

Talking To Kids About Problems of Racism

By Kathy Slattengren, M. Ed., [Priceless Parenting](#)

Tragic stories rooted in racism have been exploding across the United States. In the past year there have been many stories of unwarranted police brutality against black people. You no longer have to rely on verbal accounts; you can see for yourself in graphic videos documenting these injustices.

The heartbreaking tragedies continue. On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof attended the weekly Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. After participating in the meeting for an hour, [Roof, a 21-year-old white man, shot and killed nine black people](#) including the senior pastor and state senator Clementa Pinckney.

In the three weeks following that tragedy, seven predominantly black churches have been set on fire by arsonists. These evil acts are fueled by racism. From the black kids who are disproportionately expelled from school and put into juvenile detention to the black men who fill the jails, racism is a major destructive force. While Asians, Native Americans, Latinos and other nonwhites also experience racism, Blacks are targeted the most.

Talking to Your Kids About Racial Differences

Racism grows in silence and secrecy. You can help shine a light on racism by talking to your kids about it. Do not avoid uncomfortable discussions of race by pretending that someone's race doesn't matter or pretending you don't notice race.

You don't need all the answers. You just need to start the conversation. Not talking to your kids about race only works if your kids are white. If you and your kids are white, you will not have negative experiences due to your skin color.

If your kids are not white, they are likely to run into negative experiences due to their skin color by the time they enter elementary school. The darker your kids' skin, the more likely they are to experience mean behavior from others.



For this reason, researchers find black parents do a far better job talking to their kids about racial prejudices than white parents. To stay safe, black kids need a much deeper understanding of the impacts of racism.

Exploring Your Kids' Views on Racial Differences

What do your kids think about people of different races? A study commissioned by Anderson Cooper's CNN program, 360, explored [children's perception of race](#). Kindergartners were shown ambiguous pictures of black and white children on a playground and asked questions about what was happening. The study found that "Overall young white children are far more negative about interactions between the races than young black children."

When researchers asked these kids about being friends with someone of the opposite race, many expressed concerns that their parents would not approve. Parents were surprised by their kids' responses. How comfortable are your kids in inviting over someone from a different race? Have you talked about it?

Your kids learn about race from you, other family members, friends, school, TV shows, internet sites, books and video games. Often the information about race is indirect. Look at the shows they are watching, the books they are reading and the digital programs they are using. What roles are being played by people of different races? What colors are the good guys? How about the bad guys? How do they know when something bad is about to happen in the story?

Kids notice racial differences by the time they are preschoolers. One way to talk about race with young kids is to use the example of eggs. Buy some white eggs and some brown eggs. When you're cooking, let your kids crack a white egg. What does it look like on the inside? Now have them crack a brown egg. What does that one look like? Discuss the differences on the inside versus the outside. Compare this to how people have different skin color and yet are the same on the inside.

Encouraging Empathy

Empathy is essential in combatting racism. In their book, [Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential - and Endangered](#), Perry and Szalavitz write "The essence of empathy is the ability to stand in another's shoes, to feel what it's like there and to care about making it better if it hurts."

They document cases where children have not experienced adequate empathy while growing up. These kids' behavior towards others also reflects a lack of empathy leading to serious problems. Certainly Dylann Roof lacked empathy towards the people attending the Bible study.

You can help your kids develop empathy for those experiencing racism by discussing situations like this. These are some questions you might ask your kids:

- If you were a church member attending that Bible study, how would you have felt when Dylann showed up to join your small group?
- What do you think Dylann was thinking and feeling as he sat down with this group?
- What would you have been thinking and feeling when you saw Dylann take out his gun?

Depending on your kids' ages and temperaments, you might want to choose a less horrific story. You could discuss the story of a [14-year-old black girl shoved to the ground by a police officer](#) in Texas. Ask your kids to imagine being this girl. How would they feel? What would they think?

For younger children, you could read stories together which address racial issues. For example, [The Story Of Ruby Bridges](#) is a true story of a 6-year-old black girl who was the first to attend an all-white school. The many challenges Ruby must face are rich for discussion with your kids.

When you teach your kids to put themselves in someone else's shoes, you help them develop empathy. Kids who have empathy are the ones who will fight against prejudice and speak out against racist behavior. Talk to your kids about racism and help them become a source of healing not hatred.

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