

Talking to Kids about Race: Tips for Teachers and Other Educators

Where to start? Here are some tips from the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) and our team at [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#) to help with these important conversations.

1) **Before you begin:**

- **Reflect on your knowledge of the history and impact of systemic racism.** Think about the negative experiences that communities of color have had with social systems such as law enforcement, child protective services, mental and physical healthcare providers, and **school systems—even yours.**
- **Take the time to learn more** about the historical and current impact of racism (see below for websites and books).
- Understand that these negative experiences can result in significant distrust in the system and could be very distressing for some students.

2) **Create a supportive and brave environment.**

- **Talk to students about the need for both safety and trust** so that everyone can share their views and listen respectfully to others, even when there are disagreements.
- **Encourage curiosity** and an openness to learn from others' perspectives.
- Before starting a discussion, **give students options** with clear directions for managing difficult emotions and responses during these discussions. Options include giving students permission to leave the room or to have a buddy to rely on for debriefing, processing, or support.
- **Validate differences** in how students talk about and experience emotions.
- Some students experience complex trauma and may have difficulty identifying, expressing, and managing emotions. Others might remain silent and that is also okay.
- **Check in** with students during the discussion to make sure that students feel safe.
- **Make time to transition back to class.** It can be hard to go back to learning activities after these discussions. Build in a break for students before returning to activities.

3) **Be aware of when a student or family needs more support.**

- Find out whether a counselor or other supports are available at your school.
- Talk to your leadership about mental health resources outside of your school.

4) **Model and support being open and honest** when you talk with students.

- **It is okay to not always know the answer.** You can model this to your students by saying “I don't know” or “I will have to look into that for you”.
- **Offer students positive ways to cope with their feelings** after having these difficult conversations. Examples include art activities, social action (e.g., signing a co-written letter to a local political leader), relaxation strategies, listening to music, and taking a walk outside.

5) **Help your students and colleagues understand the negative impacts of systemic racism and racial trauma—throughout history and up to present day.**

- Use real-life cultural references that students can relate to and understand.
- Give students and colleagues opportunities to share their own cultural stories and experiences.

6) **Empower students to be leaders.**

- Keep the child's age and grade level in mind and **choose age-appropriate leadership activities.**
- **Help students be more engaged** in their communities, including grassroots organizations.
- Organize dialogues, small gatherings, or school events to discuss antiracism and to advocate for equity and inclusion.
- Encourage students to create messages of equity and organize events to address inclusion on school grounds and in the community.

7) **Take care of yourself and the feelings you may experience** after discussing racism and racial trauma with your students.

- **Seek out allies and supports** as you start these discussions in your classroom.
- **Consult** with school counselors, mental health professionals, other teachers, and school administration about ways you and your colleagues can get more support.
- **Start a group of allies or “buddies”** and keep each other focused on using trauma-informed and culturally responsive language at school.
- **Hold each other accountable** for speaking up, stepping in, and advocating for change when confronted with racism at your school or in the community.

Resources for learning more:

- Talk to your school administrator and district leadership about your school's resources for addressing racism and racial trauma.
- The [National Child Traumatic Stress Network guide](#) has more information for educators.
- [Teaching Tolerance](#) also has helpful classroom guides and resources.
- **Books:**
 - “Racism without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States” (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva)
 - “How to be an Anti-Racist” (Ibram X. Kendi)
 - “Me and White Supremacy” (Layla F Saad)
 - “Warmth of Other Suns” (Isabel Wilkerson)
 - “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” (Michelle Alexander)
 - “Why are All the Black Kids Sitting Together at the Cafeteria” (Beverly Tatum)
- **Movies**
 - “Just Mercy,” tells the story of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), founded by Bryan Stevenson, and Walter McMillian, a Black man who was sentenced to die for the murder of a young white woman that he did not commit.
 - “13th” is a Netflix series on the history of race and the US criminal justice system.
 - “Whose Streets”, an account of the Ferguson uprising, inspired by the activists and community who protested after the killing of 18 year-old Michael Brown, which sparked a global movement.