

CRITICAL THINKING

4 Ways to Challenge Children to Question Racial Narratives



Certain stories about race are common in our society. The 'colorblind' narrative tells us that race does not matter; that racism was a problem in the past, but is not anymore; and that we should all learn not to pay attention to race. Other narratives tell us that racial differences are real and are related to essential differences between racial groups, and reinforce stereotypes. These messages all create barriers to developing healthy racial identities and standing up against racism. As caregivers, we can help children explore alternate counter-narratives to promote critical thinking about race and racism and resistance to the idea of racial hierarchy.

1. Nurture critical-thinking media consumers.
2. Push back against stereotypes and generalizations.
3. Ask children about what they are learning in school.
4. Seek out more information together.

1. Nurture critical-thinking media consumers.

Media portrayals of racial groups are especially influential in shaping the perceptions of children with little direct contact with the people in them.

- Read books with children or co-watch videos, TV, and movies so that you have the opportunity to talk with them during and after. If kids are reading and watching independently, keep an eye on what they're consuming so you're aware of the kind of messages they are receiving.
- Teach your child to question the narratives offered in books, movies, and on television. Some questions to ask include:
 - Whose story is this? Whose voice is missing or sidelined?
 - Who created this story and when?
 - Who gets to be the hero?
 - Who has the most active/passive roles in the story?
 - Are characters portrayed in terms of racial stereotypes?
 - What do the 'good' and 'bad' characters look like?
 - Are people of color portrayed as one-dimensional, or as full, multi-layered characters?

- Model asking these kinds of questions (“Hmm, I wonder...” “Does it seem fair that...?”) so that over time, these questions come up naturally for children.
- Questioning can be especially important if you choose to share books or movies that you believe have problematic aspects. This includes both the super-problematic [old classics](#) as well as current favorites that might have both affirming and challenging aspects. To help develop this critical lens, check out these EmbraceRace pieces on [Frozen](#) and [Black Panther](#).
- Focus on the positive, too! If a book, show, or movie has great representation or an inclusive message you particularly like, mention it to your child and talk about why it resonates with you.

2. Push back against stereotypes and generalizations.

Cultural stories about hard work, equal opportunity, and the [myth of meritocracy](#) teach us that everyone starts on a level playing field and has an equal chance to succeed – in short, that people get what they earn and what they deserve. The corresponding story about race is that members of racial groups share particular characteristics that lead them to succeed or not. In reality, all our opportunities are shaped by the legacy and present-day dynamics of racism.

- Point to [structural and systemic explanations](#) for the racialized patterns children observe. Do they see more White people in “leader” roles, and more people of color in “supporting” roles? Are they noticing differences between neighborhoods that are majority-White vs. majority-people of color? Research shows that by age 5, children are associating some racial groups with higher status than others. [Offer explanations](#) for these trends grounded not in individuals’ choices or character, but in terms of segregation, job and housing discrimination, bias in policing and the legal system, and lack of access to healthcare. Discuss the unfairness of these systems. The point isn’t that individual effort and choices, including their own, are irrelevant. However, those choices often align with or push back against powerful structural racism for which we too often fail to account.
- Emphasize the vast diversity that exists WITHIN racial groups. Every racial group contains artists, scientists, athletes, doctors, and teachers; people who speak different languages; people who have different likes and dislikes; and people who do not conform to even the most basic assumptions we might make about their groups. Point out this diversity to kids, and highlight diverse representations of people from their own and other racial backgrounds. Avoid speaking in generalized terms about groups of people.

3. Ask children about what they are learning in school.

Unfortunately, schools are often contexts in which dominant cultural narratives are reproduced and reinforced. Talking to children about what they’re learning, both explicitly and implicitly, can let us know when we may want to emphasize an alternate narrative.

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.



- How is U.S. history being taught? Are children learning about the genocide waged against Native American nations, or a sanitized version of colonization? Are they learning about Japanese-American internment during WWII? Are they learning that the Civil War was about slavery, or about economics and states' rights? Are they learning that racism was ended by Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Civil Rights movement? Are they learning about current voter suppression efforts when they learn about democracy?
- How are the histories, perspectives, and contributions of people of color being presented? Are they featured only as "special topics" during certain months of the year?
- Look beyond the classroom curriculum and to the '[hidden curriculum](#)' in schools. Which classmates are most often being disciplined and labeled as "the bad kids"? Which classmates are in the highest and lowest reading or math groups? Is that fair? Are those patterns really due to individual traits, or are they symptoms of larger patterns of bias and inequality?

4. Seek out more information together.

A huge part of challenging dominant cultural narratives about race involves having the humility to recognize that there's a lot we don't know! And that's ok. The more we learn about our history, our systems, and others' experiences, the more counter-narratives we will come across.

- Identify what you DON'T know. Ask children, "What more information do we want to have about this topic? What would we want to ask this character or someone from this community?" One idea is to create a jar and write down topics that you want to learn more about. Then when you have some time, pick a topic from the jar!
- Do the research together. There's no shame in starting with Google! Model the desire to find out more for your children.
- Keep in mind that not all sources are equally reliable, so always ask questions about where the information is coming from. ("How do we know what we think we know?") For a lot of great content on developing digital media literacy (for yourself and children!), check out the [wealth of resources and guidance from Learning for Justice](#).
- Be sure to include in your research insights and information from people of the community or group in question whenever possible.

REFERENCES:

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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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