

Talking with Children about Racism

Conversation Starters

Many parents and adults working with children know the importance of talking to children about racism, but often don't know how to start. Our faith calls us to seek justice and kindness. One of the most prominent ways we can do that is by teaching our children to be anti-racist, not merely disliking racism, but actively standing against racist policies. Here are some helpful guidelines for talking with children about racism.

For Preschoolers:

- **Learn:** Ensure that books, tv shows, and other media a preschooler consumes not only have diverse characters, but characters that don't fall into stereotypes, positive or negative. You can also proactively celebrate the differences in skin color, hair, and other characteristics and note how God creates everyone differently, and how beautiful our differences make the world. Many young children learn best with experimental learning. Consider reading stories, drawing pictures, and then asking questions. Some good content for preschoolers is:
 - [Bino and Fino](#) Video Series
 - [Anti-racist Baby](#) by Ibrahm Kendi
 - [Our Skin](#) by Jessica Ralli and Megan Madison
- **Discuss:** If a child notes that a person has a different skin color than they do, don't shush them or act in a way that would make it seem like their observation is shameful. Instead, note that their observation is correct and take the opportunity to celebrate the difference and note that we are all humans made in the image of and loved by God.
 - I wonder what it would be like if our whole world celebrated differences like God does?
 - Could we find a way to celebrate differences each day?
 - Can you draw a picture of God's dream for of our world? Tell me about your picture.
- **Apply:** Talk about how wrong it is when people aren't being treated fairly. Use social stories to show examples of what happens when someone isn't being treated fairly and how it makes them feel. Ask children how they feel when they aren't being treated fairly. Some good social stories include:
 - [God's Dream](#) by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abram
 - [Say Something](#) by Peter H. Reynolds
 - [What If Everybody Did That?](#) by Ellen Jevernik
 - [Rain Boy](#) by Dylan Glynn

For ages 5-8:

- **Learn:** As your child learns about community helpers such as teachers, police officers, and firefighters, talk to the child about how we are taught to trust community helpers. Emphasize that many community

helpers make good choices, but sometimes some community helpers make bad choices. Remind your child that if they ever encounter a community helper making a bad choice, especially if they are treating someone who looks different from them badly, that they should tell you right away.

- **Discuss:** Talk to your kids about BIPOC leaders they are learning about in school (like Martin Luther King Jr). Ask them to identify what the leaders were advocating for or fighting against, and if they still think racism is happening. Talk about how racism can happen in overt and less overt ways. For example, you can talk about how schools that are in wealthier, less diverse areas tend to have newer playgrounds, buildings, and books. But schools in poorer, often more diverse areas do not have the same things.
 - I wonder if you've ever seen a situation where someone was being treated unfairly? I wonder how they felt? How did that make you feel?
 - What can you do if you see someone being made fun of because of their skin color or their ethnicity? Let's practice what you can say or how you get help from an adult.
 - Do you have friends that are different from you? How are they different? What new things have you learned from them? What do you have in common?
- **Apply:** Ask them what they would do if they saw someone being made fun of because of their color or ethnicity. Talk about standing up to bullies and telling a grown-up if someone is being mistreated. Talk to them about being a good friend and checking in with someone who has been bullied, left out, or mistreated. Some good books on how to respond to bullying include:
 - [I Walk With Vanessa](#) by Kerascoët
 - [The Proudest Blue](#) by Ibtihaj Muhammad
 - [Those Shoes](#) by Maribeth Boelts

For ages 9-12:

- **Learn:** Ask your child how many BIPOC leaders they have learned about in school. Then ask them how many White leaders they have learned about. Ask them why they think this is. You can look at the Quicksheet *BIPOC Trailblazers and the Untold History of Marginalized People* to learn more about BIPOC leaders or have your child explore on their own in areas of interest – science, sports, music, art, food, social justice.
- **Discuss:** Talk about what it means to be actively anti-racist instead of simply thinking racism is wrong. Share ways children can and should stand up to people, even people they love (such as family members), and tell them why things they are saying and doing are wrong. Examples from this article highlight the difference between overt and covert racism: <https://www.r2hub.org/library/overt-and-covert-racism>
 - Sometimes people we love say things that perpetuate racism. Have you ever heard someone say something that didn't sound right to you about a group or individuals' ethnicity? I wonder what can we do when we hear these things? I wonder how God would want us to respond?
 - What are some ways that we can become involved in standing up against racism?
- **Apply:** Begin to talk about systemic racism and the difference between it and overt racism. Talk about things like mass incarceration and how 1 in every 14 children have a family member in prison and that this number is much higher for people of color (source: [ChildTrends](#)). Remind them that children in their class could have a family member in prison. Remind them that they can be a friend and offer a listening ear if they know of someone that might be impacted by having a loved one in prison.

Each child is unique and has a different capacity for understanding the complexities around this issue. These are meant to be starting points for age-appropriate conversations about racism and what a child can do to become anti-racist.

In an effort to help kids realize how they can become anti-racist, tangible action is a great way to take their learnings from conceptual to actionable. Having children join family friendly protests, call or write to their elected officials, or collect signatures for a petition can be effective ways to do this. When children are taught to take action, they will be less likely to be bystanders.

For additional suggestions see the other Quicksheets in this toolkit including “Take Action Against Injustice: Ideas for Families”

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