

Talking With Your Children About Racism: Start, Continue the Conversation

Racism and discrimination harms everyone in our communities.

As a parent, you must assume children of almost any age may experience racism first-hand or are exposed to racism. Children may be called names or bullied. They may also overhear adult conversations, see online videos, or watch news coverage of actions ranging from unfair treatment or unkind words to violent protests or hate crimes. Some actions may make children feel afraid for their own safety or their family's safety. They might have questions about why people are hurting other people.

How to help your children understand

Ideally you can talk with them first, in ways they can understand, before they hear about it from other sources. When talking to your children, keep the following tips in mind:

- **Check in with your child.** Ask what they know, what they've seen, and how they are feeling. Tell them you understand their feelings and reassure them it's normal to feel these emotions. You know your child best and what information they can handle. For younger children, tell them what you are doing to keep your family safe. For pre-teens and older children, ask if they've ever experienced mistreatment or racism, or seen it happening to others.
- **Watch for changes in your child's behavior.** Some children may become more aggressive, while others will become withdrawn or scared. If you are concerned that your child may be struggling with anxiety, fear or distress, call your pediatrician or mental health provider for additional support.
- **Limit what your child sees in the media.** Do not leave the TV on in the background. With older children and teens, watch with them and talk together about what you're seeing. Listen to their observations and share your own. Use commercial breaks, or pause the video, to have brief discussions. With younger children, limit TV, smartphone, or tablet use, especially when the news is on. Make sure the media they do see occurs in a common area where you can check in.
- **Be aware of your own emotions.** As an adult, tune into how you are feeling and check that you are ok. If you are not, ask for help to deal with the trauma and emotional impact of these events and images. Make a list of your own coping strategies, and when you need to use them, tap into that list.
- **Use this teachable moment.** For all families, whenever racism occurs, use these opportunities to discuss the history of racism and discrimination in the US and help your children discover ways to make change.
- **Resources can help.** If you struggle to find the "right" words, try using books or other resources to share with your child. The tips in this article can also help. Remind your children that no one is perfect, talk about what you are doing to be anti-racist, what you have learned, and how you as a family can step up.

Talk and act

It's OK to acknowledge that people are treated differently based on the color of their skin and where they live and share examples of this happening. But this is also an opportunity to show your children how to make a positive difference. For example, perhaps your family can call your city council person or superintendent to advocate for issues faced by communities of color. Think about how you might confront your own biases and show how you want your children to respond to others who may be different than them.

Remember

If we are to progress in this country, it's going to be because we help our children, adolescents and young adults learn not just that racism exists, but that it is something all of us can work together to dismantle.

Adapted from the HealthyChildren.org article *Talking to Children about Racism: The Time is Now* by Nia Heard-Garris, MD, MSc, FAAP, and Jacqueline Dougé, MD, MPH, FAAP (1/7/2021).

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