by talking about how these things happen and some different options for things they could say, to provide what I didn’t have.”

-1.5 generation Korean-Japanese American mother of 11-year-old Korean-Japanese-White American girl

“I don’t think racism was ever overtly discussed as freely [with my parents] as I discuss it with [my child]. I always knew that it was an issue though. I mean, I grew up in a really diverse community and neighborhood, where a lot of us were refugees because we came right after the Vietnam War. So we would see it firsthand and live it. I don’t know that we ever had big discussions around it, other than just to know that it was out there. There was definitely not any shielding or anything like that from us. I think they were busy trying to build a life for themselves and their own struggles with the war and moving on from that, so I don’t think it was as thoughtfully discussed as I do right now with [my child].”

-1.5 generation Vietnamese American mother of 11-year-old Vietnamese-Indian American boy

**When was the first time your child noticed or experienced racism?
What was that like?**

My reflections:

When was the first time your child noticed or experienced racism? What was that like?

“My child comes home and tells me stuff like a kid calling her ‘ching chong’. That child must have learned it from an adult because that's very old school. I think she feels very alone dealing with it. Her school is predominantly a White neighborhood, very old money. So, I told her those kids are never gonna experience the world the way you would. It gets me fired up because you don't want your child to experience racism so young.”

-2nd generation Filipina American mother of 10-year-old Filipina-Japanese-White American girl

“I think her first impression about racism might be from President Trump. During Covid the President was saying, this is a Chinese virus, and I think she remembers some people had protests like Stop Asian Hate. And that's her very first exposure, being 6 or 7 years old. She probably saw it on the news [and] asked me why people hate Asians. And I think I said, ‘Not everybody hates Asians, just some people thought this virus is because of Asians, but that is not true.’”

-1st generation Chinese American mother of 9-year-old Chinese American girl

What do you want your children to know about race and racism?

My reflections:

What do you want your children to know about race and racism?

“I’m trying to find that balance between letting my kids know how the world really is, but then not too much so that you just become hopeless. I think it’s important to frame racism in the light that not everyone is going to be mean or racist. And it’s important to try to question those snap judgments we all have and to have my kid question some of his own judgments...So my main message to him is, we can be quiet, or we can speak up. I want to show that it’s important that we have a voice and that we do try – even if it’s scary, even if it’s hard – to stand up for ourselves. Although, at the same time, we don’t want to get beat up either! So, that’s a balance too. Like, when to speak up, and then, when is it not worth the fight, if it’s your safety or your life that’s at risk. I feel like that’s a fine line to draw too.”

-2nd generation Taiwanese American mother of 9-year-old Taiwanese American boy

“It’s important to me that they know that there is nothing wrong with them. What is happening is not because of who they are, it’s because of who the other person is and ideas that they may have heard or may believe about other people. But, it’s not because there’s anything wrong with my kids or anybody else who may be the target of that kind of behavior. And it’s important to be proud of who you are and to know your own strengths and to know that when people make remarks or they do things, it has to do with them, and the place that they’re in. And I also explained the history of where these ideas and behaviors come from.

It’s a lot of information and it’s pretty heavy.”

-1.5 generation Korean-Japanese American mother of 11-year-old Korean-Japanese-White American girl

“Part of my and my wife’s approach is just planting some seeds now, so they get a better understanding of what racism is, how it can affect them, and how it can affect others. And then, figure out what they can eventually do about it as they become young adults. I’m not expecting them to completely change the world, but it is gonna impact you at some point down the road. I want you to have the tools to be equipped to do something about it, and sometimes make things better for yourself. Make things better for the people who are directly around you. Even that small amount of change is a very positive thing.”

-2nd generation Filipino American father of 10-year-old Filipina-Latina-White American girl