

Parenting Series - Addressing and Preventing Racism

Part Two: Answering Difficult Questions

"Sean's family is so weird," a six-year-old announces. "His mom is black and his dad is white. Isn't that weird?"

"Alan says that Christians are best," confides a seven-year-old. "How come they're better than us?"

As parents, we may wish we never had to face such questions. It is almost certain that we will.

Answering Those Hard Questions - Some Guidelines

It can be hard, but infinitely rewarding, to talk honestly with children about diversity, racism, and prejudice. Our own feelings about the questions children ask can have as much impact as the words we choose to answer them.

We may have to conquer some hurdles of our own before we can discuss racism comfortably with our children. Their comments are sometimes embarrassing and their questions can force us to face issues we would rather avoid. We can help our children sort through the confusing and complex issues of race only if we start by understanding our biases and ourselves. What are our attitudes towards different races and ethnicities? Where did they come from? How do they affect our behavior?

One of our most difficult hurdles is our own prejudice. Most of us have some. How do we really view white people, black people, Asians, Hispanics, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Native Americans and the other racial, ethnic, or religious groups that populate the United States and the world? Do I cross the street to avoid teenagers of a race or ethnicity different from my own? Do I pay more attention to my change if the salesclerk is different from me? Do I avoid driving through some neighborhoods just because of the color of the people who live there?

Even when we are members of a group that suffers from discrimination, we may perpetuate prejudice directed at other groups. If we can face our own biases, and if we work to overcome them, we are less likely to pass them onto our children. In the long run, our most helpful responses are those that show respect for our children's curiosity and encourage them to keep actively questioning our complicated world.

One useful way of thinking about our children's difficult questions is to view them as "teachable moments." They provide not only a chance to educate and shape

values, but an opportunity to equip our children with tools for sorting through complicated social problems. Our children will learn not just from the content of our conversations, but from the fact that these conversations occur at all.

Children sometimes prefer to share their feelings and concerns with one parent. If this is the case in a two-parent family, it is important for both parents to be aware of, and talk together about, the questions children raise. If we are comfortable openly discussing difficult issues, we foster openness in our children.

Understanding as much as we can about what prompts our children's questions is a good beginning.

The more we know about why our children ask particular questions, the more likely it will be that we will help them find meaningful answers.

Remember that "I don't know" or "Let me think about that for a while" are valid answers.

Racism is a complicated and persistent problem. Sometimes we need time to clarify our own thoughts before we can be of help to our children. Unfortunately, we and our children will probably be wrestling with racism for many years to come. Most of the time we can think of their questions as part of an ongoing conversation.

Sometimes children's concerns are pressing. Hurt feelings, anger, and worries all need immediate attention. Sometimes we may decide to talk with other parents or teachers about an incident. We will preserve our children's trust if we involve them in decisions about what actions need to be taken, or at least let them know about our intentions.

When our children ask hard questions, we are given an opportunity to glimpse how they experience the world.

In turn, we can use these opportunities to sort through complicated or confusing issues together.

What You Might Say When...

What we sometimes find shocking or uncomfortable about our children's questions is that they often reflect a starkly unvarnished version of what they see. Their vision may not be pretty. We've collected some of the questions and concerns we hear from parents about their children's growing awareness of race, ethnicity, and religion.

Our answers are only suggestions. Clearly, there is no single right response.

AFTER HER FIRST DAY OF KINDERGARTEN, MY DAUGHTER MENTIONED THAT KARLA, THE ONLY SPANISH SPEAKING CHILD IN HER CLASS, "TALKS WEIRD." WHY WOULD SHE SAY SOMETHING LIKE THAT?

This is a wonderful opportunity to help your daughter understand that "different" and "weird" do not mean the same thing. Explain that people from different parts of the world, or even different regions of this country, sound different. You can introduce the idea that if your family moved somewhere else, your language or accent could sound different to the people who live there.

Young children, still in the process of learning their own language, are often fascinated by other languages and accents they hear around them. This is a great time to encourage excitement and curiosity about languages. "I'd like to learn Spanish," is a possible response. Expressing admiration for Karla is another. "I think Karla's doing something really hard. Her family speaks Spanish and she's learning English. I think that's great."

Perhaps you can share with your daughter the languages you, your family, and friends may know. You or a bilingual friend can teach her words or songs in different languages. She might like to make up her own language. If she is really excited and interested in language, you can find language tapes especially for children that might be fun for her.

WHEN WE WERE DRIVING HOME FROM THE PARK, MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD SUDDENLY SAID, "MOM, I WISH I WERE WHITE." WE LIVE IN A MIXED NEIGHBORHOOD BUT I THOUGHT HE HAD A POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM AND A STRONG AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY. I FELT LIKE A FAILURE.

You haven't failed your son. Most of us work hard to give our children a sense of pride in themselves and their heritage. If that heritage is devalued by society, the task is harder. Before you worry too much, it would be helpful to find out what his remark means to him.

Try to understand what prompted his comment. Has he been excluded from friendships or activities because of his race? Was his comment inspired by television or incidents in your neighborhood? Did it come out of some other experience?

Those of us who are not part of a dominant culture have probably all wished, on occasion, to be part of it-or at least to be afforded the same privileges. Expressing that wish does not mean that we always, or even often, feel that way. Nor does it mean that we lack either self-esteem or a strong, positive, cultural identity. See if you can view his statement as part of a lifelong conversation about what being African-American means to you, to him, and to others.

AFTER WATCHING A NEWS REPORT ABOUT A RACIALLY MOTIVATED CRIME-THE BURNING OF A CROSS ON THE LAWN OF A KOREAN-AMERICAN FAMILY-MY SON TURNED TO ME AND ASKED, "WHY DON'T WHITE PEOPLE LIKE US?" I WAS SPEECHLESS.

One of the best things you can do is to support your son's feelings of shock and horror. Share your horror about this particular incident and all hate crimes in general. (i.e; the incident at Redwood High School).

After that, your son's question can be a springboard for talking about stereotyping. "White people don't all think and feel the same way. Neither do Korean Americans, Jews, Latinos or any group. Look at you and Jason Li. You like soccer. He likes baseball. You're different in lots of ways, even though you're both Korean-American."

You can also use this as a chance to talk about race-related hatred in the world, how you feel about it, and what the solutions might be. Even though we may sometimes feel discouraged and disillusioned about the world, it is important to give our children hope. Remind your son that even though race hatred exists, there are many people, of all races, working to prevent it.

MY SON AND HIS OTHER BLACK FRIENDS ARE ALWAYS BICKERING WITH THE CAMBODIAN CHILDREN ON OUR STREET AND USING RACIAL SLURS. IT MAKES ME SAD. AFRICAN-AMERICANS HAVE EXPERIENCED SO MUCH RACE HATRED IN THIS COUNTRY- I'VE BEEN THE OBJECT OF IT MYSELF. HOW CAN A CHILD OF MINE DO THIS?

Watching children act out any kind of bigotry is painful. That the children belong to racial or ethnic groups who have themselves been the target of race hatred is more painful still. We have a sense that both groups have suffered enough and should be working together instead of against each other. It is an opportunity to talk with your son about the history of racism in this country-and all the different groups who have been targeted.

Perhaps you can tell him about your personal experiences with racism. "I know what it feels like to have people be mean to me because of my race, and I never want anyone in our family to do that to someone else. It's wrong and it's hurtful." Sometimes children tease other children out of fear or ignorance about the other child's race or culture. Sometimes we pass on our biases to our children without even knowing that we are doing so. This may be a good time to examine your own feelings about racial and ethnic groups different from our own.

If children recognize the essential humanity of children who are different from them, they are less likely to tease. The more you populate your lives with people of different races and ethnicities, the more accepting your son will be of people different from him.

Perhaps you and your son can try to learn more about Cambodia together. Does your library have any books for children about Cambodia? Perhaps you can make an effort to reach out to the Cambodian families on your block.

MY SIX-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER CAME HOME FROM A FRIEND'S HOUSE AND SAID, "ALAN ASKED ME WHY I CAN'T BE CHRISTIAN BECAUSE CHRISTIANS ARE THE BEST. ARE THEY BETTER THAN WE?" I WAS ANGRY THAT SOMEONE SAID THAT TO HER AND CONFUSED ABOUT HOW TO REPLY.

Of course you were angry! All children need to feel good about themselves and who they are. That sense of well-being is threatened when they are faced with a racial, ethnic, or religious slur.

You might talk with her like this. "Our family is a different religion from Alan's family. His religion isn't better than ours, and ours isn't better than his. They're just different. Maybe we can invite Alan to celebrate one of our holidays with us some time so he can learn more about it."

By addressing the issue calmly and directly, you can help your daughter decide what she can reply if anyone says that to her again. By encouraging her to invite Alan to share in your holidays, you communicate your sense of pride about your religion. In addition, you and she might decide that you will call Alan's parents to talk about Alan's comment. Perhaps both families can talk together about their respective religions. If Alan's parents are closed to this kind of discussion, you can share your feelings about their response with your daughter.

In any case, you can try to help your daughter understand that no race, religion, or ethnicity is "better than" another, and that we are lucky to live in a country where people are allowed to choose their religion. While your daughter's experience is painful, perhaps you can use it to help her think more about your family's religious beliefs and how they are similar to and different from the beliefs of others. This can also be the beginning of your family's exploration of the rich variety of religions in the world.

MY SEVEN-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER TOLD A RACIST JOKE AND COULDN'T UNDERSTAND WHY I DIDN'T THINK IT WAS FUNNY. I WAS ANGRY AND EMBARRASSED. WE'RE NOT RACIST. WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

Most seven-year-olds love jokes and riddles. This is a time when their sense of humor is becoming developed and refined. At this age a racist joke is an experiment, not a malicious act. A thoughtful response to hurtful humor will help

your child grasp the power of language to evoke both pleasure and pain. Try to explain why the joke could hurt someone's feelings and let her know that you don't like humor that makes fun of people. You might want to connect it to how she would feel if someone made fun of her because of the color of her hair or eyes.

This is an example of a situation that may need immediate attention. If your daughter hurt another child's feelings with this joke, you probably want to encourage her to apologize. Depending on what you and your child decide together, you might want to talk to the other child's parents, discuss what happened, and let them know how you are handling it.

A CHILD IN MY SON'S SECOND GRADE CLASS IS THE PRODUCT OF A BI-RACIAL MARRIAGE. MY SON WAS SHOCKED TO SEE SEAN WITH HIS PARENTS AND COMMENTED THAT THEY WERE "STRANGE". I FELT CONFUSED AND REALIZED THAT I HAVE SOME DISCOMFORT WITH MIXED MARRIAGES. I ALWAYS THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS OPEN-MINDED. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

In order to help our children overcome their biases, first we have to understand our own. Try sorting through your own feelings about mixed marriages by asking yourself questions like these: Why am I uncomfortable? Where do these feelings come from? Are they based on my experience? Do they come from my parents?

When you talk with your son, you can explain that Sean's parents are from different races and that Sean is a mix of those two races. One way to help your son expand his concept of an acceptable family group is to introduce him to the rich variety of people in the United States. Share with him the racial, ethnic or religious mixes in your family or among people you know. Help him understand that, with the exception of Native Americans, we are a nation of people whose families originated from different countries all over the world. At this point, most people in America represent some combination of race, religion and/or ethnicity.

MY SIX-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER CAME HOME FROM A CHRISTMAS PAGEANT AND ASKED WHY JESUS WAS WHITE. SHE WANTED TO KNOW IF GOD WAS WHITE TOO. WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

Never having come face to face with God, we can't vouch for God's color! Answering a six-year-old's questions about religion is always complicated because they think in terms of what they can see, touch, and feel. How you answer this question will depend heavily on your own religious and cultural beliefs.

To help your child be free of bias, the most important thing is to encourage him or her to be open to, and have respect for, religions and cultures that are different from your own, and to accept that there is more than one way to think about or worship God.

One answer might go something like this: "In fact, no one really knows what God or Jesus looks like. In the part of the world where the story of Jesus takes place, most people have brown skin. The pictures that we see of Jesus today are based on pictures made hundreds of years ago in Europe where most people were white, so it is natural that they drew Jesus as a white person.

"Some people hold the belief that they were made in God's image and thus they reflect God's 'appearance.' Some people don't believe in God at all. I think that we need to decide for ourselves what we believe about God and Jesus."

MY WIFE AND I ARE AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND LIGHT SKINNED, AS IS OUR EIGHT-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER. SEVERAL OF HER AFRICAN-AMERICAN FRIENDS HAVE BEEN TEASING HER ABOUT BEING "WHITE." SHE CAME HOME CRYING THE OTHER DAY. I FEEL SO BADLY FOR HER. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

It must have been very painful for your daughter, and painful for you as well. You can reassure your daughter that she is as African-American as any of her African-American friends. "Most of us are a mix of races. We come in all sorts of skin colors-some light, some dark and all shades in between! What makes us African-American is not just our color, but the fact that we all have at least one parent, grandparent, great-grandparent, etc. who came from Africa!"

Talking about your ancestors will give you the chance to explore with her the history of African-Americans in this country. There are some wonderful books, enhanced with illustrations and photographs that illustrate the wide range of differences in African-Americans-not only physical differences such as skin color, facial features and body types, but differences in talents, occupations and class as well.

You and your daughter might decide that you should talk with the parents of the children teasing her. Perhaps they can have a similar talk with their children about diversity within the African-American community.

MY HUSBAND, MY SIX-YEAR-OLD SON, AND I ARE MEMBERS OF THE NAVAJO NATION. ONLY A FEW OTHER NATIVE PEOPLE LIVE IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. THE KIDS ON OUR BLOCK SOMETIMES CALL MY SON A "REDSKIN." THIS DOESN'T SEEM TO BOTHER HIM, IN FACT, HE'S A WASHINGTON REDSKIN FAN. I FIND THE USE OF THE WORD "REDSKIN" TO BE HORRIBLY OFFENSIVE. MY SON IS STILL SO YOUNG. I DON'T KNOW HOW TO EXPLAIN TO HIM WHY IT'S SO HURTFUL. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

It's painful that people who wouldn't dream of using racial slurs still use without thinking words like "redskin" that are so hurtful to Native Americans. However, all of these terms are classified as "offensive" or "derogatory" in most modern

dictionaries. That the use of "redskin" is legitimized in popular culture as the name of a sports team is insulting.

Perhaps you can explain to your son that, historically, certain terms have been used in a mean way to hurt groups of people and therefore should not be used at all. It might be helpful to talk about some of the terms that are used to belittle other groups. You can categorize all of these as words that people need to be educated not to use.

You mention that there are a few other Native People in your neighborhood. Perhaps you can work together with them to devise ways of educating the children in your community about respectful ways of referring to American Indians, and other cultures as well. As a group, you might be able to work through the schools to teach children about the history of Native People in this country.

As your son grows and you pass along the traditions of Navajo culture, you could begin to talk to him about the effect the Europeans had on all Native American cultures, and how you all still experience that effect. It helps to remember that you don't have to cover everything in one conversation. If you think of your conversations with your son as part of an ongoing dialogue, you have an opportunity to help him understand more and more as he grows and develops. You might decide that talking about the historical use of the word "redskin" is too scary for a six-year-old, but something that an older child can handle.

Even though he's still quite young, sharing your feelings about these issues and listening to what he has to say will create an atmosphere that encourages him to question what he sees in popular culture.

Part three in this series will cover activities to raise children who are comfortable with diversity.

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