

16 ways to help children become thoughtful, informed, and BRAVE about race

Our children receive messages about race all the time - from books, games, movies, television, teachers, family friends and family members, neighbors and neighborhoods, their peers, and from you. They learn from what you say and do, from what you don't say and don't do. They notice patterns around race and gender, among other identities. Which kids get to be the stars in their picture books? Who among their peers is considered beautiful or smart or upstanding? Which children do teachers tend to scold? Who's invited to their home for dinner - and who isn't? Which communities' concerns do we meet with care, attention, and resources? Which groups do what work in the world? Who gets to be president?

As adults in the lives of children, we play a crucial role in shaping how and what they learn about race. Here are some starting points for raising children who can be the thoughtful, informed, and race-brave community members our multiracial democracy needs to thrive.

Start early. The earlier, the better.

1) Understand that children notice difference.

Within months of birth, infants prefer same-race faces. Babies can distinguish skin colors and hair textures. This doesn't mean that they think about race the way adults do or that they're "racist." It means that they have begun to participate in the ongoing conversation about race. Be sure to involve yourself thoughtfully in that conversation!

2) Make space for your child's respectful curiosity.

Let your child know that it's okay to notice skin color and talk about race, whether with respect to toys, characters in books, or in the world. Encourage her to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences by asking questions of her and welcoming her questions. If she makes a negative racial comment, ask, nonjudgmentally, What makes you say that?

3) Read #ownvoices books.

#OwnVoices books feature characters from marginalized groups written by members of those groups. Engaging kids with books that offer diverse and authentic racial and cultural representations and stories sends the message that you value diversity and opens up space to have great discussions about race and difference.

4) Use age-appropriate language.

When talking about big concepts like discrimination, power, and oppression with young children, use language they understand. Even young children have a developed sense of what's "fair" and "not fair." That's a good place to start when talking about racial bias and inequality.

Let your child see you do your own work.

5) Talk about your own feelings.

Whatever your racial or ethnic identity, you may have “big” or complicated feelings about race. Acknowledge that with your child and talk about where your anxiety may be coming from. Sharing your struggle will help free your child to share any discomfort about race she may have. Make the struggle part of the journey.

6) Let your child see you face your own biases.

We’re less likely to pass on biases we identify explicitly and work to overcome deliberately. Give your child an example of a bias, racial or otherwise, that you hold or have held. Share with your child things you did or do to confront and overcome that bias.

7) Acknowledge when you don’t have a good answer, but don’t leave it there!

You don’t have to be an expert to talk with a child about race and related topics. If you don’t have a good answer to a question, say, Let me think about that for a while or Good question! Let’s find out more about that later, okay? And then do the research!

8) “When you know better, do better.” (Maya Angelou)

Don’t let your mistakes paralyze you. The point isn’t to be perfect; the point is to do better. Learn. Do better. Keep going. Repeat! Do the work - and let your child see you do the work.

Learn about others and about yourself.

9) Choose diversity.

Choose a diverse neighborhood to live in. Choose a diverse school for your child. Be sure the books, toys, and movies in your child’s life include some with Black, Indigenous characters and people of color in lead roles. Diversify your circle of friends and help your child diversify his. Helping your child build real relationships with a racially diverse set of children and others will probably take some effort. It’s worth it!

10) Learn about and respect others.

Talk about and study the experiences of groups we now call Black people or African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Peoples, and Whites, among others. Be sure your child understands that every racial and ethnic group includes people who believe different things and behave in different ways. There is more diversity within groups than across them.

11) Tell stories of resistance, resilience, and joy.

It’s easy to reduce the story of race to one of bias and discrimination. However, race is also a story about joy, family, community, resilience, allyship, grassroots resistance, and laugh-out-loud humor. Be sure that all of these are in the mix of your discussions and explorations about race.

12) Know and love who you are.

Talk about the histories and experiences of the racial, ethnic, and cultural groups you and your family strongly identify with. Talk about their contributions and acknowledge the less flattering parts of those histories as well. Tell stories about the challenges your family — your child's parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great grandparents, others — has overcome.

Raise a changemaker.

13) Be honest with your child, in age-appropriate ways, about bigotry and oppression.

Children are amazing at noticing patterns, including racial patterns (who lives in their neighborhood versus their friends' neighborhoods, for example). Help them make sense of those patterns. Bigotry and oppression are sometimes a big part of those explanatory stories.

14) Nurture critical race thinking.

Media portrayals of racial groups might be especially influential in shaping the perceptions of children with little direct contact with the people in them. Teach your child to question the narrative offered in books, movies, and on television. Ask: Whose story is this? Whose voice is missing or sidelined? Who gets to be the hero? Who created this story and when?

15) Support your children to take a stand.

Be sure your child knows that the struggle for racial fairness is ongoing and that your family can take part in it. Help her understand what it means to be, and how to be, a change agent. Connect the conversations you have to the change you both want to see, and to ways to bring about that change.

16) Plan for a marathon, not a sprint.

Make race talks with your child routine. Race is a topic you should plan to revisit again and again in many different ways over time.

Source:

<https://www.embracerace.org/resources/16-ways-to-help-children-become-thoughtful-informed-and-brave-about-race>