A White Parents' Guide to Talking with Children About Race

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Why Talk About Race?

Most parents want to raise children who treat individuals fairly regardless of the color of their skin. They want children who embrace diversity and are successful at building relationships with others from backgrounds unlike their own. Many parents believe that they can achieve these goals by avoiding discussions about race altogether. Research suggests, however, that children whose parents do not talk about race typically fall short of these goals. That is, parents who do not talk about race are likely to have children who are racially biased and who often assume that their parents share their own racial biases, even when they do not! As in many other domains (drugs, sexual behavior), it is important for parents to share their views with their children explicitly and honestly. Of course, "talking the talk" of racial non-bias alone is insufficient to prevent bias. "Walking the walk" of racial non-bias and commitment to social justice is equally important.

Why a Guide for White Parents?

We wrote this guide for White parents for three reasons.

1. Research indicates that White parents are more likely than parents of other racial and ethnic backgrounds to avoid discussing race. Specifically, data show that, although parents of many races talk openly about racial issues, most White parents adopt a "colorblind" or "colormute" approach. They believe that they will convey that they are racially non-biased by carefully avoiding all mention of racial labels and topics. This strategy does not work. Thus, we hope to provide White parents with effective, research-supported strategies for raising non-prejudiced children.

2. White families are more likely than Asian, African American, Latino, and Native American families to live, work, and socialize in settings that almost exclusively include members of their own racial group. That is, White parents are especially likely raise children in racially segregated environments (i.e., predominately White environments). Such conditions are known to negatively affect children's racial attitudes. Thus, there is a need to address this issue in parent-child conversations.

3. Whites continue to occupy a position of privilege in the United States relative to other racial groups. Thus, although some parent-child conversations will be similar across racial and ethnic groups, White parents are preparing their children for a different racial context than parents of Asian, African American, Latino, and Native American children.

When Should I Talk About Race?

Children are not colorblind; they notice race. Research indicates that infants notice race well before their first birthday. Thus, it is appropriate to begin to talk with children about race quite early in development. We begin with recommendations for talking with preschool-age children.

Although we think that it is important for parents to initiate frequent conversation, there are two occasions on which is it **vital** to have these conversations:

1. When someone (a relative, acquaintance, or complete stranger) makes negative or racist comments within earshot of your child. Children are careful social observers. Many children listen to, and try to make sense of, comments that they *overhear*. For example, one child explained to his mother that "Black people are mean" because he heard a man (who was homeless and sitting on the sidewalk when the child passed) say that Blacks steal. If you hear a race-related comment when you are with your child, discuss it! Suggestions for such discussions are below.

2. Your child asks a question or makes a remark. Sometimes in these circumstances, your child is seeking your input on the topic of race. That is, your child is inviting conversation. Shutting down the conversation is likely to convey that you are uncomfortable with the topic and, perhaps, with individuals from other racial and ethnic groups.

In addition to these occasions, many (probably even most) movies, television shows, and books provide rich opportunities to talk about race and express your views to your child. Select books designed for such purposes to share and discuss with your child. Encourage your child to share his or her thoughts and questions and try to have an honest and open dialogue with your child about race. Material that is not explicitly race-related also present opportunities for discussion of race exclusion, valuing diversity, multiracial children and families, and discrimination (e.g., see *https://www.whatdowedoallday.com/childrens-books-with-multiracial-families/*). You might, for example, ask your child about his or her views of a characters who have many (or no) cross-race friends and then express your views. (I think that having friends of different races is important because..."). Also, if you are caught off-guard by a question, it is fine to ask for a moment (or more) to think. You might say, "That is a great question. I need to think for a little bit so I can give you a great answer."

How to Talk about Race: Age-based Recommendations

Ages 3-5

<u>What children typically say and do</u>**.** Young children are likely to comment spontaneously on aspects of racial or ethnic group differences. For example, they may comment on individuals' skin tone or hair type. Such comments might imply bias ("That man has weird hair.") or may simply a state a fact ("That man has dark skin.").

What parents can say and do. In response to children's statements, use the opportunity to explain the racial differences your child has noticed (including what such differences do and do not mean) and state your own personal views on the trait. In the first case, you might say, "That man is African American and his hair is not weird. His hair is different than yours but I think that it is really great! People often (but not always) have hair like others in their family. You have hair like your ____. But people's hair doesn't t tell you anything about them! Sometimes people with curtly hair like to play with cars and sometime they don't! Sometimes people with straight hair are friendly and sometimes they are not!"

Ages 6-11

What children typically say and do. At this age, White children typically begin to endorse the view that positive traits (intelligence, kindness) are more often associated with Whites than other racial group members and negative traits are more often associated with other racial groups than with Whites. Most children do not endorse extremely biased views but instead show consistent associations of Whites with positive attributes. Children typically select White dolls, White friends, and activities that include predominately White children. Importantly, many White children in this age range become convinced that race is a taboo topic and that it is always inappropriate to admit that one notices or thinks about others' racial group membership.

What parents can say and do. Parents should pay close attention to behavior that may indicate racial or ethnic biases. When selecting items for their children, parents should select diverse dolls/action figures and media (books, televisions shows) that include racially diverse characters. They should also explicitly acknowledge that racial diversity is a valued dimension of such items (e.g., "You have several dolls that are White. I think that it would be very nice to have dolls of other races as well. They are all beautiful!"). Parents should also model their own interest in non-White people, culture, and history. It is also important to encourage children to have an ethnically diverse group of friends. Parents can do so by modeling cross-race friendships and placing children in racially diverse contexts (e.g., summer camps, recreation centers), as well as by stating that they value friendships and interactions with others who are dissimilar to themselves in appearance, social group membership, skills, and interests. For example, a parent might say, "Do you remember my friend Cara? She is African American. I always learn a lot from having friends who are different from me in their race or gender or background. Cara shared her experiences about_____ with me. That hasn't happened to me, so being friends with Cara has helped me to learn more about the world. I'm really glad to have Cara as a friend. Have you learned things from talking to your friends who are different from you?"

Adolescents (12 and up)

What adolescents typically say and do. Adolescents are increasingly independent and spend more time away from their families. Research indicates that adolescents become more knowledgeable about racial stereotypes in their culture as a result of their wider experiences in the world (e.g., exposure to media). They also begin to attend to social issues such as affirmative action via media and schooling. Because of the prevalence of racial stereotypic messages in the media, and racial segregation within and across cities, adolescents sometimes become more

stereotypic in their own attitudes. Adolescents' friendships become more intimate and they begin to date, making cross-race relationships potentially more fraught.

What parents can say and do. Racially biased parents often express disapproval when they become aware, or suspect, that their child is hanging out with, or dating, non-White peers. Racially non-biased—but "colorblind"—parents are likely to say nothing at all. In contrast, we recommend that parents offer explicitly positive comments when their teen develops intimate relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds. A parent might say, "I'm happy to see that you have friends from difference racial and ethnic groups. It is important to me that you are not racially prejudice and this shows me that you don't want only white friends." They might also express some of the ways that relationships with diverse friends benefit people. For example, "I have learned a lot from my friendships with people who are from different background to me."

Parents should also talk to their adolescents about the racial disparities that exist in our society. Adolescents notice, for example, that Whites tend to have higher status jobs than do people of color. Parents should discuss the history of racism and White privilege in the United States with their teens. These discussions should help to prepare adolescents to both interpret disparities and oppose discrimination when they see it.

Additional Readings and Resources

Bronson, P., & Merryman, A. (2009). Even babies discriminate: A *NurtureShock* excerpt. *Newsweek*. Available at: newsweek.com/id/214989

Derman-Sparks, L., & Ramsey, P. G. (2011). *What if all the kids are white?: Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Tatum, B. D. (2007). *Can we talk about race? And other conversations in an era of school resegregation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

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