

Overview

Even before children can talk, they are learning about the world and about race through your words and actions.¹ One common misconception is that children do not notice race until it is pointed out to them and that children only become racist if they are taught to be.² However as early as three to six months old, research indicates that children begin to notice and respond differently to people based on race.³ At this age, infants start to recognize physical differences in people, including skin color.⁴

Studies have also shown that by age two and a half, children can start developing racial biases and observing such biases in others.⁵ They can categorize and express racial bias and may even intentionally use racial language.⁶ Moreover, by age 12, many children have become set in their beliefs.⁷

Parents and caregivers have the unique opportunity to frame their child's first attempts to understand and talk about race. They can provide their children with the vocabulary to name the world they live in and to feel proud and safe in their racial identity.⁹ To counter racism, experts recommend acknowledging and acting against racism with children as early as possible.¹⁰ Having open conversations about race and skin color creates opportunities to provide children with accurate information and builds a strong foundation of factual knowledge and understanding from which children can draw upon.¹¹ In fact, studies indicate that children with parents who have meaningful conversations about race have better racial attitudes.¹²

However, many parents avoid talking about race with their children for a variety of reasons, most commonly because of fear.¹³ Recent studies further indicate that some parents want to talk about race with their children but feel ill-equipped to do so. While avoiding conversations about race may feel more comfortable, it provides children a window to absorb society's racial stereotypes without context or guidance from caregivers.¹⁴ Ultimately, silence can teach fear, require children to figure things out on their own, and rob them of a vocabulary to talk or ask questions about what is confusing.¹⁵

Why Talking about Race Matters

Everyone has a racialized identity.

Racialized identity significantly impacts a person's life.

Race is a defining social construct in America.

Source: National Museum of African American History and Culture¹⁶

To support parents and caregivers in having racially-focused conversations, this resource guide provides research-based practices, strategies, and tools that promote positive racial identity, support conversations about race, and move conversations toward action.¹⁷

Research and Resources on the Intersection of Race and Childhood

The P.R.I.D.E. Program (i.e., Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education) of the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development presents a plethora of research ([accessible here](#)) about race and how children perceive and experience racial identities and bias that can help parents and caregivers better understand child development in this area. In addition, the P.R.I.D.E. Program hosts a number of open access resources—such as podcasts and informational articles—to support parents and caregivers in engaging their children in productive conversations about race ([accessible here](#)).

Source: P.R.I.D.E. Program | Office of Child Development, University of Pittsburgh⁸

Preparing for Conversations About Race

To promote acceptance and tolerance, **parents and caregivers must first be willing to reflect upon and address their own personal biases.**¹⁸ As the National Museum of African American History and Culture of the Smithsonian Institute explains:¹⁹

Bias is a preference in favor of, or against a person, group of people, or thing. These initial human reactions, which are often unconscious, are rooted in inaccurate information or reason and are potentially harmful. Biases are also part of being human. Once we know and accept we have bias, we can begin to recognize our own patterns of thinking. With awareness and a conscious effort, we have the power to change how we think and to change the negative or harmful biases within ourselves.

The experiences of each person create a lens through which they see the world, either consciously or unconsciously. **Explicit bias**, or conscious bias, is when a person is actively aware of their bias and can admit it to themselves and others. On the other hand, **implicit bias**, or unconscious bias, is subtle, and individuals do not initially detect implicit bias without self-introspection.²⁰

Research has shown that implicit biases can shape how people see the world.²¹ More importantly, a growing number of studies have found links between hidden biases and behavior.²² When considering the role that bias plays in talking to children about race, it is important to understand that the personal biases parents and caregivers may hold can significantly influence what and how they teach about valuing differences.²³

Evaluating Personal Biases

Researchers have developed tools to help people truthfully evaluate personal views, such as Project Implicit (linked [here](#)). Harvard University created this resource to help users measure hidden biases and unconscious thoughts through a series of online activities.

Source: Project Implicit, Harvard University²⁶

Children learn biases from those around them and from media.²⁴ As such, parents need to understand how even small actions and words send subtle, yet powerful messages. Behaviors and language, such as locking the car doors, conversations at the dinner table, reactions to news headlines, and whether and how to respond to questions about race, provide information that is observed and taken in by children. And, while these actions and words may not intentionally or directly express racial animosity, they can still perpetuate racism and inequality.²⁵

It is therefore essential that adults honestly confront their own biases so that their example is consistent with messages of tolerance.²⁷ It is also important that they not be ashamed or blame themselves for any biases they may hold. Rather, they should critically reflect and address these personal biases before having a conversation with their children about race.²⁸ To begin confronting their own biases, parents and caregivers can:²⁹

- **Be a role model:** Identify and correct your own racially biased thoughts, feelings, and actions. If you want your children to believe what you preach, you must exhibit those behaviors as well. Your everyday comments and actions will say more than anything else.
- **Have a wide, culturally diverse social network:** Encourage your children to have diverse circles of friends, as well. This lends itself to engagement in multicultural activities and experiences.
- **Travel and expose your children to other communities:** This can help them understand that there is diversity in the world that might not be represented in the community in which they live.
- **Get involved in your child's school, your place of worship, and politics:** Adults who are involved in this way are better able to advocate for fair treatment of racially marginalized groups and to raise awareness of race issues in other groups.

Beginning the Conversation

Ideally, parents and caregivers will commence racially-focused conversations with their children at an early age, but it is never too late to start the conversation.³⁰ Conversations about race will look different for each family and there is no single way to talk to children about race.³¹ However, experts suggest starting with three primary lessons when beginning conversations about race at home:³²

- People are much more alike than different because all are human;
- The idea of race does not explain or describe human biological or cultural variation; and
- Grouping people into races is arbitrary, subjective, and influenced by culture and human experience.

Parents should be encouraged to look for teachable moments as an avenue to begin these lessons about race. These opportunities provide authentic moments to discuss race, human variation, and racism. Parents can use the following steps for creating teachable moments about race.³³

Steps for Creating Teachable Moments about Race



BRING UP THE TOPIC WHEN APPROPRIATE

If a child observes that an individual “looks different,” use this moment to discuss human biological variation and differentiate between race and human biological variation.



MEET PEOPLE OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS, RELIGIONS, AND TRADITIONS

Meeting new and diverse people will lead to questions and “teachable moments” and foster a better understanding of human cultural and biological variation.



TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT YOUR FAMILY HISTORY

Explain to your child where their grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents came from. If appropriate, talk about the relationship between ancestry and race. Explain that ancestry is an important factor in one’s physical appearance and differentiate between ancestry and “race.”



RECOGNIZE WHEN BIAS OR DISCRIMINATION HAS OCCURRED

Point out intolerance when it happens, so your child understands the situation. Talk about how bias or discrimination are hurtful and recognize both your child’s feelings and the potential feelings of all individuals involved in the situation. Discuss ways that the situation could have been handled better.

Source: American Anthropological Association³⁴

Talking about race should move beyond a single occurrence, as children’s racial thinking does not begin or end with a single conversation.³⁵ Parents and caregivers should revisit race and racism upon their child’s exposure to new media or events.³⁶ Likewise, they can keep the conversation going by encouraging their child to come to them with questions.³⁷

On the following page, **Strategies to Get the Conversation about Race Started** provides additional steps to begin conversations about race and to keep the conversation going. Additional information and training about race and holding conversations about race with children is available by accessing the links in the table to the right.

Resources to Prepare for Racially Focused Discussions

Organization	Link
Teaching Tolerance	Link
Raising Race Conscious Children	Link
Embrace Race	Link
Teaching for Change	Link
AORTA Cooperative	Link

Source: Multiple³⁸

Strategies to Get the Conversation about Race Started

Strategy	Description
Get the Facts	By learning about the issues, you will be better able to report them. Listen to a podcast, watch a show, or read up on the history of racism and civil rights so that you are prepared to talk and answer any questions.
Clarify Your Family Values	Use your words, your example, and your actions to show your children what you believe in. Values to focus on can include equal treatment for all, justice, standing up for those who are suffering, and respecting all people no matter the color of their skin, the language they speak, or other differences.
Speak in Simple Terms	Do not overwhelm children with too much information. State the facts, simply and clearly. If you want to address something that is happened in the news, be honest about what happened, but do not give children more info than they need.
Be Age-Appropriate	Topics of race and racism are big-picture issues, and this can be hard for younger children to grasp. Address topics as is appropriate for children's development

Source: KidsHealth³⁹

Alternatively, some parents and caregivers believe that they are raising their children to be more inclusive by teaching them to be “colorblind” (i.e., the notion that if they do not talk about race or color, their children will come to understand that all people are the same).⁴⁰ Colorblindness is rooted in the belief that “racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted.”⁴¹ In other words, people who do not see themselves as racist and would not think of using racist remarks see themselves as “colorblind.”⁴² However, colorblindness eliminates the need to recognize uncomfortable realities and ultimately perpetuates racism, injustice, and oppression.⁴³ Instead, **parents and caregivers should openly discuss people's differences and the impact those differences have on their lives.**⁴⁴

Although conversations about race are critical, parents may encounter difficulties when talking to their children about race, particularly with younger children. Presented below are common challenges parents may face when discussing race and racism with their children as well as some strategies to effectively manage these challenges.⁴⁵

Common Challenges that Accompany Conversations about Race

Challenge	Strategies
Your child is not interested in talking about race.	If it is difficult to create “teachable moments,” then bringing up race can be difficult. It will be helpful to avoid putting your child on the spot. Rather, draw your child in with something they are already interested in. Use familiar subjects to contextualize an unfamiliar topic.
A teacher or another adult has given incorrect information.	Although it is important to maintain the authority of your child's teacher and other important adults, use this opportunity to present conflicting information (i.e., watch a movie or read a book). Talk about how your presentation differs from what was said. Ask your child what they think about the difference. Allow your child to form an opinion.
Misinformation was given from your child's peers.	Although it is challenging to compete with the information children receive from their peers, children will generally defer to a parent for guidance and the “truth.” Try not to openly criticize your child's peers, simply correct misinformation when it is heard or seen.

Source: American Anthropological Association⁴⁶

Guiding Age Appropriate Conversations

When beginning a conversation with children about the effects of racism, it can be difficult to know how to start an age-appropriate conversation.⁴⁷ First and foremost, adults should meet children where they are developmentally, socially, and emotionally. However, regardless of a child’s age, parents and caregivers should always hear and validate their child’s questions, fears, and emotions. Furthermore, parents and caregivers should not worry or stress if they do not have all the answers; what is important is holding fact-based conversations about race, diversity, and inclusion.⁴⁸

The Preschool Years

Children under the age of five begin noticing and vocalizing the differences they see in people.⁴⁹ To counter racial messages children might receive, adults should create an environment where children learn about differences and similarities between people of different races, cultures, and religions.⁵⁰ Parents and caregivers should recognize and celebrate people’s differences, especially when a child points out differences, using it as an opportunity to acknowledge both differences and similarities between people, even if what children say may feel embarrassing or insensitive.⁵¹

Parents and caregivers must actively start conversations about diversity and race to promote inclusive attitudes and develop a healthy understanding of people’s differences.⁵² They should also expect children to ask many questions.⁵³ Although these questions might be tough to hear or answer, adults should not discourage children from asking. Instead, parents and caregivers should consider their child’s question and determine whether the question is coming from a place of judgment or curiosity. By doing so, they can answer the question in a positive way, using language that is age appropriate and easy for children to understand. Parents and caregivers should take the time to understand and answer each question and teach positive racial identity, connection, and inclusion.⁵⁴

Five Tips for Talking to Preschool Children about Race

TIP	DESCRIPTION
Be Honest	Don’t encourage children not to “see” color or tell children we are all the same. Rather, discuss differences openly and highlight diversity by choosing picture books, toys, games and videos that feature diverse characters in positive, non-stereotypical roles.
Embrace Curiosity	Be careful not to ignore or discourage your youngster’s questions about differences among people, even if the questions make you uncomfortable. Not being open to such questions sends the message that difference is negative.
Broaden Choices	Be careful not to promote stereotypical gender roles, suggesting that there are certain games, sports or activities that only girls can do or only boys can do.
Foster Pride	Talk to your child about your family heritage to encourage self-knowledge and a positive self-concept.
Lead by Example	Widen your circle of friends and acquaintances to include people from different backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

Source: Teaching Tolerance⁵⁵

The Elementary and Preteen Years

When talking to elementary children or preteens about race, adults should take the time to discuss media, as it may be one of their main sources of information, and explore examples of stereotypes and racial bias.⁵⁶ Likewise, when children start school, their exposure widens, and as a result, they may need more explicit guidance about race and racism.⁵⁷ Parents and caregivers should check in, listen, and ask questions, encouraging their children to share their feelings and thoughts. Parents

can follow up by asking broad questions, such as: “How did you feel about what you saw on the news? What did it make you think about?”⁵⁸

Furthermore, it would be developmentally appropriate for adults to use practical examples from everyday life to help children understand the complexities of race.⁵⁹ **It is important for children to understand that racism is not limited to the past.** When connecting conversations to current events, parents and caregivers should provide children with the truth but let them lead the conversation.⁶⁰

It is also beneficial for children to be exposed to diversity. Children should have opportunities to explore food, stories, films, and other cultures and backgrounds reflective of diverse communities, discussing uniqueness and similarities.⁶¹

Five Tips for Talking to Elementary Children and Preteens about Race

TIPS	DESCRIPTION
Model It	Talking to your child about the importance of embracing difference and treating others with respect is essential, but it's not enough. Your actions, both subtle and overt, are what they will emulate.
Acknowledge Difference	Rather than teaching children that we are all the same, acknowledge the many ways people are different, and emphasize some of the positive aspects of our differences — language diversity and various music and cooking styles, for example. Likewise, be honest about instances, historical and current, when people have been mistreated because of their differences. Encourage your child to talk about what makes them different and discuss ways that may have helped or hurt him at times. After that, finding similarities becomes even more powerful, creating a sense of common ground.
Challenge Intolerance	If your child says or does something indicating bias or prejudice, don't meet the action with silence. Silence indicates acceptance, and a simple command — “Don't say that” — is not enough. First, try to find the root of the action or comment: “What made you say that about Sam?” Then, explain why the action or comment was unacceptable.
Seize Teachable Moments	Look for everyday activities that can serve as springboards for discussion. School-age children respond better to lessons that involve real-life examples than to artificial or staged discussions about issues. For example, if you're watching TV together, talk about why certain groups often are portrayed in stereotypical roles.
Emphasize the Positive	Just as you should challenge your child's actions if they indicate bias or prejudice, it is important to praise them for behavior that shows respect and empathy for others. Catch your child treating people kindly, let them know you noticed and discuss why it is a desirable behavior.

Source: Teaching Tolerance⁶²

The Teen Years

Teenagers can understand more abstract concepts and express their own views. As a result, they may understand and feel more than adults may be aware of.⁶³ Teenagers are also capable of having more in-depth conversations about race and prejudice and the role they may personally play in supporting or mitigating them.⁶⁴

When talking to teens about race, parents and caregivers should find out what their teen already knows and ask open-ended questions to help teens process their thoughts and feelings. This approach will help explore a teen's understanding of racism so that a parent can bridge gaps with facts or values.⁶⁵ Often, teenagers spend a lot of time online and can be exposed to media that provides misinformation. As such, parents and caregivers should encourage their teen to think critically about the media they are consuming.⁶⁶

Teens also typically look for ways to be active in their community. Parents can support teens in acting in ways dedicated to inclusion, unity, and personal growth.⁶⁷ Parents can also encourage their teen to participate in online activism to respond to and engage with racial issues.⁶⁸

Five Tips for Talking to Teens about Race

TIPS	DESCRIPTION
Keep Talking	Many believe the last thing teens are interested in is having a conversation with parents. But even if your teen doesn't initiate conversations about issues of difference, find ways to bring those topics up with them. Use current issues from the news, such as the immigration debate or same-sex marriage, as a springboard for discussion. Ask your teen what they think about the issues.
Stay Involved	Messages about differences exist all around your teen through the internet, songs, music videos, reality shows, ads and commercials, and social cliques at school. Know the websites your teen enjoys visiting and take time to listen to or watch the music and shows they enjoy. Then, discuss the messages they send. Ask your teen about the group or groups they most identify with at school. Discuss the labels or stereotypes that are associated with such groups.
Live Congruently	Discussing the importance of valuing difference is essential, but modeling this message is even more vital. Evaluate your own circle of friends or the beliefs you hold about certain groups of people. Do your actions match the values you discuss with your teen? Teens are more likely to be influenced by what you do than what you say, so it's important for your words and behaviors to be congruent.
Broaden Opportunities	It may be natural for teens to stick to groups they feel most comfortable with during the school day. These often are the people they identify as being most like themselves. Provide other opportunities for your teen to interact with peers from different backgrounds. Suggest volunteer, extracurricular, worship, and work opportunities that will broaden your teen's social circle.
Encourage Activism	Promote ways for your teen to get involved in causes they care about. If there is no place for them to hang out with friends, encourage them to get together with peers to lobby city officials for a teen social center or skate park. If they are upset about discriminatory treatment of teenagers by a storekeeper or business, give your teen suggestions for writing a letter of complaint or planning a boycott. When young people know they have a voice in their community, they are empowered to help resolve issues of injustice.

Source: Teaching Tolerance⁶⁹

Utilizing Literature and other Media to Support Conversations

Literature is one concrete and powerful way to engage all children in discussions about race. Even from a young age, children learn about the world around them through observations and listening. Reading can nurture their sense of curiosity and build a foundation for larger conversations.⁷⁰ Books allow all children, regardless of age, to see themselves and develop an understanding of others. Furthermore, culturally diverse books relevant to a child's life are important because they can increase their interest in reading, improve literacy skills, boost self-esteem, and develop a strong sense of identity.⁷¹

When selecting a book to spark conversations about race, families should choose book titles that contain strong, positive characters that may or may not look like their child or family, as well as books that explore racial or ethnic culture. Parents and caregivers should also select culturally relevant books for their children to read that are realistic and authentic, as children tend to gravitate toward books that reflect themselves and their own lives.⁷²

Likewise, books should be age appropriate. Picture books are ideal for children ages five and under.⁷³ For younger children, these books explain complex concepts using images and developmentally appropriate language.⁷⁴ When selecting a picture book, parents should look for texts that promote racial and cultural awareness to educate and empower children about their identity.

During adolescence, teens may prefer books written from a teen’s perspective. Books for pre-teens and teens should aim to help them to understand racial barriers and strategies to cope with and overcome prejudice.⁷⁵ Parents can explore specific book titles for various age groups in the **Appendix** (p. 10).

Tips to Assess the Quality of Books

TIP	DESCRIPTION
Preview the Text	Read the cover and browse the pages before you check out the book. Children’s books should have a good storyline and feature multidimensional characters living complex lives.
Scout for Stereotypes	Look for negative stereotypes in the illustrations and in the text. Watch closely for one-dimensional characters who lack depth and never seem to learn or grow.
Analyze the Characters	Common examples in popular literature are the token minority (often depicted as representative of their race), the faithful sidekick to a white protagonist, and racist caricatures of ethnic minority groups.

Source: American Psychological Association⁷⁶

When using literature to engage children in conversation, parents should encourage children to talk about what they notice in the book and explore their child’s understanding of the text by asking questions. In the same sense, parents and caregivers should also be prepared for potential questions that their child may ask. Ultimately, these questions should guide the conversation.⁷⁷ While it is acceptable to not have all the answers, adults can still prepare for conversations by practicing what to say in advance.⁷⁸

When having conversations while reading, parents should also ensure that they are not leading the conversation or doing most of the talking. They should maintain balanced conversations and listen to their child’s perspectives, as this will indicate how they are engaged in the topic and that deeper learning is taking place. To further support parents, **Questions Your Child May Ask** and **Types of Questions Parents Can Ask** below and on the next page explore questions parents can use to prompt conversations and prepare for potential questions their child may ask while reading.⁷⁹

Questions Your Child May Ask

AGE LEVELS	EXAMPLE QUESTIONS/STATEMENTS
Young Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why do people have different skin colors? Why is that person’s hair different?
Elementary Aged Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why am I called “black”? Is being black bad? Is being white good?
Pre-Teens and Teens	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the dark skin vs. light skin (i.e., colorism) debate? Where did it come from? Why do the police shoot and sometimes kill unarmed Black people? (i.e., racial profiling, police shootings) Why is it that some people get treated differently or unfairly in our society? (i.e., discrimination and racial inequality)

Source: American Psychological Association⁸⁰

Types of Questions Parents Can Ask

YOUNG CHILDREN	ELEMENTARY-AGED CHILDREN	PRE-TEENS AND TEENS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ask your child to explore the characters in the illustrations (e.g. “Who is this character?” “What are the characters doing or feeling?”) ▪ Do you notice similarities or differences between the characters (and yourself)? ▪ What about the story made you feel [insert an emotion]? ▪ What was your favorite part of the story? ▪ What happened at the end of the story? ▪ What did you learn from the story? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who is your favorite character, and what did you like about them? ▪ If there was a problem in the story, how did the character(s) solve the problem? What do you think about that? ▪ Did you wish there were a different ending of the book? If so, what? ▪ What did you learn from the book? ▪ If you had to describe this story in one word, what word would you choose? ▪ If you could ask the author one question about the story, what would you ask? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What do you like about this book? ▪ What do you dislike? ▪ What are the key takeaways? ▪ Who is your favorite character, and what did you like about them? ▪ How did the book inspire you to think differently? ▪ How did the book challenge your understanding of race? ▪ Does the book remind you of something that you’ve experienced in real life? Why? ▪ If you could, how would you change the ending? ▪ What questions do you have after reading the book?

Source: American Psychological Association⁸¹

To further support conversations, parents can use additional media forms, such as podcasts, news, television shows, and social media and use similar conversation techniques to dig deep into discussions about race.⁸² The **Appendix** (p. 10) provides a non-exhaustive list of various media forms to engage children in conversations about race as well as parent resources for additional learning.

Appendix

The following tables present specific resources that parents and caregivers can use as artifacts for racially-focused conversations with their children.

Book Lists for Children

RESOURCE (WITH EMBEDDED LINKS)	PUBLISHING ORGANIZATION
20 Picture Books for 2020: Readings to Embrace Race, Provide Solace & Do Good	Embrace Race
26 children's books to support conversations on race, racism & resistance	Association of California School Administrators
Anti-Racism Resources for Kids and Teens	North Central Regional Library
Anti-Racism Resources for Parents and Kids	Healthline
Children's Books	Raising Race Conscious Children
Children's Books to Support Conversations on Race, Racism, and Resistance	The Conscious Kid
Confronting Anti-Blackness: Books by Black Authors for ages 0-18	The Conscious Kid
Coretta Scott King Book Award Winners	Common Sense Media
How to Talk to Kids About Race: Books and Resources That Can Help	Brightly
Twelve Books to Help Children Understand Race, Anti-Racism and Protest	Smithsonian Magazine

Podcasts for Children and Parents

PODCAST (WITH EMBEDDED LINKS)	PUBLISHING ORGANIZATION
1619	New York Times
About Race	About Race
Anti-Racism Resources for Parents and Kids	Healthline
Code Switch	NPR
In My Skin	P.R.I.D.E.
Momentum: A Race Forward Podcast	Race Forward
Pod for the Cause	The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
Teaching 6-Year-Olds About Privilege and Power	Mindshift

Social Media for Children and Parents

RESOURCE (WITH EMBEDDED LINKS)	PLATFORM
Center for Antiracist Research	Twitter
Mission Unstoppable	YouTube
PBS Kids Read Along	YouTube
The Conscious Kid	Instagram

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