



RACISM: EMOTIONALLY SUPPORTING YOUR CHILD OR TEEN

Racism is toxic to the social-emotional health of all children – whether they experience it directly, or witness it silently. Given news of racial tension, injustice, inequality and police brutality over this past year coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, your child or teen may be feeling a wide range of emotions. Some children may feel scared, worried, or anxious, while others may feel sadness, frustration, or anger.

As children get older, they are developmentally more able to understand issues related to fairness, oppression, and discrimination. Parents of color have carried the burden of having conversations about systemic racism early and well before the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the rise in anti-Asian discrimination during the pandemic. For all families, these conversations should start quite early in our homes, as racism is tightly woven into the fabric of our nation. Conversations about racism should take place in all families regardless of race, ethnicity, or cultural background. All of us have biases, and all of us need to help raise a generation of youth to welcome diversity and inclusion, and to know their own biases.

These conversations can be steered by parents and other caregivers. What you say and how you say it can be guided by what you know about your child and their sensitivities, how they respond to stress, and how much they can tolerate. These can be difficult conversations, and they should be ongoing. Choosing to talk about race with your children is taking action. Here's some guidance to consider, no matter where you are in your journey.

Your Ongoing Conversation About Racism

Take Care of Yourself First. This may pose a challenge and will require extra effort – especially if you are feeling anxiety or stress, or if you are truly worried about your child's safety. Children and teens can sense when you are nervous, even if you try to hide it, so be mindful that nonverbal communication can either encourage a conversation with your child – the goal – or discourage it. So, first, [take care of yourself](#). For caregivers of color, the American Psychological Association has more on [Racial Stress and Self-Care](#).

Create A Safe Space to Talk. No matter what their age, it's important that your child feels they can say whatever they are thinking and feeling about racism. They also need to know that you will listen. Be open to all their points of view, and validate that their thoughts and feelings are real and true for them. Be aware of your tendency to judge or criticize, and let them say everything on their mind they need to before you jump in. Be mindful that judgment or criticism is not only conveyed through what we say, but our body language, as well.

Talking to Younger Children. Meet your child where they are and use age-appropriate language. This will be key in talking effectively with your child. With young children, it's best to [give them very basic information](#) and then follow their lead. It's important not to overwhelm them with too much information, as this can lead to them becoming confused or anxious. [With little ones](#), there can be a great deal of listening, educating, and comforting. Often, the younger children take on the values and practices of their home without much thought, so there is often not much push back or challenging.

Talking to Older Children and Teenagers. Similar to younger children, meet your teen where they are in the language you use. Different from younger children, older children and teens may have a lot of questions. They will have begun forming their own opinions. With teenagers, while you listen, educate, and comfort, it is reasonable to expect some push back. Developmentally, [teens are struggling with their own identity, ideas, and positions](#) and it's healthy for them to question you (as well as themselves). Your job is to accept that a spirited debate is one way they can both assert themselves and understand the different aspects of an issue. Partner with your teen and help them think about ways in which they can safely assert their autonomy. They may feel compelled to express their views and values. Following their lead, explore with them, the various options, asking open-ended questions that will spark a deeper thought process.

Learn From History. A helpful way to open this dialogue might include reading and learning about the history of racism in America, as a family. For example:

- Talk about specific events in history, like Juneteenth or the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. [There are books for all ages](#) that can [help facilitate these conversations](#).
- Watch educational videos and documentaries or listen to podcasts about specific topics, events, or people. There are many options available through streaming networks, and also through public broadcasting.
- Visit an [African American or similar museum](#), either in-person or virtually.

Be Aware of Media Influences. With 24/7 news and social media coverage, conversations about race and injustice are happening all around us. You want to be the source of information and guide the direction of conversations with your children. This is too important to avoid or leave to chance. In the absence of conversation, children will not have an opportunity to ask questions, or share fears, worries and concerns related to racism and injustice. As a result, you will not be able to correct misinformation, provide perspective, or offer comfort and reassurance. Going through this alone can be scary for both children and teens, and when left to their own devices, what they can imagine is often far worse than the reality.

See Something? Say Something. In line with keeping these ongoing natural conversations, seize the opportunity address matters of race and injustice in real time. More recently, there has been a dramatic shift in views and events related to race and racial injustice and brutality – take advantage of these as teachable moments and opportunities. Point out and name racism and examples of institutional racism at work, intentional or unintentional messages or actions that target a person based on their race, and direct blatant insults based on one's race. Recognizing the ways in which racism can look is essential to talking about and tackling it.

Guide Your Child in Any Activism. Activism is part of the fabric of our nation and working together, you can promote a safe and thoughtful experience. This approach shows that you respect and value your teen or young adult's ideas and their input. It lets them think through their motivations, goals, and intentions while feeling in control. You can also promote activism

by encouraging them to write letters to their local or national officials, bring them to protests or marches if it's safe, or raise money to donate to a cause in which there is a shared vision.

Listen! Listen! Listen! We all want to be heard and our children are no different. Teens even more so than younger children especially want to feel heard and understood. They will have questions and reactions to their life experiences, what friends may have shared with them, or what they see in the news. Let them tell you their reactions. It is our job to let them talk, as a way to process what they've seen and heard, or simply to vent. Encourage them to share and be mindful that nonverbal communication can either encourage the dialogue with your child – which is the goal – or discourage and shut it completely down. The last thing they want is a lecture!

Embrace Emotion. After the tone is set with a safe and open space to talk, expect some conversations to be emotional. It is important to take your own temperature and gauge where you are emotionally. While it is okay for parents to also have and express emotion over this topic, it is important not to overpower your child with your emotions. This can result in them feeling scared or overwhelmed, and if your child thinks that they are upsetting you, they will be less likely to open up. Your own child may not have had a negative experience related to racism, but are still aware of current events or have a friend who has talked about bad or scary situations. For some children who have had personal experiences, they may find it very difficult to manage their emotions and remain calm. Whether or not they've had a direct experience with racism, feelings of sadness, disappointment, anger, or resentment may be there. Or they may feel outrage about events they have seen in the news. They need you to let them know that their feelings are normal, that you may have them as well. but that we can only change things by acting in a way that does not fuel those feelings.

This is a difficult time in our nation, and racism can be a very emotional topic. It can also be hard to strike a balance between providing enough guidance and protection to your child, while allowing for [growth, independence, and autonomy](#), especially for teens. It will be from your ongoing conversations that you make room for future experiences and continued dialogue.

To learn more about mental health concerns by child age group, visit the Project TEACH Parent and Family Page: <http://bitly.com/PTEACH-Family>

For more trauma-informed resources, visit the Project TEACH Prevention Science Page: <https://projectteachny.org/prevention-science/>

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