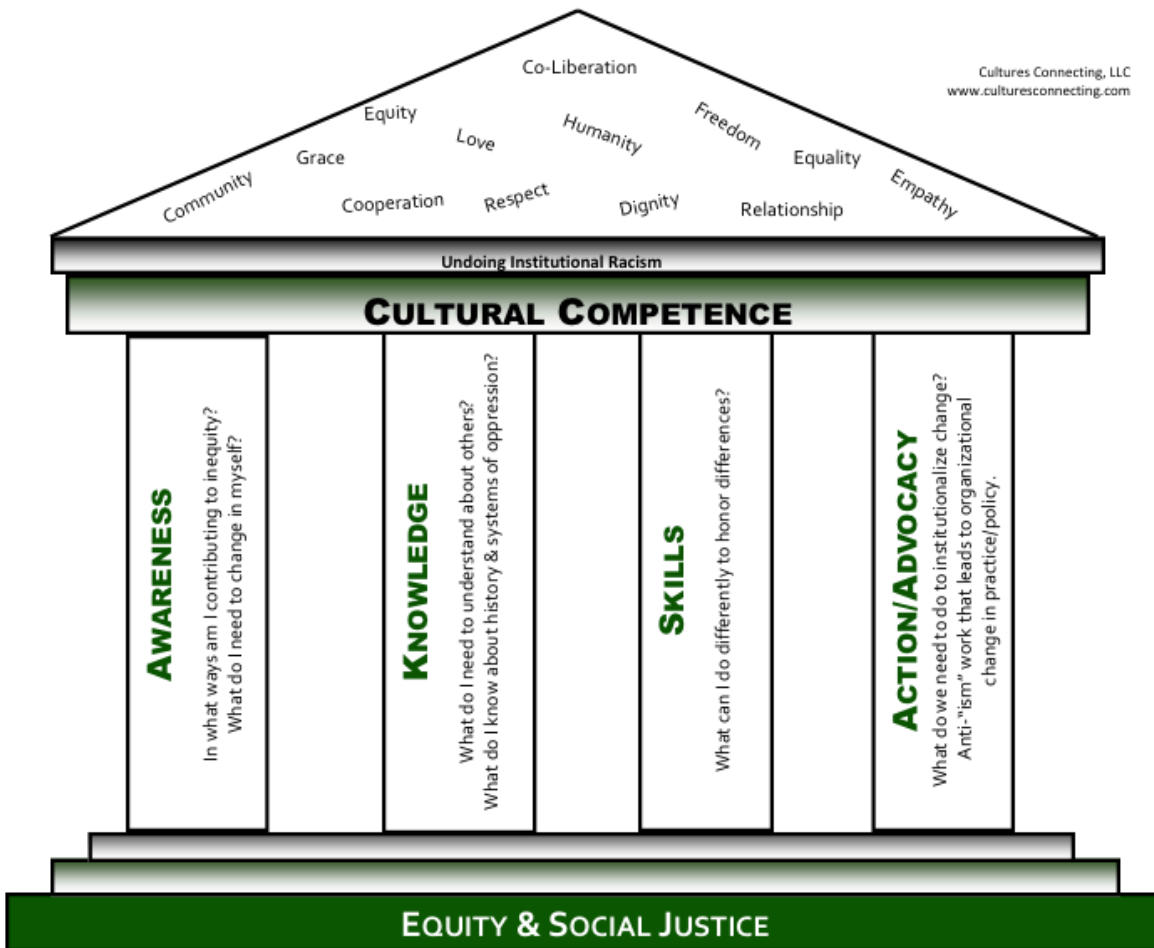


# Talking with Children & Youth about Race: Strategies for Developing a Healthy Racial Identity

## PREPARE YOURSELF & BE A ROLE MODEL

*Be intentional in your everyday life about the messages you want your children to receive from you about what it means to treat people with dignity and respect. Start with your own personal journey towards cultural competence.*



### Personal Work

1. Learn about differences, racism and privilege.
2. Continually learn more about your own culture and history.
3. Identify subconscious biases, stereotypes, attitudes and beliefs about others and internalized oppression and/or superiority regarding yourself.
4. Educate yourself about institutional racism in education, healthcare, politics, the judicial system, etc.
5. Read or watch movies about America's racial history. Try starting with your own community history.

6. Read books and articles written by diverse authors, representing diverse perspectives and increasing your understanding of diverse groups.
7. Develop your lens to critically analyze, discuss and challenge stereotypes perpetuated in the media.
8. Recognize that discomfort in conversations about racism and privilege means there is an opportunity to learn. Stay engaged.
9. Practice talking about differences, racism and privilege to increase your comfort level.
10. Develop relationships with people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.
11. Attend workshops and lectures on race relations where you can learn from others and engage in conversations.
12. Engage in reflective practice. Talk openly about your fears, challenges and successes with others.
13. Join with other people who are working on learning and acting on these issues in your community. Participate in social justice activism in the community.

### **With Young People...**

1. Model positive intercultural relationships with staff, friends, acquaintances and people in your community.
2. Expose young people to a wide variety of people and organizations working against discrimination by taking field trips.
3. Invite parents, staff, or community members who actively work against racism into the classroom to talk about their experience.
4. Complain to the person in charge when you see injustice while young people are with you.
5. Challenge any form of oppression. Openly disagree with racist comments, jokes, etc.
6. Advocate on behalf of others.

## **PROVIDE A COUNTER-NARRATIVE**

*A counter-narrative is designed to counteract messages that reinforce stereotypes and lead to internalized racial inferiority or superiority. For young people of color, counter-narratives can help them build the protective armor they need to confront everyday racial microaggressions. For young white people, they need a healthy sense of self that is not based in notions of being better than others.*

*Asians are known for more than karate and aren't all good at math. Blacks have talents other than dancing and sports. Native Americans don't walk around wearing traditional clothing or live in teepees. Latinx people aren't all immigrants and do work in diverse professional roles. Rich white people don't necessarily work harder and aren't smarter than other groups. Media continues to exacerbate these and other stereotypes. Be intentional about ensuring children and youth receive much broader messages about diverse groups of people.*

*Both white and children/youth of color receive messages about their heritage. It's important that you help to shape this message in a positive way so that they feel a sense of pride in who they are and where they come from. While whites receive more positive messages about being white, their ancestors received negative messages and consequences for their Irish, Scottish, Italian, Jewish, etc. heritage, causing assimilation. Therefore, many white children do not know about their culture. The messages*

*children of color receive about their group identity can have a powerful negative impact on their sense of self-worth. It's important that we expose all young people to the richness of their heritage.*

### **In everyday conversation...**

1. Have conversations about the beauty and strengths of diverse groups of people including their own cultural heritage.
2. Discuss the diversity within and between groups in positive ways.
3. *You have such pretty brown skin. I love all the different complexions we have.* (To a child with dark skin.)
4. *I like your hair style.* Include a descriptor. (To a youth who wears their hair natural.)
5. *You should become a scientist because you're so curious about...* (To an Indigenous, Black or Latinx young person.)
6. *You've worked really hard to solve that math problem. The best mathematicians are ones who stick with it when problems are tough.* (To a young girl.)
7. *There are lots of ways to be intelligent and a lot of kids don't get to be in gifted classes because these classes focus on one kind of intelligence. You are really smart, but that doesn't mean you're smarter than kids not in this class.* (To a White child in a gifted program.)

### **In everyday experiences**

1. Provide them with opportunities to participate in heritage festivals.
2. Take youth to race-related conferences with you.
3. Expose them to the art, music and other talents of their culture.
4. Teach and show them the inventions and accomplishments of people from their culture.

### **In books, movies and other media that reflect racial diversity in positive ways...**

1. Move beyond celebrating a few famous people to find books and movies about common folks, especially young people, in everyday settings.
2. Expose them to books written by authors from their own and diverse backgrounds.
3. Introduce young people to the history of racial and ethnic relations.
4. Do not limit the stories to those with a happy ending or present people of color as always winning battles against unfairness and oppression. It is not easy to fight racism and we don't want to give the idea that victory is just around the corner.
5. Expose them to books, role models, videos and movies that show historically marginalized groups in positions of power, authority and competence outside of stereotypical roles.

## **ACT ON TEACHABLE MOMENTS**

*Teachable moments can happen any time. Sometimes a young person says or does something that you were not expecting to hear or have happen. It's important you try to address the situation as best you can, though your response does not have to follow immediately in order for it to be effective. Just keep in mind that not responding at all sends a message too. When a teachable moment occurs because you and a young person see or experience something together, this is usually a great opportunity for learning. In*

*these situations, it's better to try and help children and youth interpret their racial experiences rather than leaving it up to them to make sense of what they see, hear and experience.*

### **Take it Seriously, Respond Intentionally**

1. Take incidents of racist talk or discriminatory behavior by young people very seriously.
2. Say something, even if you don't have all the information at that moment.
3. You don't have to respond immediately. Get ideas from colleagues and then go back and address the situation.

### **Question! Question! Question!**

One of the best possible ways to engage students in conversations is to ask them questions. The moment we start to lecture rather than listen, a young person may shut down.

1. Ask what they mean by different words and phrases such as, "He's racist."
2. Help them interrogate their own thinking. For example, if a young person says, "That's so gay!" ask questions about who they are insulting, why that word is an insult, and who else is hurt by that comment.
3. Try to avoid asking questions with one right answer or with an expected "correct" response.
4. Ask genuine questions, rather than ones that might shame a young person. For example, "Why do you think we have this school policy?" rather than, "Why would you do that?" The tone in which a question is asked can make all the difference.

### **Meet them Where They're At**

Asking questions is a great strategy for finding out what students already understand and extending beyond that point. Like any other topic, when we can connect discussions about race to the personal experiences of young people, it will make more sense and create a foundation for new learning.

1. Assume the young person knows something about, and is trying to make sense of, race. In other words, don't assume they are colorblind or underestimate their ability to understand racism and white privilege.
2. Start by having them pair share or write about personal experiences related to the discussion topic.
3. For young children, use language they are familiar with such as fairness to introduce new language such as equality or justice.
4. Think about what context you need to provide so young people can see beyond the one book you are reading or one activity you're doing.

### **Slow the Conversation**

Sometimes you have to let go of your agenda to respond to a comment or action regarding race. Although you may just want to move on because of the tension involved, it is important to recognize not everyone can or will move on with you. When a child of color is still thinking about a comment another student said and the lecture has continued, it contributes to a gap in the opportunity for learning.

1. "I noticed the room just got really quiet and I felt like there was some tension around Malik's comment. Did anyone else feel that?"

2. “We’re going to put the water cycle on hold for a few minutes so we can talk about what just happened.”
3. Actively facilitate a conversation between two or more students, having them take turns listening and responding to questions.

### **Develop Vocabulary**

Sometimes you need to slow the conversation because students don’t understand what you’ve said or have the words to accurately express themselves. Take the time to define important terms like stereotypes, racism, privilege, etc.

1. Pause if a word you used brings up questions. For example, “I heard some giggles when I used the word sexism. Is that a new word to you?”
2. Spend time up front talking about examples of what is or is not a stereotype. Ask the students to categorize images or statements according to the definition.
3. Post words about race on a vocabulary chart and include them in spelling tests.
4. If a student uses a word such as “oriental” or “colored”, give them another word to use and talk about the history of those words. Discuss why derogatory slurs are particularly hurtful.

### **Use Your Own Style and Be Real**

We each have our own style of communicating. For some, humor comes easily while others tend to be more serious. Some talk slowly and deliberately while others speed through. This style is developed through the cultural norms of our families and communities. It is important to recognize our own habits and adapt for different audiences, while still coming from a place of our authentic selves.

1. Don’t try to appropriate the style of speech of different racial groups in order to appear to better understand their perspectives.
2. Speak from your own experiences, rather than telling other people’s stories (bring them in or use videos/books, etc. to share different experiences).

### **Notice Group Dynamics**

Practice noticing who is or is not participating in conversations about race.

1. Name the group dynamics out loud. For example, “I’ve noticed we’ve heard a lot from the boys in the classroom, what do some of the girls think about this?”
2. Notice your own patterns in how you facilitate discussions.
3. “Whose voices and what perspectives were privileged in that conversation? Who was silenced? Why do you think that happened?”
4. Ask what the class is noticing about the group dynamics and why they think that is happening. Is it different from other topics of discussion?
5. Ask for written feedback after a discussion including things they wanted to say, but didn’t, and what they noticed about the group.

### Use Racial Identity Caucusing

Racial identity caucusing is a powerful tool for both youth and adults to discuss race in our daily lives. It is important to have a clear understanding of why you want to have caucusing and discuss this with families and other staff members before implementing.

1. Caucusing allows people to explore issues they have in common, such as specific forms of discrimination facing their racial group.
2. Caucusing allows people to explore intra-group differences. For example, what does it mean to “act black”? How does gender or class or sexual orientation impact our experiences?
3. White youth can explore their own ethnic identities as well as the ways they have internalized white superiority.
4. Youth of color can discuss the impact of internalized racism on how they think about themselves and each other.
5. Youth may feel freer to express their opinions in a racially homogenous group.

### Be Comfortable with Not Knowing and Continue Learning

If a group is looking to you for an answer, it can be difficult to tell them you don’t know, especially since we’ve been socialized to see teachers as people with all the answers. However, this models the willingness to learn you are asking of the group. Your credibility will be better established if you admit you don’t know and try to figure out the answer than if you take a guess.

1. Offer extra credit to anyone who finds the answer to the question.
2. Stop and do some research together, modeling where they can go to find answers to their questions.
3. Keep a list of questions the group has asked in a public space and revisit it when they or you find an answer.

### Do Something

Give students opportunities to take action related to what they are studying. Doing something to address an issue helps them see how they can be agents of change, rather than just leaving them feeling frustrated or guilty about biases they’ve noticed.

1. Have them write letters to textbook or publishing companies when they see bias in books.
2. Tell them about youth organizing they can get involved with.
3. Share ways people have stood up against injustice and have them brainstorm ideas for actions they’d like to take. Discuss the pros and cons of different strategies.
4. Support their leadership in organizing a march or rally.

### Examples of Acting on Teachable Moments

*Field Trip:* You’re walking down the street on a fieldtrip with students and you see a Muslim man praying.

**Possible Response:** Engage them in a conversation about what the man is doing and why. If you don't know, wonder together and then commit yourself to finding out more later.

**News:** You have students bring in newspaper articles about current events and one of your students bring in an article about anti-immigration laws.

**Possible Questions:** *What do you already know about the immigration policies in the US? Ask them if they understand what the issue is about. Why might some people support stricter immigration laws? Do you think it will work? Why might some people be upset about this? Do you know anyone who has been affected by laws like this? What do you think the laws should be regarding immigration?*

**Possible Responses:** Explain what the policy is about to the best of your ability in a way that allows them to explore and ask questions. Contact local organizations working on immigrant rights and/or look up more information about immigration issues together.

**Observation:** A Black student is talking about the police pulling over his father. He states, *“Man, the police are racist! They’re always pulling over Black people.” Or... Two boys are playing together on the playground. They want to play cops and robbers but the African American boy refuses to be the cop saying, “I’m not going to be the police, they’re racist!”*

**Possible Questions:** Find ways to validate the truth in his statement and then broaden the perspective. *“Yes that does happen a lot to African Americans. They call it racial profiling. Do you know what is meant by racial profiling? Do you have any thoughts about why that might be? What do you mean when you say racist?”*

**Possible Responses:** *“One reason is because there are a lot of negative stereotypes about Black people being criminals. Sometimes people aren’t even aware of the stereotypes they hold. It doesn’t mean that cop is a bad person or they are even doing it on purpose. Sometimes Blacks are being pulled over because they broke the law and sometimes they’re pulled over because they’re being racially profiled. Does that make sense?”*

**Observation:** A white student says, *“My mom says when black people get pulled over by the cops they claim it’s because of racism and they’re just making excuses so they won’t get a ticket.”*

**Possible Responses:** Talk with the student about the difference between individual criminal behaviors and institutional racial profiling. Look up data together on racial profiling. Ask questions to probe the understanding of racism such as, *“What are some reasons why Blacks might feel they are being pulled over because of their race? Could White people say the same thing when they get pulled over? Why or why not?”*

*“These are the times to grow our souls. Each of us is called upon to embrace the conviction that despite the powers and principalities bent on commodifying all our human relationships, we have the power within us to create the world anew.”*

*Grace Lee Boggs*

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