



Strategies for Talking to Children About Race

Compiled by the Schools Committee
of the South Orange/Maplewood
Community Coalition on Race



SOUTH ORANGE | MAPLEWOOD
COMMUNITY
COALITION
ON RACE

Recognize your own bias

Before we talk to our children about race, it is helpful to consider our own views on race. How do you navigate race? Who are the members of your social and professional circles? Growing up, did your family discuss race? Do you discuss race with your own family? If you are uncomfortable talking about race, begin by educating yourself and starting your own anti-racism journey.

Diversify your world

Make a conscious decision to live in a diverse space so that your children will not have a narrow view of community. Who do you invite to your home? What books, movies, music, artwork, toys do your children see? Show your children through your own life that the world is made up of people of all races and experiences.

Be conscious of how you speak about difference

When you use phrases like "they have a different culture than we do" you reinforce stereotypes that you're trying to teach your children not to hold. Talk about individuals rather than groups. Learn the language of race. Make sure you understand concepts like equity vs equality, structural racism, unconscious bias. Language changes over time and it's important to stay up to date with vocabulary.

Talk in terms of fairness and unfairness

Even very young children understand the concept of fairness. It is a natural way to frame conversations about equity. Be honest with your child when you see something that isn't fair. Inspire them to want to work toward "fairness" both in their play and in the world. Be willing to acknowledge your own (or your family's) racial or class privilege.

Speak up when words or images make you feel uncomfortable

Even if you only say, "I don't like this" or "That makes me feel uncomfortable," you are beginning to counter the negative images and words children see and hear. You can always return to what word/image bothered you and talk about it in more detail.

Challenge stereotypes

Point out stereotypes in books, movies, television, and music when you see them. Use simple, concrete, age appropriate language to explain how you feel. Choose books that acknowledge that all of us are "different" in some way. Look for narratives that don't only portray marginalized groups as suffering, in crisis, or being "saved" by outsiders. It is also important to avoid reading only "hero" narratives about "exceptional" individuals.

Explore through play

You can use stuffed animals, dolls, puppets, and action figures to role-play things that bother your child. Play-acting solutions to problems may provide opportunities to discuss difficult situations.

Consider feelings

Let your children explore their feelings about race. Ask them to think about how their words may make others feel. Share your own feelings. Think about the impact of the words you use on others' feelings.

Encourage conversations about race

When children bring questions or comments about race to you, make sure they know that you value what they have to say. Keep the lines of communication open, especially if your child says something embarrassing, insensitive, or outright racist. The conversation can sometimes be difficult, or even painful, but try to find out where these thoughts come from. Is it possible that you or other family members have modeled insensitive language or jokes?

Show your children how they can create change

As children get older, you can begin to move your conversations about race and inequity toward creating change. "What can we do, right now, to try to change something that we find unfair?" Explain that an activist is someone who takes action. Think of ways to stand up to inequity. You can call out unfairness when you see it. You can write a letter together, or send an email. Start small. But start!

Additional Resources

Helpful Websites

pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-honestly-with-children-about-racism

pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism

commonsensemedia.org/articles/how-white-parents-can-use-media-to-raise-anti-racist-kids

slate.com/human-interest/2014/03/teaching-tolerance-how-white-parents-should-talk-to-their-kids-about-race.html

raceconscious.org/strategies/

learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources/lessons/white-antiracist-biographies-early-grades

Books to Read Together

The Skin You Live in, by Michael Tyler and David Lee Csicsko

We're Different, We're the Same, by Bobbi Kates and Joe Mathieu

Ruby Bridges Goes to School: My True Story by Ruby Bridges

A is for Activist, by Innosanto Nagara

All the Colors We Are/Todos Los Colores de Nuestra Piel, by Katie Kissinger

The Youngest Marcher: The Story of Audrey Faye Hendricks, a Young Civil Rights Activist, by Cynthia Levinson and Vanessa Brantley-Newton





About the Schools Committee

The Schools Committee of the South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race has been working toward equity in our school district for over 25 years.

Our goal: The school district is stably integrated overall, where there is equity for all students, within levels and schools, and the staff is racially and culturally diverse. Students of all races are expected and encouraged to excel in a community that is proud and supportive of its students

To learn more, or to volunteer, please visit communitycoalitiononrace.org.

About the Coalition on Race

Our mission:

To build and sustain a community that is racially, culturally and socially integrated and truly inclusive where there is equity and equality for all.

Our vision:

We aspire to be a community that is a model for the nation in which people of different races, ethnic groups and backgrounds can interact, form friendships and participate fully in the community's economic, political, civic, educational and cultural life.

Follow our work



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