



Talking with Kids, Tweens, and Teens about Race and Ethnicity

How do kids, tweens, and teens think about race and ethnicity? How can adults launch constructive conversations? This tip sheet offers suggestions based on child development research.



Kids

What kids think:

- Even young kids are aware of race and ethnicity. In fact, by age 3 kids notice racial and ethnic differences between themselves and others, and begin to use racial and ethnic labels to describe people. This is a normal part of child development in a diverse society.
- Kids need caring adults to help them make sense of the differences that they notice. Kids are even more likely than tweens or teens to look to their parents, teachers, and other important adults as they form their own views about race and ethnicity.
- Constructive conversations about race and ethnicity do not cause prejudice. In fact, kids of color whose parents talk about their racial or ethnic heritage have stronger interpersonal relationships and higher self-esteem.
- Staying silent leaves kids at risk for “filling in the blanks” with stereotypes. For example, kids often make judgments about who is nice or mean, smart or not smart, and good or not good at things like sports or music that match common racial or ethnic stereotypes. These beliefs are more common among White kids.
- Stereotypes can be prevented through proactive conversations and real friendships. White kids who have more close friends from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are less likely to believe stereotypes.

What adults can do:

- Make sure kids know their family history. Sharing family stories helps kids develop a healthy sense of belonging and pride in their own racial or ethnic background.
- Think about how diversity is shown in your own life. When adults have close friends from different racial or ethnic backgrounds it shows kids that they value equality.
- Know your kid’s friends. Diverse friendships can form naturally in schools, neighborhoods, or extracurricular activities.
- Consider what your kid is watching and reading. Exposure to diversity through books, TV, and music can encourage respect for the histories and experiences of people from diverse racial and ethnic groups.

Tweens

What tweens think:

- Peer discrimination peaks in middle school, when tweens are highly sensitive to what their friends are doing. The most common forms are insults, slurs, and exclusion from activities. 70% of tweens of color have experienced peer discrimination at least once, and 10% say it happens frequently.
- Tweens who experience peer discrimination are at greater risk for loneliness, low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety. Discrimination harms people of all ages, but peer discrimination is even worse for youth than it is for adults.
- Many tweens say they are not sure what to do when they see someone treated unfairly based on race or ethnicity.
- When adults are honest about discrimination and help tweens think about how to respond, they are more resilient when they experience it and more likely to tell the person to stop when they see it. Some families of color call this “the talk.”
- Tweens begin to think about history and current events related to race and ethnicity. Some tweens may be angry or upset about what they learn. Others may be relatively unaware of racial issues in society.

What adults can do:

- Make sure your tween knows what to do about peer discrimination. You can start this conversation with a simple hypothetical, “Say you saw X happen, what would you do?” Then brainstorm proactive ways to respond to situations that they might encounter in their own lives.
- When you talk about current events related to race and ethnicity, let tweens share their own lived experiences. Model care and consideration by asking open-ended questions like “Why do you think that happened?” or “What do you think we can do about it?” Reassure them that you will do all you can to keep them safe.
- Remember the positive. Keep celebrating your own and others’ racial and ethnic backgrounds through holidays, food, community events, and local field trips to learn about important places and people.

Teens

What teens think:

- Teens look for answers to the big question of “who am I?” by exploring different parts of their identity. Part of this normal and healthy exploration process involves thinking about their racial or ethnic identity. Teens go beyond labels and facts to form an understanding of what race or ethnicity means to them on a deep, personal level. Teens who develop a positive racial or ethnic identity have higher self-esteem and stronger interpersonal relationships.
- As they start to take their place in society, teens become aware of social issues, including social inequalities that involve race or ethnicity. Many teens are motivated to come up with solutions to address injustices in their communities.
- When teens feel like the adults in their lives support them, they are more likely to take actions that could reduce social inequalities, like volunteering, petitioning, spreading awareness on social media, or planning to vote when they turn 18.

What adults can do:

- Talk about current events related to race or ethnicity, and how they fit or do not fit your values. When adults take the time to talk about these events, it shows teens that they think addressing racial issues is important and worthwhile.
- Consider that history is often told from the perspectives of White people. Make sure your teen knows about the important contributions of people of color who are authors, scientists, mathematicians, artists, etc.
- Take a long look at your school, your neighborhood, and your city. Who lives where? Who is in charge of what? How does the history of your region affect your life today?
- If your teen is interested in an issue that affects your community, consider what you can do together to work for justice.

Resources to Check Out

- Exploration guides for parents, educators, and other caregivers from the National Museum of African American History and Culture: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race>
- Advice on promoting healthy racial and ethnic identity in the book *Below the Surface: Talking with Teens about Race, Ethnicity, and Identity* by Dr. Deborah Rivas-Drake and Dr. Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor
- Social justice resources for K-12 educators from Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org/>
- Examples of parents talking about race and ethnicity on PBS’ Let’s Talk: <https://www.pbsutah.org/lets-talk/episodes>
- Media promoting racial justice from Sesame Workshop: <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/racial-justice>
- Anti-racism books from The Conscious Kid: <https://www.theconsciouskid.org/books>
- American history podcasts: Throughline by NPR <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510333/throughline>, Uncivil by Gimlet <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/uncivil>, and Seeing White by Scene on Radio <http://www.sceneonradio.org/seeing-white/>
- Recent studies on race shared by the American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/topics/racism-bias-discrimination>
- Books taking a deep dive into child development research on race, ethnicity, exclusion, and inequality: *Discrimination in Childhood and Adolescence: A Developmental Intergroup Approach* by Dr. Christa Spears Brown, *Children and Social Exclusion: Morality, Prejudice, and Group Identity* by Dr. Melanie Killen and Dr. Adam Rutland, and *Teenage Citizens: The Political Theories of the Young* by Dr. Constance Flanagan

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