



— Discussing —

RACE

— with —

YOUNG CHILDREN

A Step-by-Step Activity Guide



Ages
2 to 6

noggin sparkler



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FOR
CHANGE
Paramount

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Find videos, articles, activities, and more related to this guide online at www.BigHeartWorld.org/DiscussingRace

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Preface

Raising children is hard. It can be beautiful, fun, and rewarding — but it is challenging, too. Caregivers and parents are often desperate for support, ideas, and concrete ways of answering our children’s big questions.

As a child psychologist, I hear many of those questions from kids and from parents. Their big concerns are about how people get along, why the world works the way it does, what is fair, and how to understand themselves. Many of their big and, frankly, toughest questions involve race.

With such a contentious topic and the many dynamic feelings and opinions, our job as caregivers can seem impossible.

Parents ask and tell me:



“What do I tell my young child about race anyway?”

“I don’t want them to learn about race in the ways that I did.”

“How can I protect them from discussions they aren’t ready for?”



These are all questions I’ve heard from caregivers over my years of practice. I hear families, educators, and those serving children saying that they need help. They need the help of folks who understand children and who have had these conversations before. They also want access to the research about what this all means for kids and families.

This guide is a most welcome resource for every young family! It doesn’t solve all the problems related to race, but is a helpful guide for caregivers who want to support our children in becoming part of a more just and decent world. This guide was created with children’s stories, questions, and experiences at the heart of it. It was also created with a clear understanding of what caregivers are facing — the questions, stories, and conflicts that commonly arise.

The work here is well-researched and supported by many experts who understand children’s needs. Most importantly, this guide provides an opportunity to really listen to our children and to be in conversation with them — and it encourages us, as caregivers, to grow and learn with them.

This guide accompanies us as we play, listen, and learn with our children. I am sure that in these conversations and guides, you will come up with even more questions — but you will also learn something new and feel supported. This is not easy work, but with help like this guide provides, it can be beautiful, fun, and rewarding.



-Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith

Associate Professor, Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, The Wright Institute

Why Did We Create This Guide?

Children notice race and talk about it, but race can be an uncomfortable topic for many parents and caregivers. Research shows that parents' interest in this topic has grown exponentially in recent years — and that many parents and caregivers are still searching for the “right” way to introduce the topic and to answer young children’s questions to help prepare them to live in our big, diverse world.

This guide is a social and emotional learning tool that parents, educators, and other caregivers can use to have age-appropriate conversations with children, from about two to six years old, about race and racism.

It was created in consultation with individuals from multiple racial groups who are parents, educators, scientists, and child development experts specializing in how children learn about race and racism. It’s brought to you by trusted children’s media companies: Sparkler Learning and OK Play, in collaboration with Noggin.

Importantly, this guide emerged as a clear need from original research at Nickelodeon Consumer Insights, Noggin, and OK Play. We interviewed and analyzed conversations with more than 50 parent-child pairs of different races and from different geographies. These interviews demonstrated the need for a guide like this and informed what we chose to include in it.

At the heart of this guide are short, child-friendly picture activities to help spark open, meaningful conversations, plus question prompts to support grown-ups as they support their children. It also provides practical tips for addressing questions and situations that might occur in everyday life.

Who is this guide for?

This is a social and emotional learning guide for parents, caregivers, and educators to use with young children from all ethnic and racial backgrounds. It is important for every family to talk about race because people from all backgrounds have experiences, thoughts, and comments related to race. As we created the guide, we made a conscious effort to make it as inclusive as possible.

No special training or preparation is required to use this guide! Our hope is that any grown-up caring for a young child can use it to spark useful dialogue and learning.

We recognize that there are many components of identity besides race, including, but not limited to, socioeconomic status, ability status, immigration status, body size, age, gender, sexuality, and cultural, religious, and ethnic identities along with some forms of identity that are hard to put into words. For all of us, our many identities interact with each other to shape who we are and how we uniquely experience the world.



While this guide is focused on promoting conversations about race and racism, we believe that discussions about people’s intersecting identities are important and necessary. We worked with experts to incorporate some of these identities into the guide and the types of questions and activities we included can also extend to learning about and celebrating all kinds of differences and identities. Once families learn the approach and practice it with this guide, they can apply the approach in their daily lives — as they visit their local playgrounds, read new books, and watch movies together.

We hope that this guide will spark meaningful conversation and learning, but it’s not going to answer every (inevitable!) question.

We always appreciate hearing from people and welcome your feedback. If you have a question or situation you want to share — perhaps a time when your child observed something or asked a question and you weren’t sure how to respond — please send us an email for a chance of being featured on our website or answered by an expert. You can reach us by emailing Sparkler, the nonprofit organization that edited and published this guide at support@playsparkler.org.

Why Talk to Young Children About Race?

All children notice differences and similarities between people; it’s an expected and normal part of their development. Research shows that individuals notice racial differences in people as early as infancy (Kelly, et al., 2005); by toddlerhood, children often choose playmates based on race (Katz & Kofkin, 1997). Research also shows that adults delay conversations about race because they underestimate children’s processing of this complex topic (Sullivan & Wilton, 2020).

Why is it important to talk with young children about race? We identified five core reasons:

- 1 As adults, we have an opportunity to support and guide children. By listening to our children’s observations and talking openly about race, we can set children up to understand and celebrate differences.
- 2 When we talk with our children about differences — both seen and unseen — we are helping children learn to respect and be kind to all the different people who make up their classroom, community, country, and world.
- 3 Early conversations about race can help to build children's ability to work well with people from different backgrounds. Working collaboratively and solving problems together are skills that will benefit children as they grow up in our diverse world.
- 4 Talking about differences helps children spot when people are being treated unfairly because of their race — and use their voice to stand up for what’s right.
- 5 Framing conversations around a celebration of race and skin color can increase self-esteem and pride in children of color.

Why do race and skin color matter?

Some people wonder: Why can't we just tell children that race and skin color don't matter, and that we are all the same and equal? It seems like talking about race will further divide us.

This approach (sometimes called the "colorblind" approach), is rooted in what research now demonstrates is a well-intentioned misunderstanding.

We all wish we lived in a world where everyone was treated equally regardless of the color of their skin, but that often is not the case. And research tells us that young children notice (Winkler, 2007).

Avoiding conversations about race can also cause confusion for children of color who experience racism based on skin color (Lingras, 2021). Perhaps most importantly, by avoiding conversations we may miss a key opportunity to prepare children of all colors to successfully identify racism when it's happening, and to be able to do something about it.

Ultimately, avoiding conversations about race and racism doesn't work because children *do* see color. Noticing a difference is not problematic; the problem happens when we don't help children understand their observations of the world around them. We can encourage children to notice and celebrate differences just as we do with similarities.

This will help us, as adults, to teach children how to think about, talk about, and stand up to racism.



Talking About Race: Tips for Conversations With Young Children

Here are some proven tips to help parents, educators, and caregivers discuss race and racism in developmentally appropriate ways with young children:



Start with, and come back to, identity.

Help children understand who they are and why they are special: What are their superpowers? The color of our skin, where we are from, what we're passionate about, what we're great at — these are all parts of our identity! Understanding ourselves helps us to see how we fit into our big, diverse world.



Focus on celebrating differences as well as similarities.

Once children have a good understanding of themselves, focus on others and on celebrating the differences that make our community and our world amazing. Identify and describe the many variations in people — skin color, hair texture, body type, age, gender, beliefs, interests, abilities, etc. Celebrate how these aspects of who people are make them special and unique. You can say, “Isn’t it interesting that we’re all different?” You can also identify the things we have in common with each other to emphasize what we share.



Use the words.

When you incorporate specific words and phrases into your conversations with children, including those in the list of Key Terms at the end of this guide, you're giving them the power to express what they observe. This helps children process, discuss, and learn from what they see and hear.



Be a role model.

Even before children are talking, they are watching and listening to their grown-ups. When you show that YOU celebrate differences through your words and actions; treat others with respect and kindness; listen to others with different backgrounds, races, and points of view; and empathize with people who are different, you are modeling how to celebrate and embrace differences and diversity.



Pace yourself.

You may be eager to prompt conversations about race and racism with your child. Remember that this is not a one-time conversation. It is more effective to have shorter conversations over time with your child. Some of these conversations may be led by your child because of something that they saw or heard, and others may be initiated by you.



 **Remind your child that they are not in this alone.**

Depending on your lived experiences and prior conversations, your child may be realizing for the first time that things are not fair or right. They may start to notice the misalignment between what is happening and what should be happening, and that can be a daunting realization and cause big feelings. It is okay to acknowledge this reality while also reminding your child that it is not solely their responsibility to make things right — it's everyone's job! When we all work together, we can make a positive change.

 **Actively listen to your child.**

If your child shares a thought or observation that isn't accurate or aligned with your values, start by asking your child to explain what they meant. You can say, "What made you think that?" or "Can you tell me a little more about that?" When you listen to your child's point of view, you can better understand their thinking, so that you can correct them in a relatable way. It's also okay to pause and consider if you want more time to think about how to respond, and then come back to the conversation later.

 **Acknowledge your child's feelings.**

Conversations and situations involving race and racism can bring up big feelings for both you and your child. Help your child to identify what they are feeling and how to express it. Make sure to let them know that any kind of feeling is okay! Also, take the time you need for self-reflection and self-care. Know that it is okay to share your feelings openly with your child; it can help them to express their feelings to you.



Picture Activities to Spark Conversation

On the Playground: Identifying Similarities and Celebrating Differences

The Activity: Use this illustration to spark conversations with your child that celebrate the many similarities and differences among people's appearances.



Lesson

There are many ways people are different, and those differences make us special and unique! But there are also many ways that we are the same, both in how we look and what we like to do.

Tip

This is an activity you can also easily do when reading picture books or watching a TV show with your child, or even when you're together in your neighborhood.

To Begin


Explore the illustration together. Pick two kids or a group of kids, and encourage your child to identify similarities and differences that they see. You might demonstrate how to talk about similarities and differences to model how it's done for your child. Here is an example of possible questions and answers:

 **Can you find two kids throwing a football back and forth? It looks like they are having a lot of fun together!**

What are some ways they are the same or similar?

 **Possible answers:** They are both kids; they both like playing catch; they are both smiling.

What are some ways that they are different?


 **Possible answers:** Their skin color is different (e.g., this child's skin is light and peach-colored, and this child's skin is dark and brown); the child with the hat has a prosthetic leg (something that people may wear if they have an arm, leg, hand, or foot that is different or missing); one has brown, curly hair and the other has blond, wavy hair.




Include Your Child

Now that you are familiar with the illustration, pretend that you and your child are *in* the illustration. Invite your child to compare and contrast himself or herself with the kids in the picture.

 **Let's look at all of the people at the park! Point to who is like you. What do you think you share in common?**

 **There are lots of ways that each of us is different, and those differences make us unique and special! Can you point out ways these kids are different from you, either in how they look or what they are doing? Let's talk about what you notice.**

 **Can you find a child who has brown skin? Can you find a child who has tan or peach skin? What color skin do you have?**

Address Assumptions

Making connections and generalizing is a normal part of children's development. Therefore, it's not uncommon for them to make assumptions about an entire family's race or ethnicity based on seeing one member of the family. Below are some questions to address these assumptions and to talk about how there are all types of families.

Try pointing to various kids in the illustration, one at a time, and asking questions like:

💬 Who do you think this child's grown-ups or siblings are? Do you see them in the picture? If you don't see them in the picture, what do you think they might look like?

You can say to your child:

💬 There are all types of families, and parents and children may not always look the same. All types of families are special and beautiful!

Discuss Melanin

When talking about differences in skin color, you can use it as an opportunity to explain the science of melanin.


💬 Do you know what makes skin color the way it is? (Wait for their response).


💬 There's something called melanin that everyone has in their body. Melanin gives color to our hair, skin, and eyes. The more melanin someone has in their body, the darker their hair, skin, and eyes will be. Each of us has our own special color.




Create a Story

Pick pairs of people on the playground and make up stories about them! This can help children “get to know” other people who may be similar to and different from themselves. You might start the story and encourage your child to finish it, or take turns telling stories. As you tell the story, you can naturally incorporate similarities and differences, including skin color. Here are a couple of ideas to get you started:

 There are two children in the sandbox: one with green eyes and lighter skin, and the other with brown eyes and darker skin. They look like they are [playing/fighting/sharing]. How do you think they feel? What do you think they are saying to each other?

 This girl with long braids loves playing with trucks. She takes her truck everywhere! How do you think she is feeling? Does she look like she is feeling lonely? Do you want to go play with her? Why or why not?

Takeaway

 There are so many different people in the world that we can be friends with! We are all unique and special. Isn't that amazing? If everyone were the same, it would be pretty boring. We can celebrate each person for who they are!



Family Photos: The Many Ways to Make a Family

The Activity: You can use this collection of family photos to inspire a conversation with your child about various family structures. You can talk through questions or assumptions your child might have about families that look different from their own.



Lesson





There are many ways to make a family! Some families may have a mommy and daddy, two mommies or two daddies, or just one parent. Some families have no siblings and some have lots of siblings. Some families have grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins who live with them. Your friends' families might be different from yours. Just like each individual person is special and unique, each family is special and unique!

Tip

You can talk about different types of families when reading picture books or watching TV shows with your child — or in your everyday conversations about friends and neighbors.






To Begin

Invite your child to look at the photos and describe what they see! You can use these prompts as ways to start the conversation:

-  Say, “Tell me about this family. What do you think they are like?”
-  Point to each person and say, “Who do you think they are?”
-  You might say, “Tell me about their [skin, hair, eye] color. What do you see?”
-  You can also explore differences within the family by saying, “Not all people in a family are exactly alike! How are these family members different from one another? How are they the same?”

Include Your Child

Invite your child to look in the mirror or at your own family photos, and compare what they see with the people they see in the photos.

-  How are you like the people in this family?
-  What differences do you see between our family and this family?
-  Look at all of these people! Point to who is like you. What is the same about you and this person?
-  There are lots of ways we are different, and that makes us unique!
Can you tell me how these people are different from you?
-  Would you want to be friends with the kids in this photo? Why or why not?
What is something you could do to make friends with each kid?

At the Doctor's Office: Leading with Empathy

The Activity: You can use this illustration to open up a conversation about how everyone — no matter how they look, where they're from, or what language they speak — has feelings.



Lesson

No matter what we look like, we all have hearts and feelings — that's a way ALL people are the same! Thinking about how someone else feels can help us get to know them better. It can inspire us to have empathy for others, which helps make a kinder world.

Tip

Identifying emotions is a critical skill for young children to practice. When you work on this with your child, remind them that *everyone* experiences different feelings! Sometimes we even feel two feelings at once.

To Begin

Explore the illustration and encourage your child to tell you what they notice. You might ask:

- 🗨️ Where do you think these children are?
- 🗨️ Let's look at their faces and bodies. How do you think they are feeling? (Point to each one, and ask your child to share.)
- 🗨️ Do you go to the doctor sometimes? How do you feel when you are at the doctor's office?
- 🗨️ What do your face and body look like when you feel [nervous, happy, sad, angry...]?

I Spy

The goal of this activity is to help children see the things they have in common with others, beyond appearances. You can use these prompts to begin a conversation that helps children relate to and empathize with one another. Encourage your child to be the leader as well and come up with their own "I spy" statements for you to find.

🗨️ I spy...kids playing with toys. Can you find them?

- How do you think they are feeling?
- How do you feel when you play with your toys?
- Do you think these kids knew each other before they got to the doctor's office? Why or why not?
- Have you ever played with a new friend that you just met? What was it like?

🗨️ I spy...kids with different feelings. What different feelings do you see?

- What makes you feel better when you feel hurt or sick?

Exploring Exclusion: Standing Up for What's Right

The Activity: You can use this illustration to talk about racist behavior (someone being treated unfairly because of their skin color) and how even the youngest people can speak up and help others.



Lesson

When you see something that isn't kind or fair, it's important to speak up and say so. You can also let the people who aren't being treated fairly know that they have friends who care about them, like you!

Tip

When you create a safe space for your child to share their observations, feelings, and questions about race and racism, you're creating an environment where they can begin to understand why racist behavior is wrong. Eventually, they might ask, "What can we do about it? How can we help?" It's never too early to teach kids to be "upstanders" who speak up for others and stand up for what is right.

To Begin

Explore the illustration with your child and ask what they notice. You might say:

- 💬 What do you think is happening here?
- 💬 How do you think this girl feels? (Point to the girl who is being left out.)
- 💬 Look at the dolls the four children are holding. What do you notice?
- 💬 What do their dolls' skin look like? What colors are their skin?
- 💬 What is different about the skin color of the doll this girl has? (Point to the girl who is being left out.)
- 💬 It looks like the kids might not be playing with the girl because her skin or her doll's skin color is different from theirs. (It's up to you if you want to focus on the child's skin color, the doll's skin color, or leave it open.)
- 💬 How would you feel if someone said you couldn't play with them because you or your toy was different?



Taking Action Step by Step

Promoting Understanding

- 💬 It is important to include other kids and play with them, even if you see that they are different from you. Why?

- 💬 Do you have friends who are different from you in some way? Are there also ways that they are the same as you? How?

- 💬 Has someone ever said that you couldn't play with them? Why do you think they said that to you? How did it make you feel?
 - There are, of course, valid reasons that a child might choose not to play with someone, like if that person is being unkind or hurtful.

 - If your child has been excluded before, take time to talk through the reasons behind what happened, and discuss whether the incident was unfair or understandable. For example, you might say, "That sounds like it hurt your feelings when they didn't play with you. I would be sad if that happened to me, too. Why do you think they said that?"

 - You can also offer suggestions of what they can do if it happens again. For example, they can ask a grown-up for help, play with other friends, play something fun on their own, etc.

- 💬 The girl is different from the other kids because her skin and her doll's skin are darker than theirs. Should she be allowed to play with the other kids?



Creating Change

- 💬 What would you do if you saw something like this happen on the playground?

- 💬 Would you say something to the kids who weren't letting the girl play with them?
 - If yes, what would you say?

 - If not, why would you not say something? (Understanding potential barriers to intervening, e.g., not understanding it was unfair or being uncomfortable saying something, could prompt a meaningful discussion and learning.)

- 💬 What would you say to the girl they would not play with?

- 💬 What can we do in our home to show that everyone can play together?



Dragon Boat Festival: Celebrating Culture!

The Activity: Exposing kids to many cultures and celebrations gives them a wider view of the world and its many different people. Use this activity to share with your child a specific cultural celebration: The Dragon Boat Festival, which is a Chinese holiday. If this festival is new to them, the activity can help them learn about different ways people live and celebrate — as well as the many things that make us similar: We all celebrate! We all eat special foods! We play music and sports!

If your child is Chinese and knows about the Dragon Boat Festival, this activity can broaden their understanding of their own culture as they observe the different ways people can celebrate one holiday.



Lesson






There are many types of holidays and celebrations in every culture. Even if we observe different holidays or celebrate the same holiday in different ways, the fact that we celebrate is something that makes us all similar.

Tip


Lean into your child's natural curiosity. If there is someone who is celebrating something new to your child and seems interested in sharing, encourage your child to ask questions in a respectful way: "I've never seen this type of celebration. What are you celebrating?" Also consider finding books, TV shows, and digital games that model and expose children to different celebrations.

To Begin

Explore the photo. Look at the picture with your child, and ask what they notice.

-  What do you think is happening in this picture?
-  What are these people celebrating?
-  Is there anything here that you've never seen or done before?
-  Is there anything that you see that looks familiar to you or that you've seen or done before?
-  Would you like to try any of the things that the people in the illustration are doing?

Explain the photo.

-  This is a picture of people celebrating The Dragon Boat Festival. On this holiday, many Chinese people celebrate and think about people in Chinese history. Racing on boats is one tradition of the Dragon Boat Festival! The racers paddle to the beat of a drum. Some people believe that members of the winning team will have good luck for the next year.

Include Your Child.

- 💬 What activity in this picture would you like to do?
- 💬 Is there someone in the picture you'd like to play with? Why?
- 💬 What foods would you want to eat?
- 💬 What do you think it tastes like?
- 💬 Who would you share it with?
- 💬 What are some ways we celebrate our holidays?
- 💬 Does this celebration remind you of any of our family's celebrations or holidays?

If you don't celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival:

- 💬 What holidays do we celebrate?
- 💬 What do we eat, wear, and do during our favorite holidays?
- 💬 What is different about the Dragon Boat Festival and a holiday we celebrate?
- 💬 What are some ways the Dragon Boat Festival is similar to a holiday that we do celebrate?

If you do celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival:

- 💬 How is this similar to or different from how we celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival?
- 💬 What do we eat, wear, and do when we celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival?
With whom do we celebrate?



Dragon Boat Festival Stories

Pick people in the image and create stories about them! This can help kids “get to know” children who are both similar and different. You might start the story and encourage your child to finish it or take turns telling stories. As you tell the story, you can naturally incorporate similarities and differences. Here is an example of how you can get started:

- 💬 One warm day, a boy came to the park with his grandmother to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival...
- 💬 The boy and his friends climbed carefully into the dragon boat. One child learned to paddle the boat. One learned how to play the drum.
- 💬 What would you want to learn first on the boat? What do you think is fun about paddling? About drumming?
- 💬 Let’s think of ways the friends can help each other on the dragon boat.
- 💬 One little boy was eating a zong (Cantonese pronunciation) or zongzi (Mandarin pronunciation) during the Dragon Boat Festival. This is a type of Chinese food. Another child was eating a hot dog. The hot dog is a type of American food. The friend with the hot dog wanted to try the zong.
- 💬 Have you ever tried a new food before? What was it like?
- 💬 This zong looks like it’s sticky rice with pork and a salty egg yolk. Have you ever had a hot dog before? What do you think it tastes like?





Your Notes:



What Did You Learn?



“What Do I Say?” – Practical Tips for Parents and Caregivers

💡 Navigating and Responding to Children’s Observations about Race

Young children are both observant and disarmingly honest. This combination can result in some awkward and embarrassing situations in public when a child singles someone out and asks about (or points out) a difference. Many parents and caregivers might try to hush children or remind them to be polite. However, this approach can often be counterproductive.

First, it’s important to consider *why* children engage in this (developmentally expected) behavior. As young children process the world around them, it is *helpful* for them to point things out and group things together that are similar or different in appearance. They are almost always making observations and asking questions with innocent curiosity. This helps them make sense of the world.

We adults may think that hushing a question or observation about someone’s skin color (or accent, eye shape, traditional clothing, etc.) is the polite thing to do, but it can signal to the child that what they asked or observed is something bad or negative. It therefore can create discomfort around race and differences.

When we answer children’s questions and acknowledge their observations it promotes their curiosity about the people and world around them. It can also help them to accept (and celebrate!) individuals and families that look different, have different traditions, or speak in different ways.

What might this approach look like in practice? Imagine that you and your child are in public, and your child comments on the person next to you:

Child: “Mommy that person’s skin looks different.”

Parent: “Yes, people have all different colors of skin, based on how much melanin they have in their skin. Everyone has melanin, and the more melanin people have, the darker their skin! Melanin is an amazing thing in our bodies that helps to protect our skin from the sun, like sunscreen.”

Notice how the parent acknowledges the observation, educates the child on the variety of skin tones people have, and emphasizes how everyone has melanin.

If the child’s comment comes off as negative and the person overhears it, you can apologize to the person. This is an important way to be a model for your child. You can then discuss with your child how everyone is wonderfully unique and different, and we never want to hurt anyone’s feelings because they’re different from us.

Another common situation is when a child (of any background) asks if another person is Black or White. When young children notice similarities and differences, they may try to put them into simple categories (e.g., Black and White). We can share with them the many nuanced things that make us who we are.

Child: “Daddy, are you Black or White?”

Parent: “That is an interesting question. Many things make us who we are, like our race! There are many different types of races depending on what we look like, and one part of race is the color of our skin.”

At this point, you could answer the question by explaining what race you identify as and some physical qualities of that race. In certain situations, a child may ask why someone who is lighter-skinned than another individual is considered Black and the other is not. Kids make astute observations! If this happens, you could refer back to some photos in this guide and give examples of different races and physical features and shades of color. You could also explain some differences beyond skin color, such as hair color and texture.

You can redefine race if you want to elaborate:

Parent: “Race is one part of our identity. Race can mean lots of things, but it usually means certain things about what a person looks like — for example, the color of our skin, the way our hair feels and looks, and things like different shapes of noses and eyes. We all look different, and sometimes this is because of our race.”

Avoiding Assumptions

As children start to learn about different races and ethnicities, you can gently remind them why we don’t want to make assumptions about someone’s race or ethnicity. For example:

Child: “That person is from China!” (For any Asian American and Pacific Islander person.)

Parent: “Why do you think that?”

Child: “Because of how their eyes look.”

Parent: “Oh! You noticed the shape of that person’s eyes? Some Chinese people do have eyes that look like theirs, but that person could be from anywhere in the world, including from here. The only way to know for sure is to ask them. Do you want to ask?”

or

Child: “Is that person [White/Black/Asian/Hispanic]? She looks like she is.”

Parent: “We won’t always know a person’s story and how they see themselves based on how they look from the outside. To really know, we can ask them about their family, and what racial and ethnic groups they belong to or identify with. Remember: Sometimes, it can be more than one! They might say, ‘Oh, my dad is Vietnamese and my mom is Black. I’m Black and Vietnamese.’”

Addressing Situations Where Racism Occurs

Young children of all backgrounds may overhear or observe something negative about a certain race online, at school, or elsewhere in everyday life. If this happens, it may be jarring. You can talk together about what your child heard or saw and remind them that all people are unique and should be treated fairly.

Child: “My friend said Black kids are good at basketball,” “My friend said Asians are smarter,” “My friend said that [insert racial group] kids aren’t good at reading.”

Parent: “Thank you for sharing that with me. What do you think? (Pause for response.) What you look like or what color your skin is doesn’t make you good or bad at anything. Anyone can be smart, good at basketball, or work to become strong readers! No matter what we look like, we all have different interests, things that we’re good at, and things that we’re working on.”

You could use activities in this guide to practice talking about similarities and differences together. Another idea is making a list of people your family knows with all kinds of backgrounds and talents. You could also use this conversation as a springboard to teach your child how to tell an adult or speak up when someone says something that is unfair or unkind.

Addressing Exclusion Based on Skin Color

Consider this actual situation from a parent of a four-year-old with brown skin:

“The past few months, my child has been saying that some of the kids at his daycare won’t play with him, and they say it’s because his skin is brown and their skin is white.”

Situations like this can be both heartbreaking and infuriating. It’s not uncommon for someone’s initial response to be, “Those kids must have learned it at home” or “Those kids are racist.” While it is true that young children could have learned this behavior from someone around them, they could also just be kids at various stages of development and with different amounts of exposure to all types of racial groups.

Children’s behavior, even biased behavior, may be developmentally expected. Young kids often overgeneralize or make assumptions about groups based on one piece of information. Young children are also concrete thinkers, meaning they might think darker skin color is the result of being dirty or “drinking too much chocolate milk” (as shared by renowned psychologist Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum). These thoughts from young children are a marker of childhood curiosity and cognitive development, and they present an opportunity to listen and correct any misunderstandings or misinformation.

Here is a potential way to respond if a child (of any background) notices exclusionary behavior toward themselves or others.

Child: “When we played doctor today, my friend said that if you have brown skin, you couldn’t play.”

Parent: "How did it make you feel when they said that?" and/or "How do you think a person with brown skin would feel to hear that?"

Child: “I didn’t like it” and/or “I think they’d feel really sad.”

Parent: “We don’t ever want anyone to feel that way, no matter what their skin color is. Next time, YOU can make sure that everyone is included. You can say, ‘That’s not kind. I think everyone can play together,’ or you can invite that other kid to play another game with you. And you can always ask your teacher for help.”

If this happens, you could use the picture-based activities in this guide to help your child observe children’s differences and similarities — and how each child is actively involved in playtime and bringing their own feelings, interests, and personalities to play time!

As a grown-up, you can also use a moment in daily life — like a question or observation from your child — to teach important lessons about how to stand up for themselves or others. After talking about what happened, you could invite your child to draw a picture of the situation and practice what they could say to the child who wanted to exclude someone based on their skin color.

When kids observe unfair situations happening to themselves or others, it can bring up many feelings — such as anger, sadness, surprise, or confusion. It is important to acknowledge your child’s emotions and help them to identify and express their feelings. Remember: It is okay for them to feel any kind of feeling(s)!

Parents, caregivers, and educators can help children move beyond stereotypes and generalizations. If a situation like this occurs, talk to your child, and talk to their teachers. You can use this guide to help facilitate conversations with your child so they’re ready to tell you about what happened and prepared to stand up for themselves and others.

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Key Terms: Defining Identity, Race, and Racism for Young Children

It can be difficult to know exactly which words to use when describing a complex concept to a little one. It is important for children to know that people look different and that our differences make us special. It's equally important for them to learn that people are sometimes treated unfairly because of their race — and that this isn't right. These are big ideas, and talking about them will lead to deeper understanding; it will empower children to celebrate differences and stand up for others.

Here are some suggestions for talking about these core terms with young children. You can use these terms along with the activities in this guide or in your daily life.

1. First, define identity:

Identity is *what makes me me and what makes you you*. Cooking or baking analogies can help children to understand identity. You might say, “All of the special ingredients in a chocolate chip cookie make it unique and special! Every single person is unique and special, too. The ingredients that make each of us unique form our identity.” You might then invite your child to write or draw different aspects of their identity, such as what they like and don't like, what they look like, their family and cultural background, and their family traditions. You can use tools like *My Big Heart: An All About Me Coloring Book* to help your child explore identity. Helping children explore their own identity helps them to understand that race is just one of the things that defines them.

2. Next, define race:

You could say something like, “Race is one part of our identity. Race can mean lots of things, but it usually means how people look — such as the color of their skin, the way their hair feels and looks, and things like different shapes of noses and eyes. We all look different and sometimes this is because of our race.” You could talk about your family's race, and the different races of friends or characters from favorite stories to help your child understand the idea.

3. Defining racism:

You could start by referencing a situation in which something was unfair (even if it wasn't related to race), such as two kids not getting the same amount of ice cream. You could then say something like, “Sometimes people are treated unfairly. It can be on purpose or by accident. Either way, it doesn't make people feel good.” You can then explain that sometimes people are not treated fairly because of the color of their skin; that is called racism. Make it clear to your child that people are equal and all people should be treated equally, no matter their race, religion, ethnicity, or other characteristics. Over time, you can empower your child to be an upstander who stands up for him/herself or others who are facing bias or racism.



As you use this guide or have daily conversations with your child related to identity, race, and racism, be sure to define the words and ideas you're discussing. Often, complex terms lack shared definitions; this lack of common language can lead to misunderstandings. When you define words and ideas in clear ways, it helps to ensure that you and your child have a shared understanding. This is an important foundation for any meaningful conversation!

 Here are some tips for approaching our glossary of key terms:

First, take a look at just the bolded word.

- How would you define it?
- How did you learn that?
- Has your definition changed over time?

Then, read the definition provided.

- What do you think about this definition?
- How would you explain this word, acronym, or idea to your child?



Remember that children may not be able to understand (or remember) all of these definitions. That's okay. This is not a quiz; learning to understand these terms can be a gradual process. The most important thing is to keep the conversation going and always have open lines of communication between you and your child.

Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)

Asian Americans are Americans who are of Asian ancestry (e.g., people from China, India, Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia, Cambodia). The term was created by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee in 1968 to unify Asian ethnicity groups. Pacific Islanders are people with origins in Polynesia, Melanesia, or Micronesia (e.g., Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Tongans, Guamanians, Fijians).

Ally/Upstander

A person who speaks up, stands up, or takes action to support other people.

BIPOC

An abbreviation for Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

Black/African American

A racial classification of people often used to describe people who are thought to have dark skin or ancestry (family) from Africa. The Black community consists of many different communities, skin tones, histories, and rich ancestral backgrounds.

Culture

The distinctive customs, values, beliefs, knowledge, art, and language of a society or a community. These values and concepts are often passed on from generation to generation, and they are the basis for everyday behaviors and practices.

Discrimination

Unfair, negative treatment of a certain group of people. This may involve people being treated unfairly as a result of their race, ethnicity, language, age, country of origin, or other aspects of identity.

Ethnicity

A term used for a group of people who share a similar cultural background and are oftentimes from the same country or region. They tend to share traditions, history, religion, language, and similar cultural values and practices.

Hispanic

Hispanic refers to people who come from Spanish-speaking countries, including Spain and Latin American countries, such as El Salvador.

Indigenous

Originally from (native to) a particular place.

Latino/a/x/e

Latino refers to people from Latin America. Some Latin American countries include Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Cuba. Not all people from Latin America speak Spanish; some may speak Portuguese or indigenous languages like Quechua. Latinx or Latine is a gender inclusive term that is an alternative to Latino or Latina. People who are from a Spanish-speaking country that is not in Latin America, like Spain, are considered Hispanics but not Latinos.

Melanin

A pigment in the body that makes our hair, skin, and eye color appear darker when we have more of it and lighter when we have less of it. The more melanin someone has in their body, the darker their features will be.

Prejudice

Unfair and negative opinions of a certain group of people that are based on limited or no information. Prejudice is when people hold thoughts about a group of people without knowing the whole group, or when we expect someone to be a certain way because they are part of a certain group.

Race/Racial Group

People are categorized into racial groups based on their physical appearance (skin color, hair type, facial features), and those socially defined categories have important meaning. Race is not to be confused with ethnicity; your race is determined by how you look, while your ethnicity is determined based on the social and cultural groups you belong to.

Racism

The belief that some races are better than others and the societal systems and patterns that advantage or give benefits to some races and not to others.

Stereotype

An expectation that people from the same ethnic, racial, or religious group will act the same way or have the same characteristics. Stereotypes can be positive or negative beliefs about a group of people.

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