

Talk to Your Kids

6/9/2020

Hi everyone, Lisa here. The last couple of weeks have been extremely difficult to say the least. I've had sleepless nights and moments of anger and despair, but also hope. I've watched people come together and people try to tear others apart. I've struggled to decide how I wanted to speak about what's going on. Then I started thinking about how the kids I work with are dealing with what's happening. I work with a number of children of color and we've had conversations about the racism they've already experienced and their fears about how they will be treated in the future because of the color of their skin. I thought about the preschoolers who have told me about classmates telling them that they are ugly because their skin is brown. Yes, preschoolers.

Why am I bringing all this up? Because in thinking about how I wanted to talk about what's happening in our country, I kept coming back to the messages we are sending to kids. Decades of research has shown that kids as young as preschool age have ideas and opinions about race/skin color. Negative stereotypes and racist attitudes are learned early, even when kids are not explicitly taught these ideas. They pick them up from what they see and hear.

Now, imagine what happens when your kids don't hear from you about these issues. Where will they get their information? Just like any other topic, if you don't talk to your kids, they will get the information from somewhere else. They will also learn that they *can't talk to you* about this issue.

If you are raising Black children or children of color, you already know that you have to talk to your kids about how the world may treat them. You've either had to be or are preparing to be there for them when they face racism. You've had the talk about how to survive an encounter with police or how to behave when they go into stores so that they'll be less likely to be followed around or hassled. What you may struggle with is teaching your children how to survive in a way that allows them to be cautious but not fearful.

If you are raising White children, you may be coming the realization that there are some things you have overlooked or have not ever really had to think about. I'm guessing you're already raising your kids to be kind and respectful to other people. What you may struggle with is how to talk about these principles specifically as they relate to race.

Given everything going on in our country right now, it should be clear that it's critical that you talk with your kids about race and race relations. What may not be so clear is *how* to talk to your kids about race. Well, a good place to start is by teaching your kids how to treat other people with respect, dignity, and kindness, regardless of the color of their skin.

Unfortunately, that won't be enough. It's important that your kids understand that skin color has no relation to character or a person's right to be treated like a human being. Part of that requires direct conversations and explicit teaching about race and skin color. There are many books and resources out there to help you (I included a short list below). Many books are geared toward younger kids, but the principles can be applied when talking with older kids or teens.

When talking with your kids, it's important to find out what they already know or believe. This is necessary no matter how old your kids are. Again, even kids as young as 3 or 4 have ideas about race and before you start teaching them anything, it's a good idea to find out what they've already learned. We tend to shield younger kids from the news, so they don't typically see or hear as much about what's going on in the world as older kids. However, depending on where you live, your kids may have at least seen protesters. They're going to have questions, even if they don't ask them out loud. You can share with your young children the reason people are protesting without going into detail about the people who have been killed. You can explain what a protest is and let your young child know that people are protesting because people have been hurt because of the color of their skin. This initial explanation can lead to further discussion about race and equal treatment for everyone.

Your older children and teens will need more detailed conversations. They have likely seen or heard some of the news coverage or have seen people discussing it on social media. They may have even

participated in discussions. The most important thing in conversations with older kids is not to sugarcoat things. They know when you are trying to avoid talking about something or when you are trying to make something seem less awful than it really is. So, be brave and be honest. Ask them what they have already seen and heard and how they feel about it. It's likely that they will have received some misinformation and you will need to help them correct that. You may also find that your kids have done more work in this area than you have, so it's a good idea to listen as much as you talk.

Your kids might have a different viewpoint than you do about certain issues. It's important to allow them space to question what you have previously taught them or for them to bring up things they've noticed about how your family can change in its approach to race-related issues. These discussions might become uncomfortable and/or intense, especially if you disagree about things or if your kids challenge some of your own long-held beliefs. The natural temptation at these times is to shut down the conversation, but that is unhelpful in the long run because it teaches your kids to avoid difficult discussions. Entering these conversations with openness and a willingness to listen will create an environment that feels safe and allows your kids freedom to ask questions and say what's really on their minds.

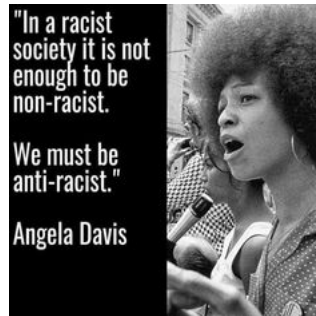
It's also okay not to know the answers.

It's okay to say, I'm not sure, let's look into that. Then, do the work to get the information you need. It's out there.

These conversations don't have to (and likely won't) happen all at once. Sometimes you'll need to talk about specific events as they happen. But, much of the time, you can prepare in advance. You can make time to gather information to share with your kids. You can read books, watch documentaries, or just talk.

With that said, yes, it's crucial that you talk with your kids about race. But, all of your talk means nothing if your actions don't back it up. Your kids look to you to model all kinds of behaviors. We've talked about this in other posts. Issues around race are no different. Your kids learn from watching

you and observing how you treat and talk about other people. So, you can't have a conversation with your kids about how it's not okay to mistreat people because of the color of their skin and then say nothing when your neighbor tells a racist joke or justify police brutality when you hear about it on the news. It will also be difficult to convince your kids that you value people of all races when you have little to no interactions with people of color.

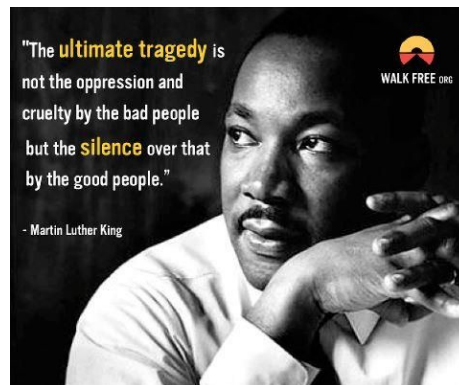


It's not enough to tell them- you also need to show them.

What should be apparent right now is that we have not made as much progress as human beings as we should have. Things are not equal and there is no such thing as "color blindness" when it comes to race.

This is not easy work. Changing a system never is.

So, please, talk to your kids.





To help you get started, here is a list of books and other resources that you and your kids can use to learn and talk about race. This is not by any means an exhaustive list- there are a lot of other great resources out there, but this is a good place to start.

Books for Younger Kids:

All the Colors We Are, Todos Los Colores de Nuestra Piel: The Story of How We Get Our Skin Color by Katie Kissinger, Photography by Chris Bohnhoff

*All editions of this book include text in both English and Spanish

Mixed: A Colorful Story by Arree Chung

Momma, Did You Hear the News? (Talking to Kids About Race and Police) by Sanyaa Whitaker Gragg, MSW, Illustrated by Kim Holt

Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice by Marianne Celano, Ph.D., ABPP, Marietta Collins, Ph.D., & Ann Hazzard, Ph.D., ABPP, Illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin

Sulwe by Lupita Nyong'o, Illustrated by Vashti Harrison

Books for Older Kids/Middle-Grade Readers:

It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood (Adapted for Young Readers) by Trevor Noah

This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action and Do the Work by Tiffany Jewell, Illustrated by Aurelia Durand

*More books for this age group can be found on the booklist links below

Books for Teens and Young Adults:

All American Boys by Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely

Black Enough: Stories of Being Young & Black in America, Edited by Ibi Zoboi

Dear Martin by Nic Stone

It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood (Adapted for Young Readers) by Trevor Noah

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas



This Book is Anti-Racist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action and Do the Work by Tiffany Jewell, Illustrated by Aurelia Durand

We Are Not Yet Equal: Understanding Our Racial Divide by Carol Anderson with Tonya Bolden

Books for Adults and Young Adults:

Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor by Layla F. Saad

So You Want to Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo

When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele

Websites & Booklists:

<https://www.becauseofthemwecan.com> – Because of Them We Can – Website and optional newsletter that provide information and stories about Black excellence in the past and present. Contains content for both children and adults.

<https://www.todayparent.com/family/books/kids-books-that-talk-about-racism/#gallery/books-that-talk-about-racism/slide-12> – Provides a list of 30 books for children of all ages that talk about race and racism

<https://www.wdmlibrary.org/2020/06/anti-racist-books-for-teens/> – Provides a list of fiction and nonfiction books geared toward teens that deal with issues around race and racism