

Talking to Kids About Racism, Early and Often

These books can help start the conversation.



By Jessica Grose

June 3, 2020 Updated 1:07 p.m. ET



Loris Lora

As protests over the killing of George Floyd (and Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor) spill into a second week, many parents are wondering how to talk about the deaths and unrest with their children. But just as important in the long run, especially for nonblack parents, is how to keep the conversation about race and racism going when we're not in a moment of national outrage, and to make sure all children see black people as heroes in a wide range of their own stories, and not just as victims of oppression.

In this moment, try to address the killings and protests honestly and in an age appropriate way, said Y. Joy Harris-Smith, Ph.D. a lecturer at Princeton Theological Seminary and the co-author of the forthcoming "The ABCs of Diversity: Helping Kids (and Ourselves!) Embrace Our Differences."

You can start having conversations about race in preschool, said Jacqueline Dougé, M.D., a pediatrician and child health advocate based in Maryland — children can internalize racial bias between the ages of 2 and 4, according to an American Academy of Pediatrics article that Dr. Dougé co-wrote.

With preschool-age children, you should start by discussing racial differences in a positive way, said Marietta Collins, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at Morehouse School of Medicine and the co-author of "Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice," which is a book for children about a police shooting.

Dr. Collins gave the example of a white child asking why another child had brown skin. A parent can take this opportunity to explain what melanin is, and to talk about how wonderful it is that the world has so many different kinds of people.

Latest Updates: George Floyd Protests Updated Just now

- [The defense secretary says he does not want active-duty troops used on the streets for now.](#)
- [The statue of a former mayor, criticized for years as a symbol of racism, was removed in Philadelphia.](#)
- [Trump admits he went to a secure bunker, but claims it was only for an inspection.](#)

[See more updates](#)

Older children will be much more aware of what's going on right now. So find out how much your child knows about the protests, Dr. Harris-Smith said, because kids may know more than we think they do from overhearing the news, their parents talking, or simply noticing what is going on outside in their neighborhoods.

Once you assess what they know, you can have a conversation about the violence against black people without being too explicit with elementary-age children.

Dr. Dougé suggested starting with something like: "There are things happening in the news that are upsetting us. Unfortunately there were police officers that made bad choices for the wrong reasons because of the color of our skin." Dr. Collins said that with children in elementary school, you should focus on how unfairly black and brown people have been treated throughout American history to the present day, because fairness is something all children can understand.

If you live someplace where people are actively protesting and your children have observed some destruction, "First and foremost, reassure them you're there to keep them safe," Dr. Dougé said. But also explain why people are protesting, and show them positive images of protesting now and from history, she suggested.

Make sure to create space for your child to feel however they need to feel about what you're discussing — they may be angry, sad or scared. "When we're not validated in how we feel, it makes it difficult for us to be active participants in our lives," Dr. Harris-Smith said. Dr. Collins suggested that parents can let their children know, "The important adults in her life are working really hard to make sure these injustices don't continue to happen in our city, country and world." Respect your children's feelings if talking about it is too upsetting, but make sure to leave the door open for future conversations, she continued.

In addition to keeping an open dialogue about racism, a way to raise children who are anti-racist is by making sure your home library has books with black people at the center of their stories. Christine Taylor-Butler, the prolific children's author and writer of The Lost Tribes Series, said that she got into children's literature because she wanted to see more stories of black joy. "I want stories about kids in a pumpkin patch, and kids in an art museum," she said. "Not only do we want our kids to read, but we want white kids to see — we're not the people you're afraid of."

Would you like recommendations for more stories like this?

Yes

"I see students clamoring for books that speak to heart, not oppression based on civil rights," Taylor-Butler added. And she is also a fan of books that tell stories of black triumph and invention, like "Whoosh! Lonnie Johnson's Super-Soaking Stream of Inventions," by Chris Barton and illustrated by Don Tate, which is about the black engineer behind the Super Soaker water gun.

With that in mind, I asked several authors and Times editors to offer suggestions of books to read to children. Some are explicitly about racism, but others are stories with nonwhite protagonists. They are broken down roughly by age range; see our full list here.

Email us with a list of your favorites and we will run an article with your suggestions.

Ultimately, words and books should not be the end of your child's education about race and racism. "The best advice I can give parents is to be models for the attitudes, behavior and values that they wish to see in their children," said Nia Heard-Garris, M.D., an attending physician at the Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago.

"It is not enough to talk about racism, you must strive to be anti-racist and fight against racist policies and practices," Dr. Heard-Garris said. If you have the privilege, "make space, speak up or amplify issues of inequity and injustice." Children see everything.

[Click here to read the full list of books.](#)

P.S. Click here to read all NYT Parenting coverage on coronavirus. Follow us on Instagram @NYTParenting. Join us on Facebook. Find us on Twitter for the latest updates. Read last week's newsletter, about when couples diverge on coronavirus risks.

Want More on Talking to Kids About Race?

- In 2016, several Times editors and reporters had a group conversation about "Talking to Children About Race, Policing and Violence."
 - Two Instagram accounts that suggest great books with diverse protagonists are @hereweeread and @theconsciouskid.
 - Dr. Heard-Garris recommends the website Embrace Race for webinars, action guides and book recommendations.
 - NPR's Michele Martin interviewed Jennifer Harvey, the author of "Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America," on May 31. You can listen to their conversation [here](#).
-

Tiny Victories

Parenting can be a grind. Let's celebrate the tiny victories.

My 5-year-old was having nightmares and waking me up each night, so I hugged and kissed her pillow and told her I'd filled it with "mommy love." It worked, but I have to recharge it each day with more hugs and kisses. — Leah Nelson, Montgomery, Ala.

If you want a chance to get your Tiny Victory published, find us on Instagram @NYTParenting and use the hashtag #tinyvictories; email us; or enter your Tiny Victory at the bottom of this page. Include your full name and location. Tiny Victories may be edited for clarity and style. Your name, location and comments may be published, but your contact information will not. By submitting to us, you agree that you have read, understand and accept the Reader Submission Terms in relation to all of the content and other information you send to us.