

# ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT RACE AND PREJUDICE



**Bright Horizons.**

Early Education & Preschool

**Children need our views about life, the natural world, and social issues articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They observe not just what we say but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature; our spirituality; and our willingness to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that empathy on to our children.**

## **WHAT IS RACISM AND PREJUDICE?**

Racism — along with all the other “isms” — is a learned response that is often subconsciously passed down. Even very young children can begin to pick up on racist or biased thinking, but parents, families, and other caring adults can help counter those negative attitudes, actively helping children learn to be inclusive and respectful of all people.

## **HOW TO ANSWER YOUNG CHILDREN’S QUESTIONS ABOUT RACISM AND PREJUDICE**

Young children often have questions about differences in physical appearance, skin color, or ability. These questions aren’t generally meant to be hurtful or embarrassing, but come from children’s innate ability to detect dissimilarities. Children are naturally observant and curious. Additionally, they’re developing a sense of self and figuring out who they are compared to others around them. Their questions help them to better understand our diverse world and figure out where they fit in.

Here are some simple responses that may help answer a young child’s questions about differences.

## **WAYS TO RESPOND WHEN YOUR CHILD NOTICES DIFFERENCES IN OTHERS**

- ▶ People are born and grow in all shapes, sizes, and colors.
- ▶ Every person is born with their own unique characteristics: you have your own, I have mine, and others have theirs. Let’s talk about what makes you *you* and me *me*.
- ▶ Every person has their own style and preferences. Just as we feel uncomfortable or hurt when someone laughs at us for what we wear, others feel the same way.

Adapt your answer to your child's need. A quick and simple answer will often satisfy your child's curiosity. You don't have to wait until a child asks a question to begin discussions about differences.

## ACTIVITIES TO INTRODUCE DIVERSITY TO YOUNG CHILDREN

**Start conversations:** Remember that sharing your thoughts and opinions offers your child a valuable model for approaching the world. Weaving these conversations into your everyday experiences will help build an appreciation for the wonderfully diverse world in which we live.

**Read with your child:** While reading, try discussing these reflection questions:

- ▶ What are some ways we are alike and different?
- ▶ How has someone helped you with something that was hard for you? How have you helped someone else?
- ▶ How do our differences help make the world a more interesting and better place?

Here are some books that can help you discuss diversity and differences:

- ▶ "Whoever You Are" by Mem Fox
- ▶ "Hey, Little Ant" by Phillip M. Hoose, Hannah Hoose, and Debbie Tilley
- ▶ "The Big Orange Splot" by D. Manus Pinkwater
- ▶ "All the Colors of the Earth" by Sheila Hamanaka

Be proactive and seek out opportunities to discuss differences. Conversations are critical to helping your child understand that diversity is what makes our world so special.

## HOW TO ANSWER OLDER CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS ABOUT RACISM AND PREJUDICE

School-age children are very interested in issues of justice and fairness. They are becoming aware of prejudice, bias, and racism in a more conscious way, and they can engage in deeper conversations. This is the time to encourage children, first, to develop a habit of self-reflection, understanding that we are all capable of prejudice or racist attitudes; and second, to develop the skills to speak up for others. Below are just a few of the questions older children might ask about prejudice and racism and some possible answers.

## What is prejudice? Why do people say and do bad things about and to other people who they don't even know?

Prejudice is a feeling of unfair dislike directed against an individual or a group because of some characteristic such as religion, race, socioeconomic status, gender, age, or sexual orientation. It is usually based on ignorance (not knowing), fear (they could hurt me or take things I have), hate (I don't like things about them), or sometimes our own insecurity (it makes me feel better to think I am better than them).

Are there times when someone teased you about your clothes or your hair, or for just being a girl or a boy, or for having a different skin color? Or maybe you were teased or excluded because you had different abilities and you couldn't do something. Imagine feeling like that a lot of the time because of your religion, your ability, your gender expression, or the color of your skin.

There are people everywhere who are treated differently because they look or sound different or have different abilities. But no one should be made to feel badly just because they look different. Be aware of children in your own school who are being excluded or treated unkindly. Think ahead of time about what you can say to help them. It could be something as simple as, "Let's sit by Lexi. She's really nice," or "I don't like it when you say those things about Cole. Please stop."

## What is racism, and why does it happen?

Racism is treating another group of people badly because they look and act differently than you. Sometimes, it is a whole community, city, state, or country that treats a group badly. In the United States, because of a long history of slavery, segregation, and racism toward black people, we associate most racism with the attitudes and practices of white society toward people of African heritage who have brown or black skin. There has also been racism toward people from Central and South America with brown skin, Native Americans, Asians, and Southeast Asians. Racism also happens toward other groups around the world. Sometimes groups of people are singled out because of their culture, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

Many people are working hard to end racism and the other isms. Teachers and government and community leaders offer education or make fairer laws. Individuals may protest peacefully (and sometimes not peacefully) to end racism. We can help by seeing every person as someone valuable and worthy and treating them with respect and kindness. We can speak up when we see things that aren't fair.

## Helping Children Understand Racial Conflict

In recent years, awareness of racial inequities has increased, along with an increase in episodes of racial conflict. Children might feel frightened or confused by media images

of these conflicts. Talking about the reasons behind the conflict and developing proactive individual solutions can help children feel hopeful and empowered. Below are more general ideas for supporting children through crisis.

## **MORE ON HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE**

When crisis or catastrophe occurs, the most important work we can do, after ensuring children's physical safety, is to be thoughtful and responsive to their emotional and educational needs. The family is a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears with assurance that their parents will protect them and teach them about the world that they will inherit.

If a child's family does not provide this safe haven, it is important that other adults in their lives do. Most children have at least one caring adult in their lives, but it is the job of all of us to ensure they never have less than one.

## **TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE**

Many of the questions and concerns that surface in times of crisis have at their heart the fundamental questions:

- ▶ Will I be OK?
- ▶ Will you be OK?
- ▶ Will everyone I know and love be OK?
- ▶ Will the world that I know be OK?

Help the child:

Identify his or her own fears through gentle conversation that follows the child's lead. Ask the child what they wonder, what they think, what they imagine. Respect the child's fears and remember that fear is not always rational.

Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that it is unlikely the catastrophe will happen again the same way. Assure the child that if there is a next time, "We will be ready" (even if you are not feeling entirely sure yourself).

In the aftermath of a crisis or catastrophe, children will have a range of reactions. If they have been in harm's way or vulnerable, their wariness, fear, and anxiety will likely increase. If they have only heard about it, they may be curious and even seem cavalier in response. Alternately, they may feel empathy and sorrow for the people who are experiencing the crisis. Some of their reaction will depend on how the adults around them are responding. Young children have limitations in how they can respond to and process emotions, and a spectrum of reactions is normal. The comforting, thoughtful presence of an adult helps dispel young children's fears. Older children also rely on the strong presence of adults and their rationality and optimism.

In these circumstances, children need to hear that:

- ▶ People are working very hard to learn more about early warnings of natural disasters or violent attacks and ways to prevent loss of life and damage to society.
- ▶ As a family or school community, we will devise plans to be prepared and safe.
- ▶ I am always here for you and will do everything I can to protect you.

## ANSWERING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS

Children need our best answers, or our honest lack of an answer. Sometimes all we can say is, "Bad things sometimes happen without a reason, but we will always do everything we can to protect ourselves so the chance of a bad thing happening is smaller." Use examples from your own life that they can understand, such as wearing a seat belt to protect themselves in case there is an accident or cutting up food into small bites to avoid choking. Children need our thoughtfulness and willingness to help them seek answers. No child will ever thank us for lying or avoiding questions.

### Before Talking to Children

Even if we only have a moment to think about what to say and how to say it, try to remember to:

**Get your own feelings and thoughts straight.** Have another adult listen to you first if you aren't sure you are ready to talk to a child. Try to be your most thoughtful, calm, and emotionally stable self when you talk to children. Be prepared for the inevitable difficult questions about what bad things could happen to us, why people die, and why some people live. Think not only about what you want to say, but also about how you want it to come across. Watch your words, tone, and body language. You may give a nonverbal message of sadness, anger, confusion, fear, or indifference.

**Clarify.** Ask children what they think the words they are using or hearing mean: death, drowning, loss, weather, disaster, hurricane, looter, hero, terrorist, victim, refugee. Understand what your child already knows and feels before beginning any dialogue by asking, "What are you thinking and feeling?"

**Observe.** Find natural opportunities to ask what's on the child's mind and follow his or her lead. Recognize the clues in a child's art, play, or conversations with friends. Accept his or her feelings. Read thoughtfully chosen picture books to support children's understanding.

**Check first before assuming either a lack of or a strong interest.** When you encourage a young child to draw, play, or talk about his or her feelings, you give the child permission to freely express scary or angry thoughts.

**Use emotional self-regulation.** Honestly share your feelings, but always try to be in control of your emotions in the presence of your children.

**Be strong in a crisis, even when feeling sad, scared, confused, or angry.** The child needs to draw upon your strength, not take care of you. Demonstrate resilience and optimism.

**Offer physical comfort.** Provide the child hope by simply sharing hugs or reassuring smiles that say, "I'm here for you and we will make it through this."

**Adapt your response to a child's developmental level and needs.** While a young child may need to hear, "Lots of strong, smart people are working hard to keep us safe," an older child may need to help you plan what to do or help research efforts to prevent natural disasters.

**Monitor and limit children's exposure to media coverage of disasters and crises.** Children have not seen much of life or weathered many storms and can easily feel that everything, everyone, everywhere is coming apart. The quantity and intensity of television, radio, and newspaper coverage as well as adult conversations during a crisis can easily frighten children, and adults should try to manage those images.

**Offer additional context.** Consider that natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis will spark an interest in environmental concerns as well as issues of poverty and race for older children. Respect the growing ability of school-age children and teenagers to understand and discuss issues openly and honestly.

**Stay tuned in.** Keep listening, asking, conversing with, and reassuring children as their thoughts and feelings evolve. Remember that every child is different. The explanation of national, global, or personal events needs to match the child's developmental understanding and personality. Don't give more information than the child is ready for.

**Protect children's idealism.** Children are born idealists: The world is a good place where nature is usually friendly and predictable, people are mostly good, and life is worth living. Sudden exposure to catastrophe or violence tests their idealism and optimism as well as our own. If children are exposed to too much of life's dark side, they may lose their sense of optimism and start to experience toxic stress.

**Stay alert to signs of stereotyping and racism.** In times of conflict or exposure to societal issues, “us versus them” mentalities, ethnic and social class stereotypes, and contempt for behaviors different from our own may lead to racism and cultural bias. In times of crisis, we can inadvertently make harmful assumptions about groups of people and make false correlations. Though often unintentional, this can cause damaging, lasting effects. More than ever, we need to teach children to accept and respect cultural and social groups different from theirs and see the good in other people. Children need us to model tolerance, respect for diversity, and an interest in learning about other people, cultures, and countries. In every conversation, work toward greater understanding across ethnic, cultural, and social class lines. Be your best as a human being.

**Honor children’s need to have some control and find ways for them to contribute.** Our sense of power is restored by taking steps to improve our own current situation or to increase our preparedness for future situations. Finding ways to connect with others in the community and around the world to show our common humanity has the same result. Younger children can draw thank-you pictures for police officers and help pack a natural disaster survival kit. Older children may also want to help create a family emergency plan, communicate with a pen pal, or collect donations.

**Challenge assumptions and overgeneralizations.** Older children and teens are cultivating their worldviews. This matures over time, but is heavily influenced by their early experiences and by adult perspectives and opinions. Without a broad context, they readily and unconsciously integrate what they observe and hear. Help them develop a conscientious and curious approach to learning about the world by modeling these characteristics yourself, especially when it’s hardest to do. For example, if a group of people from one country or religion commits a terror attack, it is important not to generalize that all people from that country or religion are bad or evil.