

5 Ways to Talk with Your Child About Racism

BY DEBORAH JOHNSON

Talking about racism makes most of us uncomfortable. The ugliness of the topic, and our anxiety about using the wrong words, leads us to avoid the subject altogether. Still, parents of transracially adopted children should resist the urge not to talk. Kids should hear about racism before they experience it (typically, this will be early in grade school, when children start to perceive differences among themselves). Here's how to begin:



1 TALK ABOUT FAMILIES. Let your child know that, while your family values people of different races and cultures, not all families do. “Some kids grow up in families who are afraid of people who are different,” you can say. “They may not know how to react when meeting a kid who looks different, and that may make them afraid. And when kids or grownups are afraid, they can do mean things.” Reinforce the fact that your family is different. “Isn’t that sad?” you can add. “I’m glad our family isn’t like that.”

2 EXPLAIN THAT RACISM ISN’T HER FAULT. Tell your child that she might get teased about the kind of hair she has or the color of her skin, simply because it’s different. “Some kids may call you names or not invite you to play with them because you have darker skin,” you can suggest gently. But emphasize that your child is not causing the bad behavior—the child doing the teasing or harassing is the only one responsible for such thoughts and actions.

3 BEGIN CONVERSATIONS EARLY. Even after such preparation, your child may not tell you if she has been teased or harassed. Kids sense that such incidents will upset you. Talking about it can also make them feel like they’re reliving the hurt or embarrassment of the incident. They may even feel that Caucasian parents won’t be able to understand. This “no-tell” tendency is another reason to discuss racism early and often at home.

4 DON’T BE TOO DIRECT. It’s best to avoid asking your children directly whether they’ve faced racism. This puts them on the defensive and shuts down the discussion. Instead, bring up a racist

incident in the news or something that might have happened in your neighborhood. Then say, “I hope that, if anything like that happens to you, you’ll share it with me. I may not know exactly what you’re experiencing, but we can learn together how to handle it.” Your child may groan, but at least she’ll know that you’re thinking about these issues and are open to discussing them with her.

5 BECOME A RESOURCE—AND AN ADVOCATE. Even if you haven’t experienced racism yourself, you can help your child by understanding this: Racism is, ultimately, an attempt to define who belongs in the human race, in our world, and in our community—and who doesn’t. While exclusion is tough for anyone to handle, it can be especially difficult for transracial adoptees, who may wonder whether they belong in their families and communities. As a parent, you’ll have to make yourself a credible resource on this topic. Talk with other parents of children of color and with adults of color, read books about parenting children of color, or seek a mentor.

Help your child understand that, no matter what is said on the playground, her place in the world is assured. Let her know that she is loved and safe with you, and help her grow into a confident young adult who, instead of being defeated by racism, sees it for what it is and knows how to challenge it.

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AF RECOMMENDS THIS BOOK TO FAMILIES:

How Do I Feel About Dealing with Racism
by Jen Green (Copper Beech)

Five young friends of different races talk about their feelings on racism, and offer practical solutions on how to respond to racist comments or actions.