

TALKING TO CHILDREN

Racial Targeting and Acts of Violence: Strategies for Coping

When and how to have a conversation with your child about racial issues is a very personal decision. The strategies and resources in this handout can help you to feel more prepared when you're ready. If your child has experienced an incident or has been exposed to the news and is fearful, you will want to address their questions and emotional reactions right away.

Address fears and worries

Ask what they have heard, seen, or read. What worries them? Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings. Really listen without trying to make it okay.

Let them know that feeling strong emotions is okay. Naming and facing our fears reduces the power they have over us. Be open to talking through their worries. Children may need to ask the same questions over and over. Young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. They may show them through play, drawing, or physical symptoms, such as tummy aches. You can help them name what they're feeling.

Give realistic reassurance. Rather than saying, "I'll never let anything bad happen to you," you can tell them that you'll always do your best to keep them safe. Make time for soothing activities such as reading or playing games together. Give extra hugs. Consistency and routines also help communicate a sense of safety.

Share information honestly, but at a level they can understand. A general rule is to offer only as much information as they request, but be prepared to go deeper with older children. As with adults, unknowns can be scarier than the reality when we "fill in the blanks" with our worst fears. Think about how you want to address the hard questions, such as how to respond to racial slurs or why they might be targeted. Age-appropriate resources (*see next page*) may be helpful.

Talk about safety. Having strategies can reduce risk and build a sense of security. Review ways to respond to harassment, threats, or bullying. Discuss how they can stand up for themselves or others in safe ways. Roleplaying and practice can help build confidence.

Helping children cope

Talk about positive ways that people are responding and what you might be able to do. Look for any sort of positive actions that others are taking, such as community support or bystander interventions. Think about what you as a family might do. This can be empowering and help counteract some of the negativity and feelings of helplessness.

Monitor exposure to news and social media. Watching repeated coverage of the event(s) can be as disturbing to a child as if it were happening anew each time. You may want to watch together and discuss what you see to put the information in context. This can also be a good starting point for a deeper conversation. Talk with your teen about the damaging impact of social media comments and the wisdom in not reading them.

Keep checking in. This is not a "one and done" issue. Keep talking and inviting questions. Ask, "How are you feeling about this?" Be tuned in to your child and the needs they are communicating with their actions. If changes in mood or behavior are concerning, seek out professional support.

Be aware that your child is watching you to understand how to process this experience. Be honest with words, feelings, and actions, but stay in control. Try to model healthy stress management and coping, such as taking good care of yourself and asking for the support you need.

Talking about the issues

Think about what you want to communicate and when. Talk with your co-parent and others to review factors that might impact this conversation, such as your child’s age and maturity level. But be aware that even small children have likely seen or heard things related to the topic and may benefit from talking. This can be a profoundly important conversation, not only about injustices – past and present – but also as a way to share specific advice on safety.

Be open and direct. You can acknowledge that talking about race and injustice can feel uncomfortable, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk about it. You may want to dig deeper into your own perspectives and examine your attitudes and positions before talking with your child. Don’t avoid this topic because it makes you uncomfortable.

Share stories. Help children understand the human stories behind the headlines and news coverage. Be sure to include stories of people who have made a difference, people who have stood up to bring change, and those who are doing so today.

Understand that you don’t have to be the expert or have all the answers. Even adults grapple with challenges and issues around race, discrimination, violence, and injustice, but talking is a way to bring this topic out into the open. It gives you and your child a way to share thoughts, feelings, and questions. It’s also an opportunity to learn more together about what has happened in the past, as well as current events. And to talk about how your family can respond. As much as we want to, we can’t “fix” this for our children. But we can give them language, tools, and our support.

Resources

Talking to Young Children About Race and Racism

www.pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism

Center for Racial Justice in Education

www.centerracialjustice.org/resources/resources-for-talking-about-race-racism-and-racialized-violence-with-kids/

Embrace Race: Raising a Brave Generation. Together.

www.embracerace.org/resources

Teaching Tolerance: Beyond the Golden Rule

www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/beyond_golden_rule.pdf

Sesame Street and CNN town hall: How to Explain Racism to Kids (video)

www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/app-news-section/cnn-sesame-street-race-town-hall-app-june-6-2020-app/index.html

Trying Together: Anti-Racism Tools

www.tryingtogether.org/community-resources/anti-racism-tools/

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