

Talking to Young Children about Race and Racism

By Joemy Ito-Gates & Wei Ming Dariotis, PhD

How do you prepare your children for racism, without making them over-sensitive to it? By talking to them about race, are you going to poison their feelings towards white people? The truth is: race and racism exist, whether or not you talk about them with your children. The question is, are you willing to prepare your children and give them the tools to handle racism when it happens?

Many parents who think they are prepared to do this are still uncertain about when to begin the dialogue. How young is too young? High school? Middle school? Kindergarten? From our perspective, even a pre-verbal child is not too young to engage with these issues. For this article, we focus on kids 0-10. Look for future articles on middle school, high school, and even college-age discussions.

Please note the experiences we are drawing from are Bay Area specific.

Ages 0-2

Scenario

Your pre-verbal toddler touches his skin and looks at yours.

Your newly adopted transracially child is being raised in a predominantly white community and your family is already getting the "triangular stare" (that stare that goes from parent, to child, to parent); strangers and extended family members are making unintentionally insensitive comments.

Suggestions

It is important to cultivate the community your child will be raised in.

Begin a dialogue with family and friends about your feelings on race and racism, how you expect your child to be received, and what language around the child's identity is okay to use (terms such as "half" may not be okay with you and that needs to be made clear to the people who will be interacting with your child).

Encourage your family members to have relationships with your children and to use relationship names (i.e. Paw-paw, Grandpa, Auntie, etc.) with photos of diverse family members displayed around your home or in one central location. You can create a laminated book with enlarged photos of family members (with large letter names) as a fun way for your children to learn about their diverse families.

Ages 3-5

Scenario

Your children ask you why you are different colors or why you do not look the same. Your child may overhear a stranger or even another family member making comments, such as, "How much did it cost to adopt your child?"; "Aren't you nice to have adopted that poor child"; or "Where did you get that child?" These sorts of comments/questions may start as soon as your children become a part of your family, but we have included it here because the 3-4 age range is when most children begin to become aware of such experiences.

Suggestions

We want to focus on suggestions on how to talk with your children; however, at this age, a lot of what your children will hear will come from discussions you have with other adults- strangers and family members. Thus, here are a few suggestions on how to respond to strangers and family members, keeping in mind that your main concern is what your children are getting from these exchanges.

A FUSION summer day camp parent shared with us her strategy for addressing a wide gamut of these questions: verbally she alerts the questioner to her unwillingness to engage about an issue that she indicates as personal; and with her body language she turns away from the questioner. Children might learn from this that is okay to draw boundaries around their identities; and that they have a right not to engage with

strangers about such personal issues.

Make an effort to share with extended family members resources, and what language you think is appropriate for indicating their relationship to your children, your children's ethnic heritages, and letting them know what racial language you would like them to avoid.

Ages 6-7

Scenario

Other children ask your children what they are, why their parents look different, or tell your children that families should all look the same. Racial epithets from other children and even other adults. Questions from other children and adults about your children's racial and ethnic identities.

Suggestions

There are differences between ethnic heritage, ethnic identity, and racial identity. Unlike most transracially adopting parents of the past, many of you have made an effort to incorporate your children's language of heritage into your family. This will help your children establish a sense of their ethnic heritage, and it may even help your children establish an ethnic identity. However, identity—unlike heritage—will be developed more through a relationship to community than through ethnic signifiers like house decorations, clothing, language, or even food when they are disconnected from a sense of family or community. For example, you serve your children kimchee and say, "This food represents your Korean culture." Your children may understand from this something about their cultural heritage, but in a way that is disconnected from family and community. If you could say that this recipe came from a family member or friend, and then share a fond memory of that person, then you would be communicating not only ethnic heritage, but also community connection.

Ages 8-10

Kids will be using a lot of the language around race that is spoken in the home and they start clearly identifying with words for ethnicity and race, even if they may still be somewhat unclear what those terms mean. They have also already absorbed a lot of the stereotypes around racism and colorism—particularly around who is more or less attractive or "better" than another.

Scenario

Your children might come home saying, "I think I'm Black and Mexican," or "Yeah, I'm Filipino and Irish" but it is clear they don't really know what the terms mean, or how some might be exclusive of others. They may also shift identities from day to day because they don't really know what the words mean or the difference between heritage and identity.

Your children may come to you at some point and say, "I'm not Chinese" or "I'm not fill in the blank." This can be a very disconcerting thing for a parent to

hear—especially if the identity denied is part/your own heritage. For younger kids, the ethnic identity word may not mean to children what it means for you as an adult. There may be differences between transracial adoptees and children whose birth parents are from different ethnic or racialized groups (we use the term "racialized groups" instead of "racial groups" to emphasize the constructed nature of these groupings and to recognize that there is only one human race).

If the children's birth parents are from different ethnic or racialized groups, their declarations might mean, "I miss Mom (who is not Chinese)" or "Who are these people? (i.e. if the children are being introduced to family members they don't see very often)." However, even young children can be aware of the unspoken power dynamics between racialized groups. If your children of color claim a white identity or deny an identity of color this may be a signal that they have internalized an idea of white superiority.

If the children are transracially adopted, and they are denying the ethnic identity of their heritage of birth, they may be struggling with how they fit in to a family that they do not physically resemble.

Suggestions

Ask your children what they mean when they say these racial or ethnic terms; get them to articulate who they feel connected to through these words, what these words mean to them about who they are and how they feel about themselves (i.e. do these words make them feel proud? Uncertain? Loved?) This is also a time for you to share how you feel connected to the family and how you ethnically and racially identify; and to clarify that how you relate to the family may be different from how your children do. You can also share what the words your children are using mean to you. Clarify that heritage and identity are not the same thing. For example, your heritage may be Japanese, Irish, Native American, and African American, but you may primarily identify as Native American. Nationality is another word that often gets confused with race and ethnicity. For example, many people erroneously use the term "American" when they mean white or European American. Teach your children that people of any ethnic heritage can be "American." Nationality correctly refers to citizenship.

Books, such as *Let's Talk About Race* by Julius Lester, are a great way to approach this kind of discussion, since the premise is sharing one another's stories. Attending exhibits and festivals are also an interactive way to help children understand what their identities mean to them by showing them what those identities mean to other people.

It is important to see these situations as an opportunity to communicate with your children; remember to take time to 1.) ask your children what they mean, 2.) let

them know that they have ownership of several different ethnic identities, 3.) explore the meaning of having ethnic and racial identities (for younger kids, you can explain each parent's ethnic identity and let the children know that they have access to all of their parents' ethnic heritages, but that they may have their own identity), 4.) let them know that it is ok to change their identities over their lifetime, 5.) ask them if they have any other questions and let them know that it is always ok to talk to you about these issues, 6.) transracially adopted children would benefit from having role models that reflect their heritage of birth and/or who are transracially adopted.

This is also an age when children are in need of role models who reflect their experiences. What many adoptive and monoracial parents realize, is that their own experiences are vastly different from their children's and that while they can be role models in many important ways, the ethnic and racial piece of a child's identity needs to be reflected back at them by someone who looks like them and who can relate personally to them. Places such as the FUSION summer day camp and the FUSION Family Activity Meetings (FFAMS) or Pact Family Camp, are structured and safe ways for children to interact with a diverse group of mixed heritage role models who are making a difference in their communities.

Preparing for incidents of racism

Let your child know that they will encounter both the personal racism of individuals (i.e. people who may refuse to touch them or look at them because of racism; people who will choose to befriend them or not befriend them or date or not date them because of racial stereotypes), and the institutional racism inherent in the institutions of our society (i.e. African American children will get less eye contact from their white teachers; there are relatively few teachers of color, and even fewer the higher up the education hierarchy you go; they may face assumptions that they have won their jobs or scholarships merely through "Affirmative Action" rather than merit). Personal racism is easier for young children to comprehend, so you may try role playing with your child

Handling incidents of Racism

Let your children know that even in cases where you cannot know if someone was being racist, that racism may be a possibility. Try to avoid telling your children they are imagining it or being oversensitive—rather, use this as an opportunity to have your children talk about how they feel instead of focusing on the intent of the perpetrator. Letting them know that your home is a safe space to talk about these issues may require you to put aside your own discomfort with other people's racism.

What if your children are responsible for incidents of racism? We have encountered situations where children of color, particularly if they are surrounded by white peers and teachers, may develop a self-hatred that can be projected onto other children (or adults) of color. If you are alerted to such an incident, focus on letting your children talk about the feelings they may have about themselves, about other people who look like them, and about others who do not look like them.

If they say racist things, concentrate on asking them what these things mean to them, where they learned them, and how they think these words make other people feel. Keep calm and try not to make it sound like an inquisition—your children may be confused about what certain things mean, but even if they are perfectly clear, there is something else going on that you will need to get them talking about.

Beginning the Dialogue

You love your children beyond words and your commitment to their well-being is evident. They are truly your children and members of your family. The hard part is now enacting these sentiments in relationship to their identity formation. By modeling clear boundaries with strangers and extended family members, by building strong connections in a mixed heritage and transracial adoptee community, by being honest and forthcoming about your feelings and thoughts regarding race and racism you will provide them with the tools and confidence to navigate the discovery of their identities.