

Articles & Guides | Child care | How white parents can teach their kids...

How white parents can teach their kids to be anti-racist



Maressa Brown

June 5, 2020



In the wake of millions of people taking to the streets to protest police brutality against Black Americans — the most recent example of which involved the killing of George Floyd — and demand racial justice, white parents raising white children want to know how they can encourage the next generation to do better. The key: teaching anti-racism. As activist, scholar and writer Angela Davis has stated, “In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be [anti-racist](#).”

The term has come to mean taking concrete action against racism and racist systems and policies versus passively claiming that you are not racist.

And kids ought to be a part of the conversation from a young age. “Children also often see and hear more than we think they do,” explains educator Janet Wolfe, Head of [The IDEAL School of Manhattan](#). “Avoiding conversations about anti-racism may leave white children with the sense that they do not have an essential role in making a change.” On the flip side, talking to white children about anti-racism will give them confidence and tools for creating change. “When we discuss privilege and anti-racism with white children, we teach them perspective-taking, prepare them to serve actively as allies for people of color, and ensure that they will collaborate in the creation of a fair and democratic society,” notes Wolfe.

Here, expert- and parent-approved tips for teaching your child to be anti-racist, based on their age.

How to teach your toddler

Start talking about differences when they are young. [Erin Pahlke](#), an associate professor of psychology at Whitman College, whose research centers on how children form their views about race, has found that children notice race from a very young age. It's simply not true that children do not "see color."

"If parents don't talk to kids about race from a young age, they're behind," says Pahlke. "That's because by age 3-4, most white children have developed racial biases." She explains that the biases develop as a result of factors like exposure to media and experiences with segregation. Beginning conversations this young allows you to find out what your child actually thinks, notes Pahlke.

Talk about differences openly. Every parent of a toddler knows they might spontaneously comment on just about anything they see or hear. But should they blurt out something that's related to aspects of racial ethnic group differences (e.g., "That man has weird hair"), Pahlke encourages parents to resist the urge to silence them. "Instead, explain the difference and state your own view," she notes. "You might say, 'That man is African American, and his hair is not weird. His hair is different than yours, but I think that it is really great. People usually have hair like others in their family. You have hair like your [fill in the blank relative].'"

Consider the racial and ethnic diversity of their environment. "If as a white parent, I take my toddler to parks, supermarkets and events with only other white people, that sends a message," says Pahlke. "Research suggests that the racial composition of a white mom's friend group predicts her preschool child's racial attitudes. White parents of young children should take a step back and ask, 'What would someone guess my racial attitudes are based on where I go, what I do and who I spend time with?'"

Shivani Thaker, an Indian American mom from Chicago, is striving to find a diverse day care for her 11-month-old son by asking certain questions upfront. "We've already inquired about diverseness, the socioeconomic makeup and if the curriculum reflects diversity and ideals that we want to instill in our son," she says.

Select toys and media that include diverse characters. From books that have won the [Coretta Scott King Award](#) to Doc McStuffins or Elena of Avalor toys, kids' storytime and playtime lend themselves to learning. Thaker is working to expose her son to "diverse, amazing, and powerful people of color, especially Black leaders, activists and scholars."

She explains, "We regularly read and put up quotes from James Baldwin, W.E.B. Du Bois, Audre Lorde, Essex Hemphill, Toni Morrison, the Black feminists and invisible Indian heroes like B.R. Ambedkar. We have been given and bought books that visually present the contributions and amazing accomplishments of people of color, like [Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History](#). We have a big framed poster of Barack Obama in his room and several pictures on his wall of other important leaders like Bayard Rustin and Tecumseh."

How to guide your elementary schooler

Have conversations about racism. Silence on race isn't necessarily a sign your elementary schooler doesn't have biases. Pahlke advises against assuming that they don't, as it's at this age that most white kids have learned that it is not appropriate to mention race.

It's also at this age that they're ready to have a conversation. "Books and movies can be powerful tools, especially if parents talk to kids afterward so they can both share their own views and clear up any misperceptions," suggests Pahlke.

Talking about what's happening in the world is crucial, too. "Kids will hear about what's going on in the world either from friends or from a radio/TV," says

Pahlke. "So, parents really do need to talk to their kids about examples of racism in our world today."

No matter what inspires the conversations around racism, bear in mind that kids are ready for more than we sometimes give them credit for, says Pahlke. "Early elementary school aged kids will struggle to understand some of the nuances, but kids have overheard things and are ready to learn from the adults in their lives," she notes. That said, you could open up a dialogue by saying something as direct as, "Something happened today that demonstrates white privilege. Let me show you..." or "Sometimes people respond to the phrase 'Black Lives Matter' with 'All Lives Matter.' Let's talk about that."

Get involved in anti-racist action together. Kids this age are ready to join parents to take concrete action. Pahlke advises taking kids to protests, working with kids to write letters to legislators, exploring websites focused on the history of racism with kids and talking to kids about donations you're making.

This is an opportunity to set an example. "Kids are continually learning from what they observe," says Pahlke. "If I want to raise my child to advocate for justice, they need to see me advocating. For some of us, that means doing more. For others of us, that means making sure our kids know what we are doing. Talk to your kids about what's happening, what you would like to see changed and what you're doing to change it. Your example can serve as a powerful one for your kid."

And use these moments to keep the conversation going, says [Kenneth J. Varner](#), a doctor of education and critical race theory and associate professor of literacy at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. "Encourage questions and avoid oversimplification," he recommends. "Even little children can handle big conversations when done with care and focus."

How to go deeper with a tween or teen

Work to fill knowledge gaps. Although kids have the cognitive abilities to understand systemic racism as they enter middle school, your white child likely won't truly understand the repercussions of racism. "Research suggests that white tweens tend to have less elaborate understandings of racism than their non-white peers," explains Pahlke.

For this reason, she suggests asking older children what they know and where they might need more information, helping them understand history and context. You can then make an effort to fill in those gaps together. "Listen to the [1619 podcasts](#) together, for example, so that you can both learn more and demonstrate your commitment to learning," says Pahlke.

Get real about history. Varner urges parents to work with their child to bust myths that often crop up in their history textbooks, in order to prevent mistruths from becoming the bedrock for their understanding of racism and oppression. For example, [Rosa Parks](#) didn't stay seated at the front of the bus because she was tired. "That is a narrative that is often replicated to children," explains Varner. "Rosa Parks was a systematic and conscientious actress in the fight against inequality and made conscientious choices about her behavior. These myths and lies need to be dispelled, and children need robust exposure to accurate history."

Travel can also serve as a valuable opportunity to offer your children solid facts. Sasha Brown-Worsham, a U.K.-based mom of a 13-, 11- and 6-year-old, notes, "We spent some time in South Africa recently, and before we went, we all read Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*. While there, we talked a lot about apartheid and used guides of Robbins Island and other sites that explained the country's history. We used that as a major tie-in to U.S. history."

Talk about the news and watch documentaries together. Anti-racism goes hand-in-hand with being an educated consumer of news and an informed citizen. For that reason, Wolfe recommends parents expose kids to diverse media sources, compare coverage of the same event across publications or news stations and discuss media biases. "Engage in respectful dialogue about candidates' positions on a variety of issues, fostering engagement in the

democratic process,” she suggests. “Combat the distress and feelings of helplessness that come from seeing images of racially motivated violence by teaching tweens and teens that they have a role in creating a more equal society.”

Film can also facilitate learning. Dr. Anandhi Narasimhan, a Los Angeles-based double-board-certified psychiatrist, recommends watching and discussing age-appropriate movies and documentaries that highlight inequities and teach about civil rights. “Engage in discussions about civil rights leaders such as Gandhi, Mandela and Dr. King,” she suggests.

This practice has proven helpful for Brown-Worsham who shares, “After George Floyd, we watched ‘Just Mercy’ as a family. We kept pausing to discuss the history and how it all ties together.”

How parents can do their part

One of the main ways white parents will be able to teach their child to be anti-racist is by continuing to educate themselves. Thaker encourages other parents to engage in constant learning in order to “better reflect the values on anti-racism, allyship, tolerance and diversity that you want to reflect to your children.”

Varner adds that the anti-racism work must also be ongoing. “Like any practice, this has to be a commitment. These are not conversations to be had when there is an event, a tragedy or a crisis,” he notes. “This has to be ongoing work and has to be developed like any other muscle we develop.”

Related Child Care Articles



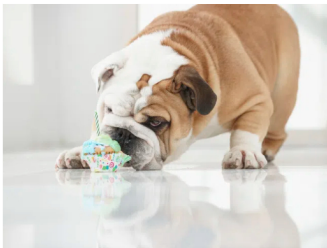
21 fun things to do with your dog



18 quick, easy meal preparation ideas for seniors



How to combine breastfeeding and pumping into a schedule that works



7 Instagram-worthy dog dessert recipes for birthdays and beyond



10 child care subsidies every family should know about



24 Halloween party themes

About Care.com

[About us](#)
[Careers](#)
[Terms of use](#)
[Privacy policy](#)

Get help

[Safety](#)
[Articles & Guides](#)
[Help Center/Contact Us](#)

Popular topics

[Babysitters](#)
[Nannies](#)
[Child care](#)
[Housekeepers](#)
[Tutors](#)
[Senior care](#)

Discover

[HomePaySM – nanny tax help](#)
[List your business](#)
[Care for Business](#)
[Become an affiliate](#)
[Care directory](#)

Care.com does not employ any caregiver and is not responsible for the conduct of any user of our site. All information in member profiles, job posts, applications, and messages is created by users of our site and not generated or verified by Care.com. You need to do your own diligence to ensure the job or caregiver you choose is appropriate for your needs and complies with applicable laws.

Care.com[®] HomePay[™] is a service provided by Breedlove and Associates, LLC, a Care.com company.

Care.com is a registered service mark of Care.com, Inc. ©2007-2022 Care.com, Inc. All rights reserved.