



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Talking with Kids about Racial Issues

When I mentioned to a colleague that I was writing a column about racial relations and families, she urged extreme caution. “Regardless of what you write, you’ll likely offend someone. Some things are better left unsaid.” When it comes to conversations between kids and parents, race has replaced sex as the unspoken, taboo topic.

We live in an increasingly ethnically diverse country. Within the next forty years, non-Hispanic whites will likely make up less than 50% of the population. Children need to understand how to live with others from different cultural backgrounds. As with sexual issues, kids will acquire this knowledge and values from lots of places. The question is whether parents want to play a key role in teaching their children the right values.

Parents want to educate their children, but are unsure what to say or do. We want to proclaim that character and not color should really matter, but we know differently. Race does matter. White parents are ambivalent and sometimes angry about policies they perceive as “reverse discrimination” or favoritism based upon skin color rather than performance. Voicing an opinion about race places you at risk for being called a racist. When Geraldine Ferraro observed that Obama’s skin color was helpful in the election, she wasn’t criticized for being wrong. She was simply called a racist. Not to be outdone in the blame game, Ferraro responded that maybe sexism was the reason she was attacked!

Black parents have their own challenges in speaking honestly with their kids about race. How do black parents promote positive race relations while still educating their children about a history of slavery and racism perpetuated mainly by white people? Blacks no longer need to use

separate bathrooms and sit in the back of the bus, but it's still harder growing up black than white in this country. While progress has been significant, the racial divide remains significant. On most economic and social indicators, blacks have a tougher time than whites. The perception of progress depends upon your race. There's generally a 20 to 30 point gap between the races when adults are asked questions about equal opportunities for education or housing.

This is not simply a black-white issue, as our population includes Hispanics, Asians, American Indians and other groups, each of which confront unique challenges.

Kids, like the rest of us, are prejudiced. That is, they pre-judge based upon the way other kids look. These judgments are based not only upon the color of the other person's skin, but on other factors just as weight, height, obvious physical disabilities, gender, age, etc. The challenge is daunting. Is it really possible to teach children to suspend their immediate impressions and judge others based upon behavior rather than appearance?

If we can talk with kids about abortion, sexually transmitted disease, and condoms, can't we also discuss race relations? Here are a few ideas about starting this conversation.

1. **Talk about everyday events.** We don't and won't ever live in a color-blind society. My white friend's seven-year-old son recently asked him why only black people work at Taco Bell. My friend didn't know what to say and was uneasy answering the question in front of the black employees. He changed the subject and the boy didn't say anything else. I'm afraid that what my friend's son really learned was that race was a taboo topic.
2. **You don't have to know everything.** Many well-meaning parents are simply afraid of giving a wrong answer or using words that will be viewed as racially insensitive. Here's where people of all backgrounds need to lighten up and be a bit more understanding. When you discuss these topics with kids, get ready for all kinds of questions that can be perplexing and based upon racial stereotypes. Here's a sample of questions I've heard in my office.
How come blacks play basketball better than whites? Why do white people want a tan?
How do you get your skin color?
Compliment your children when they bring up such questions. Don't feel pressured to respond with an immediate answer. For example, I think my friend should have asked his son why he thought so many blacks worked at their local Taco Bell. It would have provided a great insight into the racial thinking of his young son.

3. **Understand history.** It's impossible to deal with racial events without giving your children a historical context for these issues. Read books with your kids to help them understand the experiences of various ethnic groups. We tend to think of racial groups as homogeneous, but they are not. Within any ethnic category, there is tremendous diversity. Help youngsters understand that not all Hispanics, Asians, whites, etc. share the same cultural heritage or act in the same way.
4. **Tell Stories.** During my first semester in college, my best friend was a black guy from the south. We were in many of the same classes, ate together in the cafeteria, and spent hours studying in the library. By the end of my freshman year, we barely spoke with each other as he only associated with his black friends. I was really upset with him. By the time we graduated, we became friends again. I learned more about race relations from my endless arguments and discussions with this guy than I ever learned in any book.
Don't be reluctant to share your own stories about interactions with people of different ethnic backgrounds. Kids really like to know what it was like when you were a child, and how you navigated these tough issues.
5. **Do things with people of different backgrounds.** Kids judge us by what we do. It doesn't really matter how much you preach about ethnic diversity if you only associate with people who look and act like you. In a society that remains racially polarized, this is difficult. Search for opportunities for your family to be involved with racially diverse groups.

We've come to accept ads for drugs to correct erectile dysfunction as routine. Maybe there will be a time when we'll be just as comfortable talking about issues of color, age, and gender.

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