

CRITICAL THINKING

4 Tips for Talking Honestly with Kids About Racism, Bias and Oppression



As caregivers, we naturally want to protect children from the harsh realities of racism. Yet children will inevitably encounter racism, notice patterns of inequality, and receive messages about the relative status and worth of different groups of people. By talking openly and honestly, we can empower children to understand and challenge the many forms of bigotry and oppression.

1. Acknowledge the patterns you see.
2. Use age-appropriate language.
3. Find books to support you.
4. Support children's emotional responses.

1. Acknowledge the patterns you see.

Many patterns exist in our social world highlighting inequality, segregation, and different lived experiences between people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. These patterns are rooted in historical oppression and ongoing unfairness in systems like housing, employment, healthcare, education, policing, and the legal system.

- Be receptive when children notice these patterns. Children might notice segregation by race and class between different neighborhoods, or that people in positions of power (such as U.S. presidents and state governors) are more likely to be White. It is our job to validate children's observations — not shush them — and give them context for understanding that these patterns are because of a history and system of unfairness for people of color. They are not the way things should be, and are not actually reflective of the character or abilities of people from different racialized backgrounds. The key question is: how will children account for the racialized patterns they see?
- Don't just wait for kids to bring it up — start conversations when you notice these patterns, too. Young children can't always express in words what they notice about the world. When a caregiver explicitly names patterns, it helps to give language to and build understanding of the observations young children are already making.

- Do some research on structural racism if you need to boost your own understanding of the dynamics underlying these patterns. For a quick primer, check out resources like:
 - [This brochure](#) from the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity
 - [This animated video](#) from act.tv
 - [The 1619 Project podcast](#) from the *New York Times* and Nikole Hannah-Jones
- To make the idea of systemic racism tangible for young kids, Dr. Erin Winkler suggests a ‘spider web’ activity: give children several balls of string or yarn and ask them to run around the room and get it as tangled up as they can. Then, ask them to untangle it — a much harder and less fun task — and explain that racial unfairness toward people of color has been getting tangled up in our country for a long time. While some folks have worked hard to untangle it, there’s still a long way to go.

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. Use age-appropriate language.

Racism is embedded in our social systems in complex ways. But remember — there are few topics so complex that we can’t break them down into simple, age-appropriate ideas for children, in ways that will guide their understanding as they grow. Here are some ideas for simple ‘building blocks’ of language you can use to describe racism and oppression with young children.

- For patterns of inequity and injustice: Talk about “fairness” and “unfairness.” Children as young as 3–4 are developing ideas about these concepts, and by kindergarten are highly attuned to what they think is fair or not fair. It is not uncommon for kids to note patterns and call something fair/unfair when they really mean equal/unequal. From the earliest ages, help kids learn the difference between equity (or fairness) and equality (or sameness) and support kids to be precise in their use of the two words. This will help children be racial justice advocates because they will clearly be able to identify and name moments of inequality and inequity. For children in preschool or elementary, consider showing and discussing [this video](#), and for kids in middle school or high school, consider showing and discussing [this video](#).
- For racism and White supremacy: Talk about “lies” and “stories that are not true” that people tell about who is “better” based on how people look and the color of their skin. People often tell these untrue stories to gain or keep “power” — controlling other people, telling others what to do, and getting what they want. The fact that many people believe the lies and repeat them doesn’t make them true.

- For racialized violence: Talk about someone “hurting” another because of their race, or making a decision to hurt someone’s body that was based on unfair thoughts about the person. It is okay to talk (gently) about dying, too. Children begin to develop an understanding of death in the preschool years, and between 5–7 are able to fully grasp its permanence. (For support on this topic, check out books like [The Dead Bird](#) by Margaret Wise Brown and Christian Robinson and [Death is Stupid](#) by Anastasia Higginbotham).
- Be prepared to talk about race-related events in the news — even if you don’t think your child is aware of them. Be mindful that, beyond you as a caregiver, children have access to information through media, (TV, internet, YouTube) and their friends. They are often aware of much more than we think, and it is important to discuss the events with them so they can better understand and put it in context. Ask yourself “How would I explain this to my child?” Say it out loud. Say it to the mirror. It’s ok to stumble through! The more we practice, the more we’ll be able to put together a half-decent answer for our kids when something comes up. And remember that if you don’t like the way you navigated the conversation the first time, you can always revisit the topic. Talking about race should not be a one-and-done endeavor.

3. Find books to support you.

Books can provide useful language, historical narratives, and modern-day stories that facilitate honest and open conversations about racism with young children.

- Some books can help you and your child develop a common language for talking about race, equity, and oppression. For younger kids, check out books like [An ABC of Equality](#) by Chana Ginelle Ewing and [Race Cars](#) by Jenny Devenny and Charnaie Gordon. For older kids, check out [We Are Still Here!](#) by Traci Sorell and [This Book is Anti-Racist](#) by Tiffany Jewell.
- Some books can help spark conversations about what bigotry and oppression look like, and how to understand, process, and disrupt these patterns. Check out books like [Something Happened in Our Town](#) by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard; [Equality’s Call: The Story of Voting Rights in America](#) by Deborah Diesen; and [Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness](#) by Anastasia Higginbotham.

4. Support children’s emotional responses.

Conversations about racism and oppression are likely to bring up big emotions for children, including sadness, anger, and anxiety, among others. They likely bring up similar feelings for us as adults as well. Creating supportive and nonjudgmental spaces in which to share these responses can help children process difficult information and set them up for healthy emotional lives in the future.

- During and after conversations about racism and oppression, ask children what they think and how they feel. Validate their emotions (“learning about this can be scary”) and share your own (“I get angry when I think about what happened”). Let them know you’re proud of them for being able to express their strong emotions. For more on helping children manage big emotions, check out the EmbraceRace action guide [“4 Ways to Support Children in Processing Big Emotions about Race and Racism.”](#)

- For children experiencing big emotional reactions in response to identifying with people who have been oppressed: Let kids know it is natural and healthy to experience sadness, anger, and even fear in response to these stories, and that many others feel and have felt like they do. Remind them that many people have bravely fought and continue to fight to make the world better, safer, and more fair, and that they can be part of that. Strategize about how to stay calm and manage experiences of racial stress or discrimination (check out [Howard Stevenson's TED talk](#) on resolving racially stressful encounters). When talking about racially motivated violence, reassure children that you (and many other adults) are always working hard to keep them safe. And importantly, instill cultural pride and self-love in children that will help them remain resilient and joyful even when learning about and facing racism (for more, see EmbraceRace action guides ["3 Ways to Integrate Resilience and Joy into How Kids Learn about Race"](#) and ["4 Essential Ways to Foster Pride and Self-Love in Children of Color"](#)).
- For children experiencing big emotional reactions in response to identifying with perpetrators of oppression: Let kids know that it's normal to feel upset, angry, and even a little guilty about these stories, and we can use those feelings productively by standing up for what is right when we have the chance to do so. Remind them that there have always been White people who have joined people of color in resisting oppression. Recognize that it can be difficult to acknowledge the [privileges](#) we may have inherited along with our skin color, but it is courageous to do so. Encourage children to notice when they may hold a bias and create a safe space for them to talk about bias & having done harm, and strategize about how to repair harm and grow as a kind, compassionate, brave person. For more ideas, see the EmbraceRace action guide ["5 Tips for Modeling Healthy Bias Awareness for Children."](#)
- Talk about possibilities for change. As we talk openly about bigotry and oppression, we can be mindful of protecting children's emotional well-being and planting seeds for activism. Remember to acknowledge that many people are working hard for racial justice, and that you and your child can be part of that. Ask, "What can we do?" For more ideas, see the EmbraceRace action guide ["5 Ways to Nurture Racial Justice Activism in Kids."](#)

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.

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