

How to Talk to Your Children About Protests and Racism

June 03, 2020

As cities and social media explode with anger over the killing of yet another black man at the hands of police, worried parents struggle with how to protect their children from seeing the worst of the violence while simultaneously explaining the ravages of racism.

It couldn't have come at a worse time.

Sheltering at home for months to avoid the deadly coronavirus, many parents stressed by juggling work and child care from home had eased their restrictions on screen time for their children.

Now it's even more likely that kids might find the video of [George Floyd](#), an unarmed and handcuffed black man in Minneapolis, gasping for breath as a white police officer pressed a knee into his neck.

Even if they haven't, experts say parents should assume their children are already aware of tragedies like these and their aftermath.

"Children and adolescents are experiencing the collateral consequences of the publicized murderers of [Breonna Taylor](#), [Tony McDade](#), and [George Floyd](#), whether they have a smartphone in their direct possession or not," said California pediatrician Dr. Rhea Boyd, who teaches nationally on the relationship between structural racism, inequity and health.

"Whether from social media accounts, conversations with peers or caregivers, overheard conversations, or the distress they witness in the faces of those they love, children know what is going on," Boyd said. "And without the guidance and validation of their caregivers, they may be navigating their feelings alone."

Take care of you first

How can a parent help their child traverse these disturbing times?

Let the child's age and level of development guide you, experts say, but first, be sure that you are in the right frame of mind.

"A parent's first step is to take care of themselves, their mental health, their emotional health. Put their oxygen mask on first before they put the oxygen mask on their child," said Chicago pediatrician Dr. Nia Heard-Garris, who chairs the minority health, equity and inclusion committee of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

...

Infants and toddlers

While children younger than three aren't going to understand what is happening on television, they will be able to pick up on the "fear, urgency, or anger in people's voices and behaviors," Radesky said.

At this age, stress shows up in fussy or unregulated behavior. To keep that from occurring, parents should read, listen to or watch the news when the baby isn't physically there.

...

This is the time to begin teaching your child about systemic racism and how to identify and refute it, experts say.

Racist stereotypes and bias begin at a shockingly young age.

As early as six months, a baby's brain can notice race-based differences, and can internalize racial bias by ages two to four, said Maryland pediatrician Dr. Jacqueline Dougé, who [co-authored the AAP's statement](#) on the impact of racism on child and adolescent health.

"Learning" racism is a lot like learning a new language for babies and toddlers, [wrote Dougé and California pediatrician Dr. Ashaunta Anderson](#) in a separate commentary. It can happen without parental input, just by the racial stereotypes so prevalent in society.

By age 12, many children become set in their beliefs. That gives parents "a decade to mold the learning process, so that it decreases racial bias and improves cultural understanding," they wrote.

While helpful for all races, it's especially important for white children to see brown and black kids in a positive light to fight systemic racism, experts say. Books that profile multi-racial characters are an excellent way for parents to do that. And since it's never too early to read to a baby, start right away.

...

Preschool and elementary ages

This is the age when kids begin to ask questions on why other people look different than they do.

"If your child asks about someone's skin tone, you might say, 'Isn't it wonderful that we are all so different!' You can even hold your arm against theirs to show the differences in skin tones in your family," according to Dougé and Anderson.

At this age, children will see and absorb disturbing images from protests and riots literally, "likely focusing on worrying about a burning van or a scary-looking person in a mask," Radesky said.

...

"These times also provide opportunities for parents to model the behavior they want their kids to follow

by also limiting their exposure to media,” Dougé added.

But as Boyd said, children will likely have already overheard adult conversations, or been exposed to what is happening via social media accounts and conversations with friends.

“Parents who have not already, should proactively engage their kids around these distressing events,” Boyd said. “Ask them what they know and what they’ve seen. Ask them how they are feeling. Validate their feelings and let them know what you are doing to keep them safe — be it in your home or your community.”

Parents will also need to give their children the broader societal context of racism in order to try to explain the rage of protestors filling the streets of cities across the nation, Radesky said.

...

‘The talk’

For black families, there is another, more painful necessity at this age, known as “the talk.” It’s a series of “don’ts” black families have passed on for generations: Don’t resist police. Stay away from bad places. Be respectful to white people and stay away from confrontation with white men, especially police.

“We’re black folks so we don’t have a choice but to talk about race and talk about racism,” said Heard-Garris, who has a seven-year-old son. “So he can tell you probably more eloquently than I can about racism and he’s seven.”

...

“Beginning ‘the talk’ with school aged children can prepare them for these encounters before they occur and equip them with tools that can be life saving,” Boyd added.

As an African American pediatrician, Boyd discusses the topic often with parents of children in her care. She advises black parents to think of “the talk” as more of a process than a singular conversation.

“That process may begin with introducing stories through age-appropriate books or films that can generate questions you answer together. Or it can be an ongoing dialogue that is sparked by current events. Just remember to include specific guidance that enables your child to know their rights and the steps they can take to try and stay safe. And always be sure to let your child know it isn’t fair they have to learn these lessons so young. But you are teaching them to try to keep them safe,” Boyd said.

White parents can have “the talk” too, Boyd said.

“It’s an important moment to build empathy with your child,” she said. “It is also important to highlight the other children who may have fears or concerns related to their safety, and to model and practice ‘upstanding’ or acting in defense of those around them.”

Tweens and teens

Of course, tweens and teens will likely be seeing all the coverage of police brutality and protests on their personal smartphones. Most teens get comfort by communicating with their friends on social media, Heard-Garris said. Some teens have even begun participating in online activism.

“Online activism is a coping response for some adolescents, especially right now while we’re physically distant,” Heard-Garris said. “Reposting, retweeting, expressing how they’re feeling, chatting with friends has been helpful, sort of an active kind of coping response.”

“Other teens, especially those that are not of a minority background, so those that are white, are educating themselves about why this is happening, what’s the history of our country, what’s happening right now. Intellectualizing the issues has been helpful for them to understand this is not just a today problem, this has been going on for years,” Heard-Garris said.

At this age, kids will be able to think more abstractly about racism, injustice and violent versus peaceful protest and discuss their views with parents, experts say.

“Parents can ask their tweens or teens whether they’ve seen anything online about the riots and protests, what they think, and what about it was upsetting or inspiring,” Radesky said.

...

Kira Banks, a clinical psychologist whose website [“Raising Equity” provides free videos and resources](#) on how parents can fight racism and cultivate an open mind in themselves and their kids, suggests parents watch [movies like “13th,”](#) a powerful look at institutional racism in the justice system that premiered in 2016 to a standing ovation at the New York Film Festival.

“Is this a teachable moment? Absolutely. It must be, it has to be,” Banks said. “And if a person hasn’t done the work to understand the history of racism and discrimination in America they should do so, and then join us in raising our children to see and disrupt racism, and be the change we want to see.”

The work must be done by all social classes and races, experts say, including the most privileged.

...