

Racism and Violence: How to Help Kids Handle the News

 childmind.org/article/racism-and-violence-how-to-help-kids-handle-the-news

With protests over the violent deaths of black Americans dominating the news, it's understandable that many kids are feeling scared, confused or angry about the situation. How can parents, many of whom are struggling themselves, help children process what they're seeing and manage their feelings?

There's no one right answer. That said, there are a few guidelines parents can keep in mind to help kids deal with troubling news about race and violence.

Validate their feelings

Start by checking in with your child. Kids, even very young ones, are extremely perceptive, and they may have worries or concerns they don't know how to express.

This will look different for every child. Kids might be afraid of riots, of being hurt by the police, or worry that something bad could happen to loved ones. Avoid making assumptions. Instead, ask broad questions that give kids space to talk over what they're feeling: "How did you feel about what we saw on the news? What did it make you think about?"

For young children, drawing, painting or acting out stories with toys can be helpful tools for expressing thoughts and feelings that aren't easy to put into words.

Do your best to meet your child where they are and acknowledge their feelings, fears or worries.

Don't avoid talking about it

"Racism is not new," says Dr. Kenya Hameed, PsyD, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "These are ongoing problems. It's going to take all of us changing the mentality and the mindset to work towards a better future and fix them."

That change, she emphasizes, can't and won't happen without frank, open conversation — a conversation that for most black families has never been optional. "It's really not a choice," says Dr. Hameed. For families of color, racism is a daily reality. "Black parents can't wait, even if they wanted to."

White parents, she says, can help by addressing race and racism with kids early and often. Research shows that even very young children are aware of racial differences, and children can learn harmful lessons about race when it's not discussed openly. It's helpful for white

families to see that minimizing the legacy of racism in our society by avoiding ugly truths does children a disservice. Instead, white parents can commit to educating themselves and building conversations about race into kids' lives early on.

Additionally, white families can make a concerted effort to represent racial diversity in the products they buy for their children. For example, parents of white children can look for black dolls and books with predominantly black characters, which can help normalize diversity for kids and spark spontaneous, everyday conversations about race.

Be clear, direct and factual

Even with young children, use clear language. Don't say, "People are upset because some groups treat other groups unfairly." Instead, say: "This is about the way that white people treat black people unfairly."

"If you expect children to read between the lines, they can miss the message," says Dr. Hameed.

Emphasize that racial violence is wrong. It's easy for kids (especially little ones) to think that bad things happen to black people because black people are themselves bad. "Even if a child doesn't explicitly tell you this," says Dr. Hameed, "it is an easy assumption they can make based on how black people have been portrayed and treated in this country." Help children understand by speaking to them in a developmentally appropriate way. Emphasize to your child that black people are good and that being black doesn't make you bad. Treating people unfairly is the thing that's bad, and black people have been treated unfairly for a long time.

Talk about history. Kids need to know that racism is part of a history that dates back hundreds of years, Dr. Hameed notes. At the same time, you can also emphasize your hope for a better future and plan ways your family can help make that a reality.

Encourage questions — and don't worry if you can't answer them

Kids are likely to have lots of questions about racism and violence, and chances are they won't be easy ones. They might want to know how racism affects them or why white people treat black people unfairly. These aren't easy subjects and feeling uncomfortable during the conversation is normal — but it's not a reason to stop talking.

By tolerating discomfort you're modeling an important skill for your child. Be honest. You might say, "I find it really hard to talk about this. It feels scary. But it also makes me more hopeful about making change."

Try to be calm, but don't hide your emotions

Children take their cues from parents, so talking to them calmly and staying factual helps them process information. It's helpful to pick a time when you're feeling centered and have had a chance to work through your own feelings.

At the same time, it's important that we don't hide our emotions from children, especially when the subject is so important. Let them know that you're sad or angry, says Dr. Hameed, and acknowledge that it's good to be upset by injustice, as long as it doesn't stop you from working to make it better. That way, you'll leave kids with a clear lesson about the family values you want to pass on to them.

Rely on your support system

Witnessing scenes of racist violence is deeply upsetting for many parents, but for parents of children of color, it can also be traumatic. Take time to check in with your own mental health during this time, especially given the additional stress of the coronavirus crisis. If you're feeling exhausted or overwhelmed, reach out to your networks for support. Friends, family members, religious leaders and mental health professionals can all help you process your own emotions and plan conversations with children.

It can also help to bring in trusted allies to talk to your children themselves — having an adult perspective that doesn't come from a parent can give them more space to sort through what they're feeling and ask questions.

Keep the conversation open

Like any important topic, racism and violence aren't something you can have "the talk" about just once. For kids of any age and race, this is something that's going to keep coming up, so be sure to let your kids know that you're there for them whenever they need to talk — and keep checking in proactively, too.

Explore resources

No matter what challenges come up as you talk with your kids, there are lots of great resources out there to help you continue these crucial conversations. Check out the following resources for further help and support along the way:

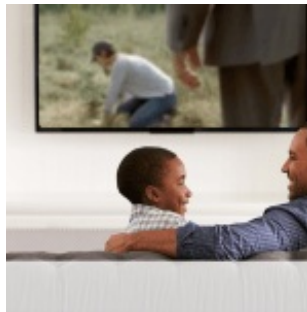
- From Colorlines: [The Dos and Don'ts of Talking to Kids of Color About White Supremacy](#)
- From Safe Space Radio: [Talking to White Kids About Race and Racism](#)

- From the Center for Racial Justice in Education: [Resources for Talking About Race, Racism and Racialized Violence With Kids](#)
- From We Need Diverse Books: [Resources for Race, Equity, Anti-Racism and Inclusion](#)
- From the Anti-Defamation League: [Children's Books Addressing Race and Racism](#) and [Activities to Promote Social Justice](#)
- From the Oakland Public Library: Resources for [Talking to Kids About Racism and Justice](#)

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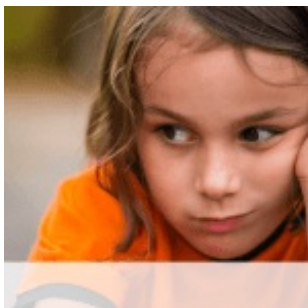


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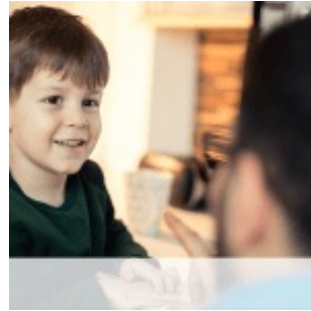
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