

# Parenting Series - Addressing and Preventing Racism

## Part One: Starting The Conversation on Racism

Parents have a vital contribution to make in eliminating racism simply by starting a conversation with their child and modeling accepting behavior. However free from prejudice a parent may be, our children, even very young children, can absorb the biases they encounter outside of our homes. The more parents talk openly with their children about race, ethnicity, religion, and bigotry the more comfort with diversity their children feel and the more likely they will recognize humanity in all people. "In the 21st century, the ability to communicate and work with people from different racial and ethnic groups will be as essential as computer skills." ([tolerance.org article](#))

### Understanding Our Ourselves

Parents must first assess their own fears, biases, and comfort level with these topics. Try this experiment. The next time you visit your child's school, after school activity, or local grocery store look at the children, teachers, parents, and people around you. Does everyone look pretty much like you? Who are your friends and neighbors? Do most of them look like you too? Some of us are fortunate enough to enrich our lives by close association with people from a wide range of races and cultures, but many of us still live lives of racial and ethnic isolation. To gain a deeper understanding of our own identity and hidden bias, Tolerance.org has an [individual reflection activity](http://www.tolerance.org/reflection-activity-identity) ([www.tolerance.org/reflection-activity-identity](http://www.tolerance.org/reflection-activity-identity)) to explore identity and useful information from a study at Harvard and several other universities on [hidden bias](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias) ([www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias](http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias)).

### Talking with Children Openly and Honestly - An Ongoing Process

During childhood, our attitudes are molded directly and indirectly by the race, ethnicity, and the status of the people around us (i.e. teachers and classmates, parents, colleagues and friends, salesclerks, doctors, nurses, waiters, house cleaners, construction workers, the unemployed, the homeless, etc.). By age twelve, a child has a set of stereotypes about every ethnic, racial, and religious group in his or her society. Parents can choose to actively influence our children's attitudes. Children care about justice, respect, and fairness. Squabbles about sharing, concerns about cliques, and problems with playmates - the daily trials of childhood - reflect their active interest in these social issues. So do the questions children ask, when they feel safe enough to ask them. One important gift we can give our children is to create a family in which difficult issues like racism are openly discussed. By talking openly and listening without censure, we can learn about our children's concerns and help them find connections between larger social issues and their own life experiences.

### **Between the Ages of Five and Eight - A Critical Period**

Five-to eight-year-olds begin to place value judgments on similarities and differences. They often rank the things in their world from "best" to "worst." They like to win and hate to lose. They choose best friends. They get left out of games and clubs, and they exclude others - sometimes because of race, ethnicity, and religion. Children at this age are exposed to a wider range of people and ideas. They also may experience more bigotry. Between five and eight, children are old enough to begin to think about social issues and young enough to remain flexible in their beliefs. By the fourth grade, children's racial attitudes start to grow more rigid. Our guidance is especially crucial during this impressionable, sometimes turbulent time.

### **What About Teenagers?**

Adolescents and pre-teens may ask some of the same questions as younger children, but their ever evolving minds and their broadening experiences allow them to understand more complex answers. We can talk with them about history and social context. We want to encourage them to find their own voice and help them make the transition to becoming thoughtful and compassionate adults.

*Information is provided by Kentfield School District counselors and adapted from CivilRights.org and Tolerance.org.*