

Racial Literacy

For Parents

With the recent wave of racially motivated attacks, many parents are struggling with raising children in today's world and the difficulty in helping their children be prepared to navigate a world full of racial bias.

As a parent, you can be better equipped in addressing today's challenges with an understanding of how racial bias works in children, the influence a parent has in a child learning race, as well as strategies to help them to understand and react to racial differences.

How Do Children Learn Racial Bias?

Children learn about racial differences and racial bias from an early age and learn from their first teachers, and their parents. What they end up adopting is, how to deal with and react to these differences.

The process of learning racial bias is a lot like learning a new language. For example, a child raised bilingual vs. a child who starts learning Korean or Mandarin in junior high school. Being immersed in an environment makes learning far easier to absorb new habits and behaviors. As opposed to being removed from that space and not actively practicing consistently. Learning from infancy can determine a critical early learning period and a later window where learning is much harder.

- As early as 6 months, a baby's brain can notice race-based differences.
- By ages 2 to 4, children can internalize racial bias.
- By age 12, many children become set in their beliefs. This gives parents a decade to mold the learning process so that it decreases racial bias and improves cultural understanding.

But, like language immersion, children exposed to a diverse society will gain a better understanding of racial bias even if their parents do nothing.

The Role of the Parent

When your child was younger, your role was to lay the foundations for their behavior. Now your child is older, they can start taking responsibility for their own behavior. However, you're still an important role model.

What you do shows your child how you want them to behave. For example, how you deal with feelings like frustration and distress influences how your child handles and expresses their emotions. How you look after yourself also influences your child.

What you say is also important. You can help your child to manage and understand how to respond by talking about the physical differences in all people. You can also talk more with your child about the differences between right and wrong. Now's a good time for this because your child is developing their ability to understand other people's experiences and feelings.

Practical Tips for Role-Modeling

- Include your child in family discussions, talk openly and give them input into family decisions, rules and expectations. These are good ways of helping your child understand how people can get along with others and work together.
- Try to do the things you say your child should do. Teenagers can and do notice when you don't!
- Keep a positive attitude—think, act and talk in an optimistic way.
- Try not to blame everything that goes wrong on other people or circumstances.
- Use problem-solving skills to approach challenges or conflicts in a calm and productive way.
- Show kindness and respect in the way you speak about and behave towards other races and cultures.
- Be kind to yourself, and treat yourself with the same care and understanding you'd give to someone you care about.

Tips for Talking About Racial Differences & Racism

Talking about race is not racist. It is okay and vital. From a young age, children may have questions about racial differences, and parents must be prepared to answer them. But, it's essential to keep your child's developmental readiness in mind.

If your child makes comments or asks you questions about race based on school incidents or something they read or watched:

1. 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.
2. Before responding to his or her statement or question, figure out where it came from and what it means from their perspective.

These conversations begin to lay the groundwork for your child to understand and respect everyone's differences and similarities. As children mature, the answers to questions will become more complex. These are moments to learn what your child understands or is struggling to understand about racial bias. From there, your openness and preparation will guide them positively