

Anti-bias Lessons Important for Kids Early On

by Trisha Whitney

“Look Dad! That kid is black all over!”

How do we talk to our children about race? Should we talk to our children about race? European-American parents have often been raised with the feeling that talking, or even thinking, about race is a social taboo.

The philosophy is: “We’re all the same under the skin, but it’s not polite to talk about it.” And so parents hush their children when the subject comes up, and feel uneasy and tongue-tied when a young child rejects a brown-skinned Lego person.

Some parents of children in the majority believe, “This is not an issue that affects us; it’s a problem for children of color but my children don’t need to know about it.”

It is true that racism hurts children of color by destroying their self-esteem. But racism also harms European-American children because it teaches them a false sense of superiority and incorrect perception of reality.

Many parents hope that not talking about race will protect their children from the ugly truth of racism. “My child is too young to know about such things.”

Most children of color are taught about racism at a very early age, when they are confronted with it. And research shows that all children, as young as age 2, notice racial differences. By the age of 3, children begin to attach our society’s positive and negative values to these differences.

Saying nothing simply leaves your children without input from you. The racism still prevalent in our society and the push toward viewing conformity as the highest virtue (“fitting in”) will fill in that gap quite easily. And while these children are sorting it out for themselves and getting to be old enough to learn about it, they are having an impact on the children they interact with.

My African-American daughter has had to learn at an early age how to deal with children staring, feeling her hair, teasing her about her nose, and telling her, “Only white kids can play here.” All of these things happened to her in Eugene before she was 5. Nearly every trip to the park, every new team she joins or class she attends includes one such inquiry.

The truth is that ALL children are curious about differences. It is the responsibility of parents and teachers to help children grow up respecting and feeling comfortable with people different from them.

A good place to start is to provide an environment for your children that reflects diversity they might not see elsewhere. Toys, dolls, pictures, books, music, TV shows, and videos widen your children’s view of the world.

Educate yourself about common stereotypes, and review books and movies before you let your child experience them. Either keep stereotyped images out of your child’s life or use them to talk about how unfair they are and how these images hurt people.

To help your children understand about racial and cultural backgrounds, begin by giving them an understanding of their own. Tell them about people you are proud of in your family. Identify for your child your family's place of origin. Use whatever family information you have and simplify for young children.

They love to be able to say, "My family came from Asia before my mom was even born," or "I'm from Italy and France!" They can do this long before they understand where these places are.

Create opportunities to discuss race with your children. Picture books can be an excellent way to make this happen. Some books discuss racial issues at a child's level ("Amazing Grace" by Mary Hoffman). Some present images of diversity the world over ("Hats, Hats, Hats" by Ann Morris) or right here in our country ("Abuela" by Arthur Dorros). Some have actually been created to help children learn to value diversity as well as our common humanity ("We're Different, We're the Same" by Bobbi Kates).

Make sure your children understand that it is never okay to tease or reject a person because of who he or she is. Present this concept to children at a very young age so that it will be natural to them as they grow.

Stop any situation in which children are breaking this rule. Never ignore or avoid dealing with these situations, as silence sends a strong message of approval to your children. Support the child who has been rejected, and find out what was behind the biased behavior. The guideline you've already established for treating everyone with respect can help children understand what went wrong.

To encourage your children's respect for people as they are, there are many other things you can do such as patronize area businesses owned by people of color and attend cultural events. But the most important thing you can do is calmly and respectfully respond to your children's questions and reactions about themselves and others.

This leads parents back to the "don't talk about it" taboo or fear of "saying the wrong thing." Both of these must be overcome. Remember that these issues are not nearly as emotionally charged for our children as they are for us—unless we communicate our fears to them. Saying something in a calm, respectful way is better than trying to deflect your children's interest or ignoring their questions—even if you don't have an eloquent answer at hand.

If you need time or information, it's appropriate to respond, "Gee, I don't know the answer to that. I'll have to ask someone about it," or, "Let me think about that for a minute and then we'll talk about it."

This lets children know there is nothing wrong with their questions or the people they are curious about and that they will get the information they are seeking. It also tells them that you are still learning yourself.

Usually children just need to be given some simple information to help them sort this all out. Remember to be brief, talk calmly, and be respectful of both the person you are talking about and your child's need to know: "John's skin is dark brown because the family he was born into has brown skin." "Julio says things differently than you do because you learned English first and he learned Spanish first."

If it feels inappropriate to discuss the issue in public in front of the person your child is asking about, it's all right to respond, "That's a good question, but she probably doesn't want to hear about it all the time. Let's talk about it when we get back to the car." Then be sure you do discuss it at the time you set.

One other important thing to do is talk to your children's teachers. Let them know that you are interested in having your children learn about these issues. Ask them in what ways the curriculum and environment is encouraging anti-bias attitudes. Find out what the school's policies regarding intervention in bias situations are and encourage them to get teacher training in this area.

Helping your children learn through these experiences can help them feel better about themselves (everyone is different in some way from everyone else) and to treat others better as well.

After swimming lessons one day, I heard a child say to my daughter, Alex, "You have dark skin all over." I knew that Alex had learned several ways to respond to these inquiries. I also knew she gets tired of dealing with it. But before she needed to explain, the child continued, "And I have light skin all over. And we both live in this town, huh?" Alex just agreed and they went on chatting.

Mentally I sent a big "thank you" to that child's parents for taking the time to give her the information she needed and the comfort with it to be delighted by a new experience. I hope that you will do the same for your children.

Trisha Whitney is the director and teacher of the Drinking Gourd Elementary School in Eugene, which was created to promote both academic and social skills in children grades K-5. She has been training teachers and parents in anti-bias awareness and educational methods since 1991. For more information on teaching children about bias issues, contact HANDS UP! For Anti-Bias Education in Lane County at 689-5255.

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