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GUEST ESSAY

How to Raise Kids Who Won't Be Racist

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By Melinda Wenner Moyer
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If race is largely a social construct, then teaching children about it will only perpetuate racism — right? Wrong: Studies show precisely the opposite. Open conversations about race and racism can make white children less prejudiced and can increase the self-esteem of children of color.

If states ban the teaching of critical race theory, as conservative lawmakers in many are attempting to do, or if schools don't provide consistent education about racism and discrimination, it's imperative that parents pick up the slack.

Even if we don't want them to, children do notice differences in race and skin color. And that means that attempts to suppress discussions about race and racism are misguided. Those efforts won't eliminate prejudice. They may, in fact, make it worse.

So-called colorblind parenting — avoiding the topic of race in an effort to raise children who aren't prejudiced — is not just unhelpful, it actually perpetuates racism. That's because racism isn't driven solely by individual prejudice. It's a system of inequity bolstered by racist laws and policies — the very fact that opponents of teaching critical race theory are trying to erase.

Some people, especially white people like me, may shy away from talking to their children about race, either because they've been socialized to treat the subject as taboo or because they fear that instilling an awareness of race is itself problematic. That's a privilege that nonwhite families often don't have — racism is a fact of life that many can't ignore. While parents of white children may be able to choose if, when and how they have these conversations, parents of children of color often have no choice but to discuss the subject as it arises.

Parents may believe their children are too young to learn about topics like prejudice, discrimination and violence. But it's possible — advisable, actually — to have age-appropriate conversations about race and racism throughout children's lives, including when they are very young.

I asked more than 80 parents about how they think their children view race. Many said their children are oblivious to skin color. Yet research strongly contradicts this notion. Babies as young as 3 months old discern racial differences, and they prefer looking at faces that share their caregivers' skin color.

Racial awareness and prejudice continue to develop during the preschool and grade school years. A 2012 study showed that many white parents of preschoolers believed that their children harbored no racial prejudice. When the researchers tested the children, though, some said they wouldn't want Black friends.

Children learn from what they see. They notice that in American culture, race and power intersect in a clear way. Children may observe, for instance, that all but one president has been white, that many of the wealthiest people are white and that more working-class people are people of color.

When children aren't presented with the context required to understand why our society looks the way it does, "they make up reasons, and a lot of kids make up biased, racist reasons," said Rebecca Bigler, a developmental psychologist who studies the development of prejudice. Children often start to believe that white people are more privileged because they're smarter or more powerful, Dr. Bigler says.

Parents should explicitly challenge these wrong assumptions and explain the role of centuries of systemic racism in creating these inequities. Brigitte Vittrup, a psychologist at Texas Woman's University, and George W. Holden, a psychologist at Southern Methodist University, found that white children whose parents talked with them about race became less prejudiced over time, compared with children whose parents didn't have such conversations.

Another study co-written by Dr. Bigler found that white children who had learned about racial discrimination had more positive attitudes toward Black people than children who were not exposed to that curriculum. The same researchers later found that classroom discussions about racial discrimination also had a positive impact on Black children.

Indeed, children of color also benefit from conversations about race and racism. In particular, Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor and Nancy E. Hill at the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that when families of color regularly talk about their culture's values and traditions, children develop a strong sense of identity and pride, and they fare better in terms of self-esteem, psychological health and academic success.

But talking about race isn't enough. Parents should also foster respect for diverse cultural backgrounds by ensuring their children interact with people who are different from them. If you can choose where you live or where your children go to school, it helps to prioritize diversity. And consider the curriculum: Children who hear teachers talk explicitly about race are better at identifying bias than students who are given vague messages about kindness and equality.

At home, choose books, TV shows and movies with characters from a variety of backgrounds — and discuss the characters' race and ethnicity with your children. When all of the characters are white, acknowledge it. Start a conversation about why that might be the case, and why it's not representative of the world we live in. Point out racist tropes in books, movies and TV shows when you see them.

Encourage your children to be friends with children of different races, too. "Friendships are a major mechanism for promoting acceptance and reducing prejudice," explained Deborah Rivas-Drake, a psychologist and educational researcher at the University of Michigan. But if you're white, don't expect people of color to do the labor of educating your children about race.

If you're like me, you may struggle with conversations about race, but they get easier. If your children comment on someone's skin color, instead of shushing or scolding them, explain the science of skin color — that we all have a pigment in our skin called melanin that protects against ultraviolet radiation. Your melanin levels depend on how much your parents have and on where your ancestors lived.

If your children make racist or insensitive comments, gently probe for more information before responding. "Get a sense of what they understand it to mean from their perspective," said Howard C. Stevenson, a professor of urban education and Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania. "Where did they hear it from? How is it being used in the social context they're in? Then you have a better angle to how you can speak to it."

These conversations can feel awkward, but remember that whatever your children don't learn about race from you, they'll learn from the media, their friends or their own imaginations.

Racism won't end until parents — and children — see prejudice, recognize its perniciousness and unravel the system that fuels it.

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