

Scenarios for Caregivers: Talking with Asian American Children About Racism and Bias

This resource contains three scenarios for caregivers. All involve young Asian American children's experiences with racism and bias. Feel free to reflect by yourself or with a partner or friend and think through how you might respond in each situation.

Remember: There are no right answers. After each scenario, we'll share two possible responses. You might do one of them, you might do both, or you might respond in a different way.

Scenario 1



Divya is out with her 4-year-old son, Nikhil, at the playground, and she overhears another child, Amelia, ask Nikhil, “Why is your skin poop-colored?” Nikhil seems confused and a little embarrassed at first, and then responds, “I don’t know!” and continues playing.

How can Divya respond?

Response 1: Intervene in the moment.



Divya: Hey, Amelia, it sounds like you're noticing the color of Nikhil's skin. I also have skin that looks like Nikhil's. We all have different skin colors. What color skin do you have?

Amelia: I think my skin is peach.

Divya: Yeah, that's a great word to describe your skin color. But the word you used to describe Nikhil's skin made me go 'ouch.' Is there another way we could describe Nikhil's skin color?

Nikhil: Chocolate!

Divya: Yeah, that's a much nicer word. Amelia, can you think of a word?

Amelia: Um... brown?

Divya: Yeah, our skin is brown. I would say my skin is a light brown and Nikhil's is a darker brown. His skin is darker because he has more melanin in his skin. Melanin helps protect us from the strong rays of the sun!

Amelia: Oh. Do I have melanin?

Divya: Yeah! You just have a different amount of melanin in your skin.

Amelia: Oh. Okay.

Nikhil: Come on, Amelia, let's go to the swings!

Response 2: Address the comment on the way home.

Divya: Hey, I heard Amelia ask you about the color of your skin. Do you remember that?

Nikhil: Kind of.

Divya: How did that make you feel?

Nikhil: I don't know.

Divya: Well, I heard Amelia ask why your skin is poop-colored. And that's not a very nice thing to say. What do you think?

Nikhil: Yeah.

Divya: We have the same skin color, and when I heard her say that it, made me feel sad. Because I love our beautiful brown skin! Our skin is brown because it has more melanin in it, which helps to protect us from the strong rays of the sun. Everyone has different amounts of melanin in their skin, which is why we all have different skin colors.

Nikhil: Okay.



Divya: Hey, look! Your skin color kind of matches this acorn we found today. What do you think? Can you think of some other ways to describe the color of your skin?

Nikhil: Um... like that?



Divya: Yeah, like a leaf! So, if this happens again or if you see somebody being mean to a friend about their skin color, what are some things you could do?

Nikhil: Tell them to stop?

Divya: Yeah, that's a great idea! And you can tell me or a teacher if it happens. You could also tell them that it's mean to make fun of the color of somebody's skin.

Nikhil: Okay!



Scenario 2



Jason is at the park with his 7-year-old son, Luke. His son is playing with some of his friends and notices another one of his friends has arrived! Luke calls out to his friend, “Hey, Caleb! Come over here!”

It seems Luke has mixed up his friends – that’s not Caleb who just arrived at the park. That’s Alex. Jason is startled because Caleb and Alex don’t look alike, but they are both Black.

How can Jason respond?

Response 1: Address the comment on the way home.

Jason: Hey Luke, I noticed you called Alex 'Caleb' at the park. Do you remember that?

Luke: Not really.

Jason: Oh, I think I might have heard that, but do you think Alex and Caleb look like each other?

Luke: Kinda?

Jason: Yeah, what do you think makes them look like each other?

Luke: I don't know. They both like to play soccer.

Jason: Yeah, you like to play soccer too. What about their hair or their skin, do you think they look similar?

Luke: Uh, they both have curly hair and the same skin color?

Jason: Yeah, they both have curly hair and brown skin. Can you think about some things that make them look different?

Luke: I guess Alex is taller than Caleb.

Jason: You're right! Anything else?

Luke: Alex plays video games with me.

Jason: Yeah. So sometimes people mix up names. One time somebody called me the name of my coworker who's also Asian. That didn't make me feel very good because it felt like they thought we were the same person.

Luke: That's annoying.

Jason: Yeah. So I try to make sure I don't mix up people's names because I don't like it when it happens to me. I always try to make sure I'm saying the right name. What do you think you can do to make sure you can tell the difference between Caleb and Alex?

Luke: Uh, just... look at their face?



Jason: Yeah, you can look at their face, their smile, or their clothes. There's lots of ways you can tell the difference between people, so it's important that we make sure to check we're saying the right name every time. Another reason we want to use the right name is because for a long time, white people in America wouldn't use the right name and would actually use mean names for people who had skin tones like Caleb and Alex. Did you know that?



Luke: Yeah we learned about Martin Luther King, Jr. in school. But that was a long time ago.

Jason: Yeah, it was a long time ago and things have gotten better. But sadly, people are still treated differently because of their skin color today. Do you remember what Martin Luther King, Jr. did?

Luke: Yeah! He said it doesn't matter what your skin color is because we're all equal.

Jason: You're right that skin color shouldn't matter, but all people aren't treated equally even today, and that's why skin color still matters. Did you know that Martin Luther King, Jr. wasn't just fighting for Black people to be treated the same as white people? He was also fighting for us, Asian people, because we also weren't treated the same as white people either.

Luke: Oh, I didn't know he was fighting for our rights too!

Jason: Yeah! How do you think people feel when they're treated badly because of their skin color?

Luke: I would be real mad... and sad.

Jason: Yeah, it makes me sad too. And you know, it wasn't just white people who treated Black people this way. Some Asian people also didn't treat Black people very kindly. Instead of getting along, being friends, and working together, some Black people and some Asian people ended up with bad feelings towards each other, and it still happens today.

Luke: Well, me, Caleb, and Alex like each other. We're friends!

Jason: Yeah, that's awesome! But sometimes people that look like us are mean to people that look like Caleb and Alex. Mixing them up can be hurtful, and can make them feel disrespected. So it's important that we try to make sure we see people for who they are.

Luke: Got it!

Response 2: Take a longer-term approach.



Jason discusses what happened at the park with his partner and they agree to get more children's books that feature diverse Black and Brown characters from their local library.

Luke likes stories with heroes and magic, so Jason asks the librarian for recommendations of fantasy books with Black and Brown main characters. He mixes these books into reading time, along with books centering Asian American characters.

Scenario 3



One day, as Elise is picking up her 5-year-old daughter, Riley, from the school bus stop, Riley runs towards her with tears streaming down her face. “Mommy, Sammy and Mila said I couldn’t play with them today because I’m not Chinese!” Elise is surprised, because her daughter is Chinese – she is Chinese and White. As Elise bends down to comfort her, Riley continues, “They said you had to say the secret password in Chinese and I couldn’t say it.”

How can Elise respond?

Response 1: Talk about what happened.



Elise: I'm so sorry that happened to you, Riley. Do you want to tell me what happened?

Riley: We were playing house, and I couldn't go in the house. Because they said I wasn't Chinese and couldn't say the secret password.

Elise: That's not very nice of them. What happened after that? What did you do?

Riley: I played something else.

Elise: Oh, okay. How did that make you feel?

Riley: Weird.

Elise: Yeah. Well you know, you are Chinese, just like me! You're also White, like Daddy. So, you're Chinese and White, which is super cool and special!

Riley: I guess. But I want to speak Chinese like my friends.

Elise: Well, you know some words in Chinese, right? Can we think of some together?

Riley: wǎn ān!

Elise: Exactly! Or... mǎo. Do you remember what that means?

Riley: Cat!

Elise: That's right! Everyone speaks languages differently. Some Chinese people that don't speak Chinese, some may speak a little Chinese, like us, and others speak a lot of Chinese. Maybe you and your friends can make a secret password together and can make sure that everyone knows how to say it!

Riley: Okay, maybe.

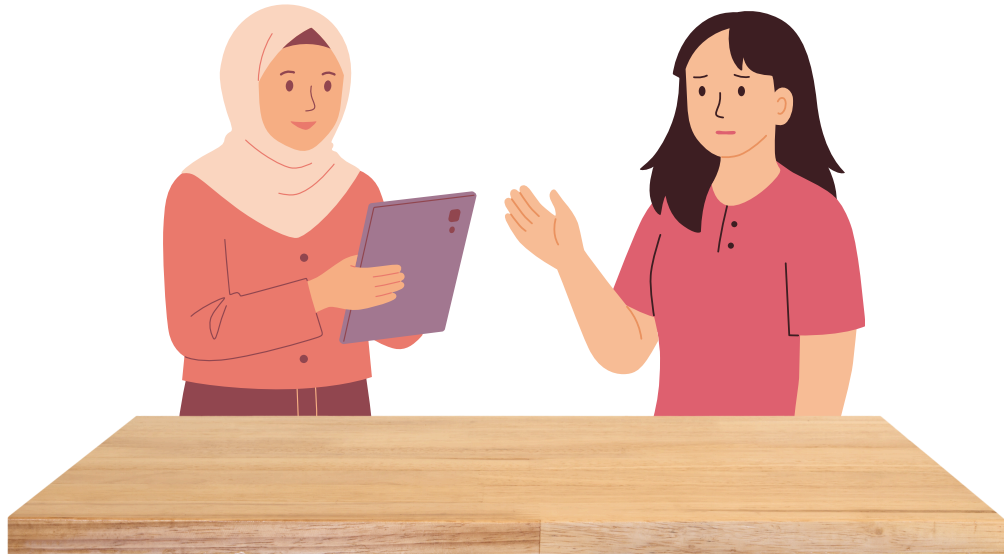
Elise: So, if that happens to you or a friend again, what could you do?

Riley: Tell them I'm Chinese.

Elise: Yeah! And you could also tell them that not all Chinese people need to speak Chinese. If you're not sure what to do, you can always tell me or one of your teachers.



Response 2: Talk with the child's teacher.



Elise sets up a meeting with Riley's teacher to discuss what happened and requests the teacher to keep an eye on Riley's interactions with her peers in the classroom. She also asks the teacher if topics like culture and language are part of the current curriculum, and if they can be weaved into a lesson plan somehow. She offers to help or suggest relevant books, if needed.

The teacher thanks Elise for bringing the incident to her attention and gladly agrees to pay attention to Riley's experiences with her playmates. She also invites Elise to read a book of her choice to the class and sets up a meeting for next month to check in with Elise and follow-up.

As our children grow, their capacity to reflect on and talk about their experiences grows, too.

Check out these reflections from real caregivers on how they engage their Asian American kids in conversation about experiences with racism:

"First, I like to let them share and just listen. Just non-judgmental listening.

And then just try to gently prod them to share their feelings about it, and gently guide them to some sort of processing – sometimes it involves like an action step. Like, okay, if this were to happen again, how would you handle it? What can you do to support your friend?

I try to guide the conversation to have them feel more confident and arm them with coping mechanisms. If this were to happen again, what would you do? And how can you better rebound from it? Stand up for people and yourself?"

(Parent of an 11-year-old)

**"Was my child provoked?
Was it unprovoked?**

What's the whole situation?

Were there any other bystanders? What were their responses? Were any other adults, teachers, other people involved?

And then talking through: How did you respond? How would you want us to respond? Do you want us to intervene?"

(Parent of a high schooler)