



Talking to Very Young Children about

RACE

*It's Necessary Now,
More than Ever*

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The civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd had a profound impact on our nation. Multi-racial and multi-generational protestors have taken to the streets demanding justice and equity, especially for Black lives. Slogans such as “All lives can’t matter until Black lives matter” have prompted conversations about race around the country. Many families are wondering how to talk to young children about race. Some are afraid their children are too young, while others fear that talking about race might promote racism. The failure to talk about race contributes to racial inequities (Plaut, Kecia, Hurd, & Romano, 2018). Many families are afraid to broach the subject of race because they were taught to be ‘colorblind’ and to avoid uncomfortable conversations. This has left children to form their understanding with little guidance from parents or other adults. As children naturally categorize people based on skin color, they develop ideas and values about people as they watch and listen to adults for racial cues.

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Black families talk to their children about race when they are very young, and the discussion continues and becomes more complex as children grow. These parents know they must prepare their children to live in a racialized society where they may be treated differently because of their skin color. Black families also discuss race to develop positive racial identities in their children to counter the negative narratives in society (McNeil Smith, Reynolds, Fincham, & Beach, 2019). White families are less likely to discuss race with their children because it is not critical to their survival. Their racial privilege has shielded them from being victims of discrimination and racism (Abaied & Perry, 2020).

Often adults in a variety of settings (e.g., medical, policing, education) dismiss or do not acknowledge pain experienced by people of color. This contributes to people of color receiving disparate, inaccurate, and/or even cruel treatment as in the case of police brutality or withholding medical treatment. In early childhood classrooms, it is important to recognize and respond to the emotions of children of color. Early childhood professionals who are attentive and responsive to the range of emotions of children of color can serve as a model of support so that other children recognize that their peers experience the same feelings and emotions that they do.

Current events remind us of the necessity to discuss race with young children. To engage in these conversations, adults must address their fears and discomfort in discussing race. This begins with normalizing racial conversations. These conversations should become a pattern during the early childhood years and not a single event. Even infants notice differences between people and how they look. Adults can help by noticing the differences and describing them positively. Casually respond when children notice how people have different color skin and hair. Discuss the variations within your own family or classroom. It is perfectly natural for children to notice and discuss race. They are amazing at noticing differences in hair, skin, shapes, colors, abilities, etc. If adults act anxious or awkward when a child notices differences, the child may invent reasons why the parent is concerned. The child may become anxious about people because of difference.

It is important to talk about race. Children see injustices that occur in the news, at the store, on the playground, in their classrooms, and other places children spend time. It is important for adults to explain to them what happened in a way that makes sense based on their developmental level.

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Developmental Understanding of Race and Difference and Strategies to Talk Young Children about Race



Birth to Age 2

Developmental Understanding of Race and Difference

- ▶ At birth, babies look equally at faces of all races. At three months, babies look more at faces that match the race of their caregivers (Kelly et al. 2005).
- ▶ By the time children are two years old, they show a strong preference for those in the same racial group (Baron & Banaji, 2006).

Strategies for Talking about Race

- ▶ Examine everything in your environment to make sure that diversity is well-represented (e.g., Do you have books and photos that represent diversity of race? Do you have friends and/or professionals you engage with from different racial groups?).
- ▶ Model positive ways to talk about skin color and differences. “Jessie has dark skin and you have light skin. Both skin colors are beautiful.”

Ages 3 to 4

Developmental Understanding of Race and Difference

- ▶ Three- to five-year-olds categorize people by race and express bias based on race (Aboud, 2008; Hirschfeld, 2008; Katz, 2003; Patterson & Bigler, 2006).
- ▶ Three- to five-year-olds use racial categories to “identify themselves and others, to include or exclude children from activities, and to negotiate power in their own social/play networks” (Winkler, 2009).

Strategies for Talking about Race

- ▶ Talk about race and promote racial identity in a positive way so that children are less likely to internalize racial discrimination. Silence can reinforce racism or discomfort with talking about race. The adult should actively help children feel positive about their racial identity, have accurate words to describe and understand other’s racial identities, and the skills to challenge racist behaviors.
- ▶ Select books that promote diversity and highlight positive role models of different races and ethnicities.
- ▶ Children notice differences. Model positive ways to talk about skin color and differences between people. “Yes, your skin is beige or white.” John’s skin is dark or black.” “Julie’s hair is...”
- ▶ Emphasize the importance of being different and celebrate differences. For example, “No one looks the same. Each person has their own look. It would be so boring if everyone looked the same.”
- ▶ Stress how everyone is different and everyone is important. No one is better than anyone else. “No one is better than anyone. No matter what color our skin is we are all important.”
- ▶ Start talking to children about hurtful behaviors and how to be helpful to others. Talk to children about how to be a good friend using concrete and specific examples. For example, “Sarah, when you told Tammy she could not play with you and the friends you are playing with, that hurt her feelings. It is important to be kind and treat everyone with respect.”
- ▶ Notice how friends feel happy when they play together. Help children notice each other’s feelings. For example, “It feels good to be asked to play and to play with many friends.”
- ▶ Talk about how we want to treat other people they way we would want to be treated. “We treat everyone fairly. We try to make sure everyone in the class gets what they need.”
- ▶ Promote empathy by asking children how they would feel if treated unfairly. “When you said that about Luna, it was hurtful. Now Luna is sad. Would it hurt your feelings if someone said that to you?”
- ▶ Be careful to promote empathy and not sympathy. It is important that White children not feel sorry for children of color so that superior attitudes are not developed. “We all have different skin color, but we are all the same. We have families, we eat food, and we like to play. It isn’t right to treat someone differently based on the color of their skin.”





Ages 5 to 6

Developmental Understanding of Race and Difference

- ▶ Five- to six-year-old children in the majority group show the same level of implicit bias as ‘in-group’ adults (Baron & Banaji, 2006).

Strategies for Talking about Race

- ▶ Start talking about how some people might treat others differently based on the color of their skin. Be very specific about the actions children can take to respond. “Sometimes people don’t treat others kindly because their skin color is different.” “Do you think that is ok or kind?”
- ▶ White children are less likely to intervene when the victim is Black. We have to teach White children to be antiracist. “Did you think that was kind?” “If you see someone treated badly you can tell a grownup or stick up for your friend by saying ‘hey, that’s not right.’”
- ▶ We have to talk to children about being antiracist and pushing back against racist policies, practices, and ideas. “What can we do to help?” “We can write letters to people who make the rules to share our opinions that a practice or rule isn’t fair.” “We can vote for people who will help make rules and laws that are fair and just.”

- ▶ Help children notice that people are sad and angry when people of color are treated badly. It is ok to be angry. We can use anger to drive us to take action (e.g., get help, ask a peer to use kind words, invite a friend to play). “It’s ok to feel angry or sad when someone is treated badly. Its ok to tell a friend to be kind or ask a grownup for help if someone is being unkind to someone based on the color of their skin.”

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