

Talking WITH Kids About Race

All Ages:

Examine your own biases.

Look at the examples that you set for the children in your life. Even the smallest actions can sometimes send negative signals to a child.

Things to think about:

- When in public, do you tend to sit only near people of your own race?
- If someone tells an ethnic joke, do you smile even if it makes you uncomfortable?
- Do you look for opportunities to expand the racial mix of you own group of friends and acquaintances?

An Honest Conversation

Answering a child's questions honestly and without embarrassment, and sharing multicultural books with them, is the first step toward teaching tolerance. Here are a few basic principles.

Don't deny differences.

"If a white child asks, 'Why does that kid have brown skin and I have light skin?' don't say, 'There's really no difference.' Kids aren't color-blind, and they won't believe you," Dr. Katz says. "They're just trying to find out whether these differences mean anything." Instead, you could simply respond, "Because his mommy and daddy have brown skin" or "Skin color is passed down from parents and grandparents, and people are different colors depending on which part of the world their ancestors came from." You should also tell children that people think and feel and enjoy a lot of the same things, even if they look different.

Give straight answers.

Never make a child feel ashamed for bringing up racial issues or pointing out differences in skin color. By responding to kids' questions and comments in a matter-of-fact fashion, adult allies can pave the way for future candid conversations about race. For example, if a child points to a black woman and says, "Look, that lady's face is brown," don't be embarrassed and hush the child up -- take the opportunity to educate the child and explain why.

"There's no need to bring in race if the child is just talking about [the color of] a person's skin," Dr. Wright says. "Adults think race, but children just think eyes or skin or whatever other characteristic. Keep your answers specific but truthful." Tailor your explanations to your students' questions to her or his particular age and comprehension level.

Be reassuring.

Sometimes children simply need to hear that it's okay to be different, especially if they are in the minority.

Don't overdo it.

Maintaining a balance is important, says Dr. Wright, especially if you're a minority. Minority parents or teachers who dwell too much on race, particularly with very young children who can't yet process the information, may be doing them a disservice. For example, Dr. Wright says, she knows black parents who tell their children that they'll have to work twice as hard as white students do to succeed in school. "Some of them grow up thinking that they are destined to be treated unfairly and don't even bother trying," she says. "It handicaps a child, it really does."

Dealing With Prejudice

Despite our best efforts, we can't protect children from the reality of prejudice and bigotry. Nor can we shield them from the stereotypes that are so prevalent in our society. Rachelle Ashour, a Virginia grammar-school teacher, recalls one eye-opening experience she had while teaching a predominantly black third- and fourth-grade class in Washington, D.C. "If you go into the gift shop of a museum with the kids, for instance, they really are watched more than other children are -- it used to make me so angry," she says. "And the kids would pick up on it. They'd say, 'They're following me in the store because they think I'm going to steal something.' I'd say, 'They're just prejudiced.'" By acknowledging the racism, Ashour says, it gave her the opportunity to discuss with her students ways in which they might handle such situations.

Unfortunately, many families find themselves living in communities in which their kids are surrounded only by people who look just like them. "Young kids begin to develop attitudes toward people who are different from them very early on if they're not exposed to people from other environments and cultures," says Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D., a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Raising Black Children* (Plume, 1992). Experts say they can easily develop an "us-them" mentality. Here's what you can do to help.

Expose kids to various cultures.

Dr. Poussaint says it is especially important for teachers to expose their kids to other cultures through multicultural books, by attending shows or movies featuring musicians or actors of different races, and by providing toys and dolls that reflect the world's diversity. "When kids have dolls that aren't all black or all white, they begin to see that people come in different shades of color, with different shapes of eyes," Dr. Poussaint

says. "This might encourage children to ask questions. Later, if they hear derogatory terms, they'll know it's not the right way to refer to people."

My Notes