

TIPS FOR TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT RACE AND RACISM:



If we want to raise our children to be compassionate people who participate as responsible citizens in a democracy, we need to find ways to talk with them about the thorny issues that we struggle with as a country. Race, violence, and how to create change in a democracy are three of those issues.

Sometimes current events will create the opportunity or the need for such discussions; sometimes our personal lives will. Because we as adults struggle with these issues, we will often find ourselves struggling to know how to talk to our children

about them. But that doesn't mean we don't have a responsibility to do so.

Unfortunately, the experience of racism is a daily occurrence for families of color, so it's a frequent discussion in many African American and Hispanic homes. How heart-breaking it must be to have to explain to your child that the color of his skin means he may not be treated fairly by our society, that he runs even the risk of death if he happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It would be facile--and just plain not true--to say "Stay out of trouble and you'll be fine." It's easy to give examples of African American men who have been killed when they had not committed a crime and were not resisting arrest; Eric Garner, Dontre Hamilton, and Michael Brown come to mind.

White families often ignore the issue of racism because it makes us uncomfortable, and because we assume that it doesn't affect our children. But racism dehumanizes all of us. We can only end racism by talking with all of our children about how it unfair it is, by admitting that all of us have a tendency to judge people based on appearance, by pointing out the terrible cost to people of color but also to our entire society, and by teaching our children that treating all people fairly matters. *(Excerpt from "Talking With Children About Racism, Police Brutality and Protests" by Dr. Laura Markham, AHA Parenting, <http://www.ahaparenting.com>)*

So... how can we talk with our children about these realities? Consider these suggestions:

THE PRESCHOOL YEARS

Be honest. Don't encourage children not to "see" color or tell children we are all the same. Discuss differences openly and highlight diversity by choosing picture books, toys, games and videos that feature diverse characters in positive, non-stereotypical roles.

Embrace curiosity. Be careful not to ignore or discourage your youngster's questions about differences among people, even if the questions make you uncomfortable. Not being open to such questions sends the message that difference is negative.

Foster pride. Talk about your family heritage to encourage your child's self-knowledge & positive self-concept.

Lead by example. Widen your circle of friends and acquaintances to include people from different backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

THE ELEMENTARY & PRETEEN YEARS

Model it. Talking to your child about the importance of embracing difference and treating others with respect is essential, but it's not enough. Your actions, both subtle and overt, are what she will emulate.

Acknowledge difference. Rather than teaching children that we are all the same, acknowledge the many ways people are different, and emphasize some of the positive aspects of our differences — language diversity and various music and cooking styles, for example. Likewise, be honest about instances, historical and current, when people have been mistreated because of their differences. Encourage your child to talk about what makes him different, and discuss ways that may have helped or hurt him at times. After that, finding similarities becomes even more powerful, creating a sense of common ground.

Challenge intolerance. If your child says or does something indicating bias or prejudice, don't meet the action with silence. Silence indicates acceptance, and a simple command — “Don't say that” — is not enough. First try to find the root of the action or comment: “What made you say that about Sam?” Then, explain why the action or comment was unacceptable.

Seize teachable moments. Look for everyday activities that can serve as springboards for discussion. School-age children respond better to lessons that involve real-life examples than to artificial or staged discussions about issues. For example, if you're watching TV together, talk about why certain groups often are portrayed in stereotypical roles.

Emphasize the positive. Just as you should challenge your child's actions if they indicate bias or prejudice, it's important to praise him for behavior that shows respect and empathy for others. Catch your child treating people kindly, let her know you noticed, and discuss why it's a desirable behavior.

THE TEEN YEARS

Keep talking. Many believe the last thing teens are interested in is having a conversation with parents. But even if your teen doesn't initiate conversations about issues of difference, find ways to bring those topics up with them. Use current issues from the news, such as the immigration debate or same-sex marriage, as a springboard for discussion. Ask your teen what she thinks about the issues.

Stay involved. Messages about differences exist all around your teen: the Internet, songs, music videos, reality shows, ads and commercials, social cliques at school. Know the websites your teen enjoys visiting; take time to listen to or watch the music and shows they enjoy. Then discuss the messages they send. Ask your teen about the group or groups she most identifies with at school. Discuss the labels or stereotypes that are associated with such groups.

Live congruently. Discussing the importance of valuing difference is essential, but modeling this message is even more vital. Evaluate your own circle of friends or the beliefs you hold about certain groups of people. Do your actions match the values you discuss with your teen? Teens are more likely to be influenced by what you do than what you say, so it's important for your words and behaviors to be congruent.

Broaden opportunities. It may be natural for teens to stick to groups they feel most comfortable with during the school day. These often are the people they identify as being most like themselves. Provide other opportunities for your teen to interact with peers from different backgrounds. Suggest volunteer, extracurricular, worship and work opportunities that will broaden your teen's social circle.

Encourage activism. Promote ways for your teen to get involved in causes he cares about. Upset about discriminatory treatment of teenagers by a storekeeper or business? Give your teen suggestions for writing a letter of complaint or planning a boycott. When young people know they have a voice in their community, they are empowered to help resolve issues of injustice.