

Racism . . . Where do I begin with my children?

A simple guide to change your heart, change your home, and impact your community

From birth, children seek connection and safety from their parent/caregiver through nonverbal and verbal communication. They learn who to be at ease with, how to treat a friend, how to treat a stranger, and how to cope with fear, first by watching the people whom they have grown to trust. Our hope is that this guide will facilitate assessment and then action. Our children are watching.

HEART

ASSESS: A personal inventory is a helpful place to start

- How diverse is my close friend group?
- How do I verbally and non-verbally communicate with people outside of my race?
- How do I talk about black people (or people outside my race?)
- Who do I socialize with in various public settings (i.e., kids' games or birthday parties, social events, at work)
- Who do I acknowledge and show kindness to in public (i.e., out in my neighborhood, at stores)?
- With whom do I arrange playdates for my child(ren)?
- What messages am I sending to black people by my actions?
- What am I conveying to my same-race friends and family members by my actions?
- What lessons might I be teaching my children by my actions?
- Do my actions match my personal values?

ACTION:

- ✓ If you are curious about unconscious biases you may hold, The Implicit Associations Test ([Implicit.harvard.edu](https://implicit.harvard.edu)) will provide you with this feedback.
- ✓ Educate yourself about black history, black culture, and positive depictions of black people
- ✓ Treat black people with respect, and dignity; acknowledge our presence with warmth
- ✓ If you see a black person being mistreated, be an ally and say something
- ✓ Speak positively about black people
- ✓ Assume that black people belong wherever you are and welcome us

HOME

ASSESS: Children learn first from the behaviors of their parents and caregivers, next from their environment. Discuss with your partner (if applicable)

- What are our family values?
- In what ways do we as a family live these values?
- What lessons might our children be learning about our family values given our current actions/inactions?
- Which lessons might we need to correct?
- Are there positive depictions of black people in the movies and shows we our children watch?
- Are there black dolls and toy characters in our home?
- Does my child have books with positive depictions of black children and adults?
- Is black history and culture taught in an accurate way at home?

ACTION:

- ✓ Purchase or borrow books about black history and culture for your home library (visit socialjusticebooks.org for ideas), and read/discuss them with your child
- ✓ Diversify your child's toys
- ✓ Be curious about your child's feelings and ideas
- ✓ Create a safety plan for what your child can do if they are in a scary situation or their friend is
- ✓ Support open dialogue about race and racism (see heART of Conversation below)
- ✓ Listen for statements that reflect stereotypes (i.e. "all black people are scary", "all police officers are bad"), validate their thoughts/feelings, and then help to correct those stereotypes with specific examples.
- ✓ Lead by example, your children are watching and learning

COMMUNITY

ASSESS: Learn about your community

- Is the black history curriculum at your child's school sufficient?
- Are positive depictions of black children and adults meaningfully represented in the classroom book collections and materials at your child's school?
- What disparities exist in your community?
- Which organizations are serving the black community?

ACTION:

- ✓ Request that your child's teacher diversify the literature available in the classroom
- ✓ Advocate for an increase in exposure to black history and culture within your child's school
- ✓ Support black-owned businesses
- ✓ Donate to non-profit organizations that address disparities within the black community, such as the [Village Giving Circle](#)

The heART of Conversations

Children's brains develop rapidly, and what started as uttering a first word seemingly becomes recounting an interaction on the playground and then an incident of racism over night. As their awareness of the world around them expands, they begin to reconcile what they learned at home with the context in which they live. Parents/caregivers have the opportunity to serve as a guide through this process not only through their actions, but also in conversation. Below are tips to enrich the quality and meaning of such conversations.

When considering a conversation about racism with your child, recognize this topic has the potential to evoke fear depending on how many details your child knows. Be on the lookout for signs that your child may be scared by what you are saying. Disengagement is an indication that your child is likely disinterested or overwhelmed. Academic prowess is not an indicator of whether your child is emotionally or cognitively ready to have a conversation about racism. A simple conversation on fairness and feelings, sharing relevant examples may be best understood and appreciated by your child. Be prepared to follow their lead.

ASSESS: Prepare for an intentional conversation and ask yourself

- What do I believe is important for my child to know given their age and level of exposure to the topic?
- How much context do I want to give?
- Is the content of this conversation something helpful to my child at this stage of development?
- Am I emotionally ready to have a conversation with my child that may trigger me?

ACTION:

- ✓ Give your undivided attention to your child
- ✓ Help your child name their feelings; this is a wonderful opportunity to increase your child's feelings vocabulary so they have the words to describe how they feel when something distressing happens
- ✓ Listen for all or none statements (i.e., "all police are bad", "all black people are scary"), and explore those statements while wondering aloud about alternative statements.
- ✓ Steer clear of questioning, advising, and judging to allow space for your child to think through their own thoughts, feelings, and solutions
- ✓ Maintain awareness of your tone, body language, stance; stay calm
- ✓ Watch and listen for signs of disengagement and/or distress
- ✓ Gently end the conversation if your child appears disengaged and/or distressed. If your child disengages before you feel the conversation is done, it's OK! You can always try another time.

Resources

Need additional help with tough conversations? *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Joanna Faber and Julie King. There are separate versions for young children, school aged children, and teenagers.

Unsure of which topics to cover in conversation with your child? [Reading Rockets](#) offers a list of books with coinciding age appropriateness for children ages 0-18.

A few topic ideas:

- ✓ Feelings, age 0+
- ✓ Fairness, age 2+
- ✓ Empowering through black history and culture education, age 2+
- ✓ Safety – Your parent(s)/caregiver(s)' job is to keep you safe, age 3+
- ✓ Using your voice to speak up for the fair treatment of others, age 6+
- ✓ Keeping yourself safe when your parent/caregiver is not with you, age 8+
- ✓ Privilege, age 11+
- ✓ How to interact with police when pulled over, 14+

When to call 911:

If you or your child is experiencing suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm

If you or your child has a plan to harm someone else

When to seek the help of a professional counselor or medical doctor:

If your child is experiencing prolonged loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, self-isolation, depressed mood, and/or marked change in behavior

If you need additional support or are concerned about the health and well-being of your child

This guide was produced by THRIVE Integrative Counseling, LLC. It is not intended as a substitute for professional help nor as an exhaustive source of information. Please use these guidelines as a starting point.