

# Family Guide to Discussing Race and Equity with Young Children

**As caregivers, we have a responsibility to ensure each child is safe from racism and discrimination and has equitable opportunities to thrive. As such, this resource is intended to serve as a starting point for conversation with young children about race. Note that this resource is not exhaustive.**

## Racial Bias at Each Age

### Infants

As early as six months, a baby's brain can notice race-based differences.

### Toddlers

By ages two to four, children can internalize racial bias. Multiple studies document the ways that young children take notice of racial differences and note that as early as pre-kindergarten, children may begin excluding their peers of different races from play and other activities (Winkler 2009).

At this age, your child may begin to notice and point out differences in the people around you (i.e., at the grocery store, at the park, etc.). If your child asks about someone's skin tone, you might say, "Isn't it wonderful that we are all so different?" You can even hold your arm against theirs to show the differences in skin tones in your family.

Parents and caregivers can cultivate compassion and tolerance in their children. Parents can also expose their children to different cultures through the foods they eat, the movies they watch, and the languages they speak at home. A child's classroom can also support a multicultural curriculum.

### Young Children

In pre-k or early elementary school, parents and caregivers can encourage children to discuss their



feelings when they feel something is unfair. This can be the basis for a conversation on justice. Additionally, caregivers should avoid downplaying information that children may absorb from their surroundings. If a child feels unsafe from what they are hearing in the news, tell them that you love them and that there are adults working to keep them safe.

This is the age that is important to have open talks with your child about race, diversity, and racism. Discussing these topics will help your child see you as a trusted source of information on the topic, and

that they can come to you with any questions. Point out stereotypes and racial bias in media and books such as villains or “bad guys” in movies.

If your child makes comments or asks you questions about race based on school incidents or something they read or watched, further the discussion with questions such as, “How do you feel about that?” and “Why do you think that?” This is also helpful if your child heard something insensitive or if your child experienced racial bias themselves. Before responding to their statement or question, figure out where it came from and what it means from their perspective.

## Adolescents

By age 12, many children become set in their beliefs. In later elementary school or middle school, parents and caregivers can ask questions about what your children’s peers are talking about at school or what they are reading online. Address any feelings they may have about family members who may say racist things, using neutral language such as, “We love Grandma, and we think differently from her. She’s come to her conclusions, but we’ve come to different ones.”

## Strategies to Help Children Understand and Cope with Racial Bias

- Confront your own bias and model how you want your children to respond to others who may be different from them. Plan for a marathon, not a sprint. It’s okay to say, “I’m not sure.” or “Let’s come back to that later, okay?” But then do come back to it. Make race talks with your child routine. Race is a topic you should plan to revisit again and again in many different ways over time.
- Talk to your children and acknowledge that racial differences and biases exist. It may feel natural to “shush” your child if they bring up or ask about race, but try to answer their questions honestly instead. You can also ask your own questions back to them, such as, “What do you think?” or “Why do you think that?”
- Make a rule that it’s not acceptable to tease or reject someone based on identity. If teasing occurs, try to find out what underlies the behavior. If the conflict is really about another issue, help your child recognize and resolve that issue. If the reason is

discomfort with differences, plan activities to try to overcome that.

- Make a family commitment to being anti-racist to model positive behavior for your children. Download a printable document titled “Our Family’s Commitment to Being Anti-Racist” from PBS Kids ([bit.ly/pbs-anti-racism](https://bit.ly/pbs-anti-racism)) and complete the worksheet with your family.
- Oftentimes families will teach their children “not to see color”, but babies as young as six months old already show recognition of different skin tones. Parents and caregivers should acknowledge that differences exist and have open and honest conversations about race. One reason why parents discourage their children from seeing color is that they’re uneasy about talking about racial bias themselves. Don’t worry if you don’t have all the answers. No one does. Also, “Let’s learn about that together!” is always a great response. (Huffpost)
- When a child experiences prejudice, grown-ups need to both address the feelings and fight the prejudices. Be honest with your child, in age-appropriate ways, about bigotry and oppression. Children are amazing at noticing patterns, including racial patterns (who lives in their neighborhood versus their friends’ neighborhoods, for example). Help them make sense of those patterns, and recognize that bigotry and oppression are sometimes a big part of those explanations.







## National Resources

- Black Lives Matter [blacklivesmatter.com](https://blacklivesmatter.com)
- Color of Change [colorofchange.org](https://colorofchange.org)
- Embrace Race [embracerace.org](https://embracerace.org)
- PBS Kids - Talking to Young Children About Race and Racism [pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism](https://pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism)
- Stop AAPI Hate [stopaapihate.org](https://stopaapihate.org)
- Yale University - African American History: From Emancipation to the Present [oyc.yale.edu/african-american-studies/afam-162](https://oyc.yale.edu/african-american-studies/afam-162)

## Local Resources

- All In Pittsburgh [allinpgh.org](https://allinpgh.org)
- Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E) [racepride.pitt.edu](https://racepride.pitt.edu)
- Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh [ulpgh.org](https://ulpgh.org)
- YWCA Greater Pittsburgh's Center for Race & Gender Equity [ywcapgh.org/what-we-do/crge](https://ywcapgh.org/what-we-do/crge)

## Learn More

Additional resources and information can be found on the Trying Together website at [tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources](https://tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources)

This document was reviewed by Positive Racial Identity Development in Early Education (P.R.I.D.E) at the University of Pittsburgh

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To learn more, visit: [tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources](https://tryingtogether.org/parenting-resources)

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