

ADVOCACY

5 Ways to Nurture Racial Justice Activism in Kids



Through our collective action, racial justice is possible, and the youngest among us are a key part of what makes it possible. In a 2013 address in Northern Ireland, President Barack Obama expressed the importance of raising a generation of change agents: “We’ll need more... young people, who imagine the world as it should be; who knock down walls; who knock down barriers; who imagine something different and have the courage to make it happen. The courage to bring communities together, to make even the small impossibilities a shining example of what is possible.”

Be intentional about helping young kids see themselves as racial justice activists. Connect the conversations you have about race to the change you both want to see, and to ways to bring about that change. Here are some ways to help young children understand what it means to be, and how to be, a change agent.

1. Believe they are capable.
2. Help them brainstorm actions to take.
3. With your child, plan ahead to be upstanders.
4. Read the way.
5. If at first you don't succeed...

1. Believe they are capable.

Young children’s pretend play shows us that they are fully capable of using their imaginations to dream up other possible worlds. Combining this creativity with discussions of fairness can help children think about what a more just world could look like.

- Maintain a “What can we do about it?” orientation when talking about unfairness. Ask children what they think and give them time to ponder.
- Know that it’s ok to start small. Children will naturally pay attention to issues that affect them directly, but any issue that has consequences for others as well may be a worthwhile target for practicing activism.
- Recognize that standing up for justice is a huge learning opportunity for children. Early childhood educators Pelo and Davidson (2000) explain that “Activism is an empowering process for young children; it calls on them to flex their social, emotional, intellectual, and sometimes even their physical muscles. They work together to solve complex problems, make forays out into the adult community, ask questions, and declare their feelings.”

2. Help them brainstorm actions to take.

When children feel strongly about an issue, help them brainstorm actions they can take — without taking over and telling them what they should do!

- Encourage children to write letters to people in power to advocate for what they believe is right. They might write to an elected official, to the principal of their school, or even to the owner of the local toy store. Help them think through what they want to say — what is the change they'd like to see? Why is it important?
- Save up and donate small amounts to organizations working for justice. Remember that it's not the amount that matters as much as building up the habits in our children of prioritizing others' needs and giving what you can to important causes. As a bonus, this activity also boosts young children's learning of math skills and financial literacy!
- Introduce children to the idea of "good trouble" as coined by the late Rep. John Lewis — sometimes it's ok to break the rules to stand up for what is right. To help explain the idea of civil rights and civil disobedience, watch and discuss this [BrainPop video](#) with children. Explain that when taking action for change, it may be necessary to hold a protest, march, or sit-in to raise awareness among others. Your child doesn't have to be protesting in the street — think about what the small-person equivalents of these might look like. To read an article about an 11-year-old activist, please click [here](#).
- Encourage children to find community — are there friends or classmates who they can talk to about an issue they care about, who will join them in standing up for change?

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.



3. With your child, plan ahead to be upstanders.

Sometimes, racial bullying or unfairness will come up unexpectedly in children's lives, and they can play an important role in standing up for themselves and others who are targeted, if they are prepared.

- Ask children questions about what happens at school, on the playground, and in their other contexts. Help them recognize when bullying might be happening and what it might look like, including name-calling, teasing, physically hurting, or excluding peers. For older kids, keep in mind that race-based bullying and harassment can also happen virtually via smartphones and social media.

- Strategize with children about things they can do or say to stand up to and speak out against race-based bullying. Those strategies might involve intervening directly, telling an adult, and offering emotional support to the person targeted. Check out the [5Ds](#) and use the song to help yourself and kids remember the different strategies! Remind children to choose whichever of the 5Ds feels the safest for all in that moment.
- For parents, ask children what adult at school they would tell if they or a friend were targeted by bias. For teachers – make sure children know they can come to you to report this kind of treatment, and back that up by doing something about it when it happens!

4. Read the way.

Plant seeds of activism and advocacy by reading picture books about changemakers, big and small. Talk with your child/student about what kind of activism interests them and consult a librarian and/or [Social Justice Books](#) or [Diverse Book Finder](#) to find books that match your child's/student's interests. If you and your child/student need a starting place, please click [here](#) to see EmbraceRace's list of "20 Picture Books for 2020: Readings to Embrace Race, Provide Solace, and Do Good."

5. If at first you don't succeed...

Remember that it's okay for projects to fail! Persistence is important for activists to make change, but that doesn't mean they don't experience pitfalls along the way.

- Allow space for disappointment. Working for change doesn't mean we have to be relentlessly positive. Give yourself and your children time and space to feel and process the emotional experience of unsuccessful attempts.
- Try again. If children are still eager to see a particular change, talk with them to identify what was learned from the first attempt and what next steps could be. Learning how to recover and learn from failures is a valuable skill for both children and adults!
- Let it go. Sometimes children will want to move on from a particular issue – they may identify another project they think is important, or they might just need to take a break from pushing! Be ready to follow children's leads when it comes to their activism.

REFERENCES

Pelo, A., & Davidson, F. (2000). *That's not fair! A teacher's guide to activism with young children*. Redleaf Press.

Wade, R. C. (2007). Service-learning for social justice in the elementary classroom: Can we get there from here?. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 40(2), 156-165.

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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