

## RESILIENCE AND JOY

# 4 Ways to Support Children in Processing Big Emotions About Race and Racism



As caregivers, we have the power to connect children of color to their racial and ethnic backgrounds in ways that foster a positive sense of identity, belonging, and pride. Researchers call it “cultural socialization.” When children are rooted in community, feel a sense of connection to their family history, and see strong and beautiful representations of their own identities, they are empowered to dream big and forge their own paths ahead. By helping children know and love who they are, we can also build deep wells of resilience and self-worth among children of color that they can draw from when facing challenges, including experiences of prejudice and discrimination.

1. Let children know you’re there for them.
2. Normalize talking about feelings.
3. Explore different strategies to help manage moments of intense anger, sadness, or overwhelm.
4. Make space for positive emotions around race, too!

## 1. Let children know you’re there for them.

The most important ingredient in any emotion-processing support you provide a child is simply your place in their life as a dependable, trusted, caring adult. Having strong, supportive adult relationships is a powerful factor in building children’s resilience, boosting their ability to persist through adversity and take healthy risks, like making friends across racial lines and standing up against racism.

- Let children know they can talk to you about their feelings and about their racialized experiences. For example, young children may speak about a racialized experience when telling a story about a negative comment about their skin color from a friend or classmate. You can tell them explicitly that you are always there to talk about and work through any hurtful experiences, but also show them by sharing your own experiences and how they made you feel.
- Practice [active listening](#). More important than trying to solve children’s problems or make them feel better is simply making sure they feel heard and understood.

- Don't underestimate the power of [physical touch!](#) Especially for young children, comfort in the form of a hug or hand holding can go a long way. Of course, what's appropriate will depend on your relationship with the child. It's also true that every child has different preferences, and over time you'll learn what works for them. The best way to begin is to ask them which they like better, a fist bump or a high five, instead of a hug.
- Give kids a break from tough conversations if they need it. Do your best to read children's verbal and nonverbal cues that might tell you if they could use a break – you can always come back to a conversation at a later time! Think about planting seeds, watering them regularly, and watching them grow in their own time. Resist the pull to do it all at once. Be patient.

When you know better, do better — as your circumstances allow. While you may not engage in all of these practices consistently, if we hold ourselves accountable to routinely doing what we can, our kids, families, and communities will all do better.



## 2. Normalize talking about feelings.

- Normalize the experience and expression of emotions by [talking about them!](#) By talking about feelings, we can help children recognize and label their experiences. And as with race, when we talk about emotions openly, it makes them less scary and more manageable.
- A great way to start early is by reading picture books in which relatable child characters experience and express big emotions. Try [Jabari Jumps](#), [Me and My Fear](#), [Ravi's Roar](#), [The Day You Begin](#), and [It's Brave to Cry](#). Talk about how the characters are feeling, study their expressions in the illustrations, and relate back to your child's own experiences ("Do you ever feel scared or nervous like Jabari?").
- Model talking about your own emotions – labeling them and locating them in your body ("I'm feeling really sad reading this story and my heart feels very heavy in my chest. How are you feeling?"). If talking about race is new or uncomfortable for you, acknowledge that with your child and talk about where your anxiety may be coming from. Sharing your struggle will help free your child to share any discomfort about race they may have.
- Validate children's own emotional experiences by asking questions and reflecting back to them ("Wow, sounds like you're feeling really frustrated."). When young children act in unexpected ways and their behaviors are not appropriate, we can remind them of what is acceptable and validate their emotional experience ("I can see you may be feeling angry, but you cannot hurt others even when you're angry."). Let children know that it's okay to feel angry, sad, or upset (and that you do, too!) when they see or learn about racism.

### 3. Explore different strategies to help manage moments of intense anger, sadness, or overwhelm.

Without a toolbox of strategies at hand to help calm down and process big feelings, we tend to either bottle them up or express them in harmful ways. Help develop children's (and your own) toolbox by exploring healthy ways to manage intense emotions. Ideally, get to know what helps kids manage their strong emotions beforehand or even ask afterward what helps them personally feel calm for future events.

- Begin by managing your own racial stress. Identify a person or people with whom you can connect and process your racial stress so that you can be emotionally available to support your child. Check out Dr. Howard Stevenson's TED Talk ["How to Resolve Racially Stressful Situations."](#)
- With your child, try some [mindful breathing](#): this could be [belly breaths](#), or using objects like [bubbles](#) or [pinwheels](#). Check out how Sesame Workshop incorporates belly breaths into their ["Breathe, Feel, Share"](#) strategy to help children process racial microaggressions.
- With your child, make a [calm-down jar or sensory bottle](#). While especially helpful for younger and/or neurodivergent kids, sensory bottles are mesmerizing, colorful tools that can help kids (and adults) focus their attention and calm their emotions! You can build on this experience by talking about how the motion of the materials in the jar, shaken up and then slowly falling, mirrors feelings of turmoil that eventually calm and settle. A quick search on Google, Youtube, or Pinterest will yield tons of do-it-yourself instructions on making a bottle with simple ingredients.
- When children are old enough to write down their experiences, [journaling](#) can be a powerful way to process complicated emotions or stressful racial encounters. Writing in a private space allows kids to engage in deep reflection, observation, and questioning, without fear of judgment. While you might want to encourage your child to journal about a particular experience or ask them what kinds of things they've been writing about, respect their privacy and autonomy. Resist the urge to snoop.
- For both older and younger children, drawing or artwork may be a good outlet. Encourage kids to draw their emotions. For children not yet at the writing stage in their development, journaling may look like a series of drawings that depict how they're feeling. It may even include some dictation to a teacher or family member who can write down their thoughts.
- Practice [gratitude](#) with children through regular [gratitude journaling](#), writing a heartfelt thank-you letter, or other [gratitude rituals](#). By regularly reminding ourselves of the people and things (big and small) that we are grateful for in life, we are better prepared to cope with stressful experiences.
- With your child, try [mindfulness, meditation, and yoga](#). Combining breathing, focusing on the present moment, and accepting feelings and bodily sensations, these activities are beneficial even for young children. The free app [Smiling Mind](#) has short, guided mindfulness meditations tailored for children of different ages; [Mindful Schools](#) has [resources for educators](#) to bring mindfulness into the classroom; and there are plenty of [kid-friendly yoga](#) resources online!

- For younger children, more active movements might be helpful as well. Try “shaking off” the overwhelm by dancing or tensing the body then relaxing, or even screaming for 10 seconds to release negative energy.

#### 4. Make space for positive emotions around race, too!

Uncomfortable emotions around race conversations are to be expected. But that doesn't mean race always needs to be a solemn, heavy topic. We can make space for warmer and fuzzier feelings around race as well!

- Empower children of color to feel proud of their identity and cultural heritage and strong and beautiful in their own bodies. Sharing representative and affirming picture books can play a huge role here: check out our other action guide, [“4 Essential Ways to Foster Pride and Self-Love in Children of Color”](#) for more ideas.
- Celebrate human diversity in all its forms. Let's give the word “different” some positive associations for our kids! Differences in appearance, language, culture, and experience among human beings are interesting and beautiful. Let's model curiosity and excitement for our kids when we have the opportunity to learn about another racial or ethnic group or make a new friend who is different from us.
- Express joy and appreciation for the love that exists among your family members and friends across race and skin color. Ask children how it feels to be part of a multiracial or multicultural family, classroom, or community, and point out how special those loving relationships are.

**EmbraceRace** is a multiracial community of parents, teachers, experts, and other caring adults who support each other to meet the challenges that race poses to our children, families, and communities. We welcome your participation.

[embracerace.org](http://embracerace.org)

