

TALKING TO CHILDREN

Coping with the Impact of Racial Injustice

When and how to have a conversation with your child about racial injustice is a very personal decision. The strategies and resources in this handout can help you to feel more prepared when you're ready. Note that if your child has been exposed to the news and is having a hard time understanding what is happening or is fearful, you will want to address their questions and emotional reactions right away.

Helping children cope with emotions

Start by asking them what they have heard/seen. What worries them? Encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings about the event(s). Really listen without trying to make it okay.

Listen carefully and validate their feelings, even if they seem over-blown to you. Something that may seem insignificant to you may be a huge concern to them. Be patient with repeated question; this helps them understand and process.

Let them know that it's good to ask questions and that feeling strong emotions is okay. Very young children may not have the verbal skills to express their feelings. They may show them through playacting or drawing. You can help them name what they're feeling.

Give realistic reassurance. Rather than saying, "I'll never let anything bad happen to you," you can tell them that you'll always do your best to keep them safe. Consistency and routines also help them feel safe. Make time for soothing activities such as reading or playing games together. Give extra hugs.

Share information honestly, but at a level they can understand. A general rule is to offer only as much information as they request, but be prepared to go deeper with older children. As with adults, unknowns can be scarier than the reality. Think about and have answers for hard questions, such as whether they need to be afraid of the police or someone burning down their house or school. Age-appropriate resources (see next page) may be helpful to bring understanding about the broader issues.

Talk about positive ways that people are responding and what you might be able to do. Looking for any sort of positive actions that others are taking, or that your family might do right now, can be empowering and help counteract some of the negativity and feelings of helplessness.

Limit your child's exposure to news and social media. Watching repeated images of the event(s) can be as disturbing to a child as if it were happening anew each time. Supervise what you want them to see and plan time to talk about it afterwards.

Be aware that your child is watching you to understand how to process this experience. Be honest with words, feelings, and actions, but be mindful of *how* you are communicating them. It can be frightening for a child to feel that you are overwhelmed.

Talking about the issues

Think about what you want to communicate and when. This is a personal decision each family will need to make for themselves. Talk with someone you trust, whether it be a co-parent, friend, or family member, to review factors that might have an impact, such as your child's age and maturity level. It may mean weighing a loss of innocence against empowerment. Many families of color haven't had the privilege of waiting to have this important conversation. Talking, not only about injustice, but also about very specific directions on how to interact with law enforcement or deal with confrontations, can be a matter of safety.

Do your homework. Take time to learn about systemic oppression – past and present. Explore a variety of resources to get a true and full picture of the issues. This can help shape your conversation.

Be open and direct. You can acknowledge that talking about race and injustice can feel uncomfortable, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't talk about it. Dig deeper into your own perspectives and examine your attitudes and positions before talking with your child.

Share stories. Help children understand the human stories behind the headlines and news coverage. Be sure to include stories about people who have made a difference, people who have stood up and taken risks to bring change, and those who do so today. Age-appropriate storybooks and other resources specific to talking about racism and injustice, such as those listed in the box to the right, can help you tell these stories.

Understand that you don't have to be the expert or have all the answers. We all grapple with challenges and issues around race, discrimination, and injustice, but talking is a way to bring this topic out into the open. It gives you and your child a way to share thoughts, feelings, and questions. It's also an opportunity to learn more together about what has happened in the past, as well as current events. And to talk about how your family can respond.

Resources

Center for Racial Justice in Education
www.centerracialjustice.org/resources/resources-for-talking-about-race-racism-and-racialized-violence-with-kids/

Embrace Race: Raising a Brave Generation
www.embracerace.org/resources

Teaching Tolerance: Beyond the Golden Rule
www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/beyond-golden-rule.pdf

**Sesame Street and CNN town hall:
How to Explain Racism to Kids (video)**
www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/06/06/entire-june-6-cnn-sesame-street-racism-town-hall-part-1-vpx.cnn

Social Justice Books
www.socialjusticebooks.org