

Talking About Race & Racism with Children and Families

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From a very young age, children notice racial differences and similarities as well as try to understand what it means to have a race. Many adults are often unsure of how to have these conversations with their children, perhaps due to messages received during their own childhood, lack of experience, or discomfort. Mental health providers working with children and their families play important roles in facilitating these conversations. Specifically, mental health professionals can support parents gain confidence and comfort in responding to children's questions about race, initiate dialogue to deepen social awareness, and cultivate empathy and compassion. In this presentation, attendees will learn about the importance of helping all children (and adults) develop a positive racial identity, hear some ways children might describe their racial identities and experiences of racism, and learn several strategies to start and encourage ongoing conversations about culture, race, and identity.

To prepare for conversations about race and racism, it is important for mental health providers and parents to become aware of their own knowledge and feelings regarding these topics. Here are some questions for reflection:

1. When were you first aware of your race? Racism?
2. What do you remember from your childhood about how you made sense of human differences? If you have children, is it different for them today than your own experience?
3. How have external factors influenced your thinking about racial difference? People, things, media, etc.?
4. How have stereotypes impacted your understanding about race and racism?
5. How has race or racism showed up in your personal life? Work? In caregiving? Parenting?
6. What feelings, thoughts, reflections are you holding in this moment related to race and racism? For yourself? Your family? Your clients? Your community?
7. What would you want others (e.g., friends, colleagues, family members) to know about your social identities - race, ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, sexuality, etc.?

Dr. Tao's 10 Tips for Courageous Conversations about Race & Racism

1. **Examine your own understanding of race.** If race wasn't discussed in your household growing up, do some research on your own and reflect on what it brings up for you. The more you understand what race means and how it operates in our society, the better equipped you are to teach your children about it.
2. **Become comfortable with terminology and familiar with how certain concepts are used.** For example, race and culture are not synonymous. It's important to be explicit and provide children with accurate terms so they can learn how to apply them.
3. **When your child brings up a topic related to race, don't be afraid to keep the conversation going.** This lets children know it is OK to talk about what they notice. Instead of telling kids to keep quiet, refrain from using particular words or make specific observations out loud, talk to them. Ask them what they noticed and discuss it.
4. **Find opportunities to ask questions.** For example, when reading a book to or with your child, ask them why someone is being treated a certain way? Is it because of their gender or skin color? Let this lead into a rich conversation.
5. **Let children take the lead.** They will probably be the ones to initiate the conversation, so spend some time on what they bring up. Validate their questions or observations ("that's such a great observation...") and then move into a discussion. Statements and questions such as, "I'd love to hear more about that," "that's really interesting, what made you think of this?" or "how did that make you feel when you saw that happen?" are helpful ways to deepen your conversations.
6. **Involve your children in activities to help them learn about their own cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds.** This will help them develop a greater sense of who they are, which will then enable them to create more positive interactions across various racial-ethnic groups.
7. **Help your children to think critically.** It is common for children to focus on concrete and visible features to describe others, such as skin color or assumed gender. Challenge them to think about other important personal dimensions. For example, if your child refers to a friend as "my brown-skinned friend," ask her to tell you more about her friend (e.g., "What does your friend like to do?" and "What kinds of things do you play together?").
8. **Recognize your child's limits and know when to stop.** Depending on age and attention spans, conversations with children about these topics may only last a minute or two.
9. **Initiate a book club or conversation group with other parents who are interested in learning how to talk with their children about race.** Sharing challenges you encounter will normalize the difficulty in talking about socially charged topics.
10. **It's OK to make mistakes.** Many of us did not grow up discussing racial issues, so there is quite a steep learning curve. You will stumble over your words and may share wrong information. Let your child know you are still figuring out how to talk about these important topics too and are so happy you get to have these conversations together.