

Appendix H

Developmentally Appropriate Conversations About Race and Gender With Children and Youth: Tips for Educators and Parents/Caregivers

Conversations with children and youth about topics of identity, race, and gender are important starting at a young age. At any age, do a lot of listening and let them know why you believe it is important to have the conversation. Ask open-ended questions, use age-appropriate language, and check for understanding. Pay attention to their reactions—notice if they are feeling anxious or frightened. If they come to you after being bullied, teased, or targeted for their race or gender, be ready to not only listen but to support them in standing up for themselves and when necessary, take action to resolve it. Ask them to generate solutions and help them manage their feelings. Offer ways to cope. Try to end every conversation with words of hope and remind them that you are always ready to listen to their questions and ideas and talk with them.

For children under 5 years of age:

- Expose them to people of many backgrounds. Let them see you interact positively.
- Point out how “we are all human and we are all unique and special.”
- If they make a comment about differences, reply, “Yes, their skin color is not the same as yours and it’s a really nice color, too.”
- Get them skin tone crayons, available in 40 different colors.
- It is fine to bring up physical differences before your child does. “This doll has curly hair, that one doesn’t; this one has brown eyes, that one doesn’t.” Treat differences as positive qualities.
- Expose them to people of all gender identities and racial groups and show them people from many backgrounds in a range of different professions.
- Foster empathy, acceptance, and kindness.
- Teach about the importance of treating everyone kindly and fairly. Explain how it is unfair to be mean to someone just because they are different from you.

- Read books and watch videos with diverse characters.
- Help them learn about people who have worked to make fairness and equality for all people.
- Teach them to say words in other languages. Talk about how people learn different languages and knowing more than one language will benefit them.
- Counter negative stereotypes/mean comments in simple language.
- Answer their questions openly.

For children 6–8 years old (all of the above and the following)

- Explain that skin color or the way someone looks or where they come from has nothing to do with being better than someone else.
- Teach them the word *racism* and what it means (e.g., racism is a word that describes treating groups of people badly because it is believed that having different skin color means they aren't as good as others).
- Let kids know that sometimes we make mistakes by saying hurtful things against someone who looks different from us, but it is important to learn from those mistakes and talk about how we can be different for next time.
- Help them develop pride in their own background and learn about their family history.
- Offer regular opportunities to learn about and appreciate other races, cultures, gender differences, religions, and so on.
- Talk about how all people have many things in common and other things that are different, and that makes the world a better place.
- Teach how bullying and mean comments, especially about differences, can be hurtful.
- Discuss how every person is a unique individual with a lot of potential.
- Break down racial and gender stereotypes with concrete examples (e.g., "Telling a girl she cannot run fast is not fair and not true").

- When they have said something racially insensitive (intentionally or not), discuss why it was hurtful. Help them understand we all make mistakes, can be accountable, and try not to make the same mistake again. Help them learn to apologize.

For children ages 9–11 years old (all of the above and the following)

- When they become aware of current events, let them take the lead and encourage questions. When you respond, tell the truth, responding in age-appropriate ways. This is also true when they come to learn about some racist or hate-filled events in history.
- Teach them the meaning of the word *stereotype* and explain how negative stereotyping can hurt others.
- Help them to notice when things in their immediate environment aren't representative of our diverse nation (e.g., schoolbooks, movies, and TV shows have a majority of White characters, history lessons on historical characters are mainly of White characters).
- As they study history (e.g., third graders study Native Americans, fifth graders study slavery/Civil War), hold discussions with them and listen to their questions. Expand beyond the textbooks. Offer counter-narratives with varying perspectives beyond the dominant narrative. Recognize that they may feel sad to learn about the ways people have hated and harmed each other.
- Listen to their feelings and fears. While telling the truth, pay attention to how they may become upset as they hear about bad things happening in the world (e.g., immigrant children separated from their parents and kept in cages). Help them learn about actions being taken to make change.
- As they become aware of current events (e.g., wars, immigration issues, incidents of racism), have discussions with them about the news, letting them take the lead.
- Begin teaching them to combat injustice and explain some of the unfair things that happened to people in different groups (Native American children sent to boarding schools) and ways that people organized to stop racism.
- Teach them to speak up if they see someone being harmed.

For children 12 years old and above (all of the above and the following)

- Give them opportunities to talk about their perceptions of their own identity and help them develop pride at a deeper level.
- Have in-depth conversations around issues of racism, homophobia, and prejudice. If there are questions you cannot answer, use the many resources that are available to help them think critically. (Note: Watch for any extremist views they might pick up from hate groups online.)
- Help them learn to read media reports critically and determine reliable news sources.
- Help them learn to discuss controversial topics and respectfully listen to perspectives that are different from their own.
- Use examples of stereotypes on television to point out bias and dispel myths.
- Point out leaders, efforts, and movements to address inequities and create social justice.
- Teach them how to be upstanders who speak up and stand up for themselves and others when people are mean or unfair.
- Get them involved in activism and community organizations. Find ways they can contribute to create social justice and an equitable society.

Adapted from Corridan & Medina, *Parent's Magazine*, <https://www.parents.com/parenting/better-parenting/teaching-tolerance/talking-about-race-with-kids/> and Dhalia Balmir of <https://www.balmirinclusive.com/>

Copyright © 2022 by Corwin Press, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted from *Belonging and Inclusion in Identity Safe Schools: A Guide for Educational Leaders* by Becki Cohn-Vargas, Alexandria Creer Kahn, Amy Epstein, and Kathe Gogolewski. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, www.corwin.com. Reproduction authorized for educational use by educators, local school sites, and/or noncommercial or nonprofit entities that have purchased the book.