

Skills Building – Approaches in answering questions or having conversations

Approaches to common questions/conversations about race

****Questioning (All Ages)**

This approach is unpacking what children are thinking or feeling.

“That’s a good comment. What makes you say that? This is something that I’m interested in talking about with you.”

“What did you think about the part of the movie when ____? (Follow-up from adult) I ask because when I watched it I felt ____ because of _____. What do you think?”

Common Preschooler Questions

“What color am I?” Use a nice, big paint kit to explore colors with your preschooler and find the shade that most closely matches his skin tone. Since your child isn’t asking about race, it’s fine to give an answer like brown, cream or tan. Expect that your preschooler might wrongly identify his own skin tone and that of others, or that the shade he picks might change over time.

“Mummy, are you black/white?” Find out why he’s asking (possibly he heard someone else referring to you by your color) before responding with a simple yes or no. Remind your child that everyone’s different and that’s a good thing.

“Why is that girl brown?” A good general answer for this age group is simply: “Everyone’s skin is different”. “Race is one of the beautiful things that makes us different, but I know that the color of our skin does not mean someone is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or ‘nice’ or ‘mean.” Whatever the context, the key is to embrace diversity with your tone and words.

“Why doesn’t her mommy/daddy look like her?” Tell your child that not all mommies/daddies and children look alike but that they’re still a family. Point out any examples in your own family, like the fact that you have blonde hair while your preschooler’s is dark.

Empathetic Relating (Younger children – School-age)

Invite the child/youth to imagine how they would feel if a similar (negative) statement were applied to them.

An adult might respond to a comment or joke by saying, “Wow, when you say that, I can’t help but imagine what they would feel if they hear that. Can you imagine what it would feel like if other kids were sitting around talking about us like that?”

Educating (School-age +)

This approach asks us to make use of the knowledge that we gain and try to inform the children in our lives what we know.

Instead of saying, “We’re all equal.”

Try saying, “We’re all equal here. But sometimes in the world, people are treated differently based on the color of their skin. What are things we can do to make sure that doesn’t happen in our home/classroom?”

Returning Later/Learning Together (All Ages)

This approach is teaching the child to navigate resources to understand the world in which they live. When your child asks a tough question about race: Instead of saying nothing and avoiding the conversation or “I don’t have all the answers” try saying: “That is something adults haven’t even figured out. Let’s learn about it together.”

Real talk and facts (Pre-teens & Teens)

5 Things to Think about When Communicating with Youth and Teens

- Listen more than Talk
- Focus on positive rather than negative
- Avoid minimizing the problem – perspective makes a big difference!
 - “In 5 years you won’t care about this stuff”/ “There will be other fish in the sea”/ “It isn’t really that bad”
- Fighting battles that don’t “really” need fighting
- Adjusting expectations can be good! Be prepared to compromise and negotiate.

Supporting other adult allies:

“My child said something racist, therefore I must be a bad parent.” Racism is a powerful system that affects individuals and institutions. Children are steeped in this culture from birth and it should come as no surprise when they ask a question or make a comment about race that gives us pause. Many adults get caught up in feeling guilty for things that child in their life has said, rather than seizing the opportunity to have a deeper conversation that examines the source of the comment. This guilt also prevents them from seeking out the support of peers who can bring expertise and insights to the situation.

Here’s something you can try with other adult allies:

Instead of saying, “My child said something so horrible I can’t even repeat it.”

Try saying, “I think my child is beginning to notice inequalities in society. She/he said _____. Has your child ever said anything like this? What did you do about it?”