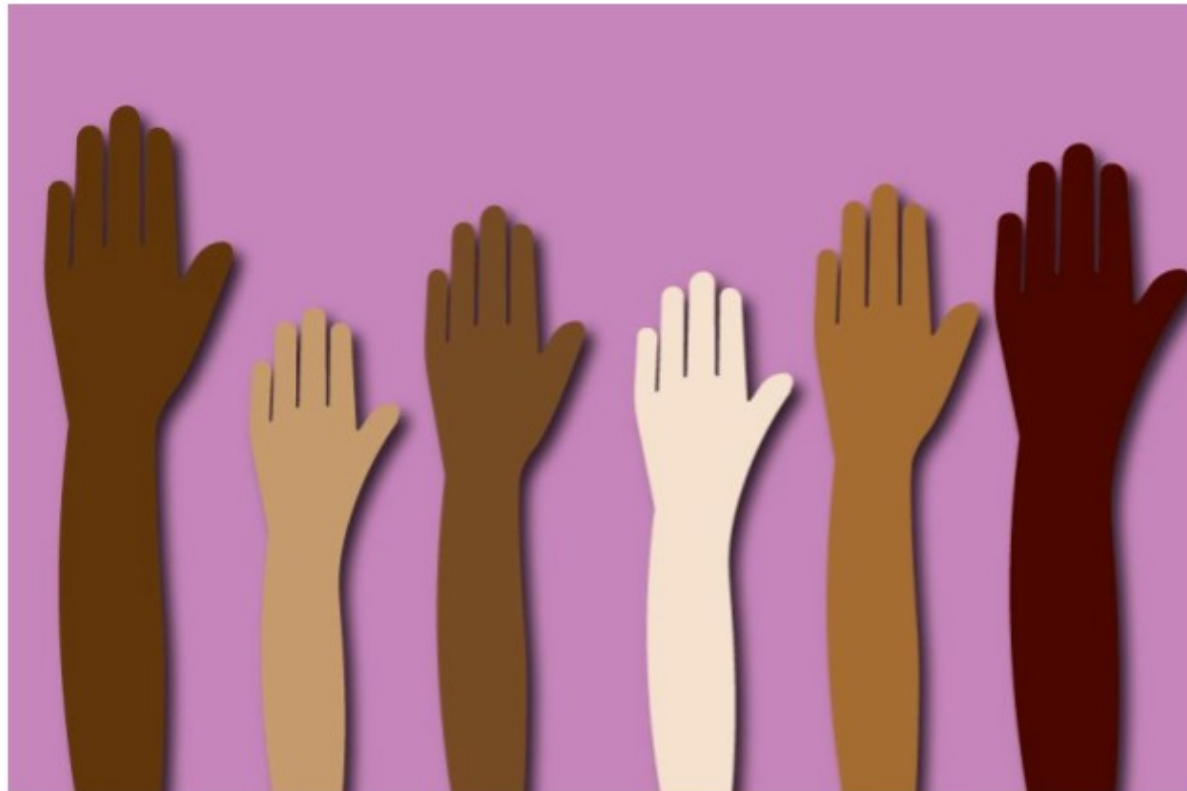


# Conversations With Children About Race & Identity

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In light of the recent uptick in hate crimes, many parents and educators find it difficult to initiate discussions about race, ethnicity, and racism with their children and students. Questions that arise include: *Where do I even start? Am I comfortable talking about race? What's appropriate for their age? Do I fully understand this topic myself? What if I instill fear in my kids?*

Feeling apprehensive and uneasy about talking to children regarding these issues is natural. Still, it's critical to step outside our comfort zones and engage in conversations to raise race-conscious individuals.

It is never too early to talk with children about race. At just six months of age, infants can notice differences among individuals, including skin color, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. By age 5, children can develop racial biases, treating a particular racial group more favorably than another. By age 12, many children are set in their beliefs.

Of course, the dialogue and detail we include in our conversations should vary depending on age-appropriateness and family dynamics. The message, however, should always remain the same: The diversity of humankind is what makes the world unique, and appearance and skin color do not determine a person's worth.

Avoiding and ignoring these crucial conversations about racism exposes children to bias that exists in our world. Delaying these talks also could make it harder for children to recognize and alter their racial biases or misconceptions.

Before we start discussing race with children, we must first be aware of our own biases. Children are highly observant and pick up on adult facial expressions, mannerisms, actions, and conversations. We must consider if we are living our lives as anti-racist individuals. Ask yourself: *Am I modeling how to be a true ally? Are the books that I read diverse? Are my news outlets and social media platforms diverse? Do my friends and colleagues represent diversity?* After addressing our personal biases, we must more fully understand and educate ourselves on the history of racism and the histories and identities of people of the global majority (PGM). PGM refers to non-white individuals, including the Black, Indigenous, Asian & Pacific Islander, Latinx, Indian and Arab communities and represents over 80% of the world's population.



There is no right way to have these conversations, but it is important to avoid methods that devalue one's identity. "...Parents often use well-meaning but ineffective strategies that ignore the realities of racism in the United States," said Leigh Wilton, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Skidmore College. One of these ineffective strategies teaches children to be "colorblind." Parents who use the colorblind method avoid having conversations about race and preach that skin color does not matter and that children should see individuals as the same. This approach is detrimental because it does not acknowledge the fact that people have differences. We must teach our children to be aware of people's differences and value others' experiences and history. Without the guidance of parents and educators, children will form their own racial biases based on ideas presented in the media and society's racial conventions. Wilton also states, "Many parents...need to become comfortable talking about race or it will only get more difficult as their children get older." This is particularly imperative for parents of white children since research shows that children of all races start to instill a "preference for whiteness" at a very young age and can carry it through their adult years.

We must highlight and learn more about people of the global majority, not only as a result of a tragedy but as a natural part of our school's curriculum and our daily lives. We can all do more to celebrate diversity both at home and in the classroom. In doing so, we instill positive messages and interactions with all racial groups at an early age, and, as a result, we significantly decrease the development of negative racial beliefs. Reading books from authors of various racial backgrounds, watching movies featuring and directed by PGM, and learning and exploring foods from different cultures are just a few examples of celebrating diversity at home.

In classrooms, I challenge teachers to reconstruct the story of America's history we were taught in school – i.e., white man's history – to provide our students with a greater perspective beyond this narrative. As educators, we must take the time and effort to learn the identities and histories of PGM to better inform and educate our students. I challenge you to continue having conversations on racism with your students to help normalize the topic.

We each have our own racial biases that we need to recognize and address, and we all can better educate ourselves on how to be anti-racist. It is our responsibility not only as educators, parents, or caregivers but as human beings to foster a culture of peace and equity.

## Resources

- [Antiracist Books for Children](#)
- [Antiracist Books for Adults](#)
- [Antiracism for Kids: An Age by Age Guide](#)