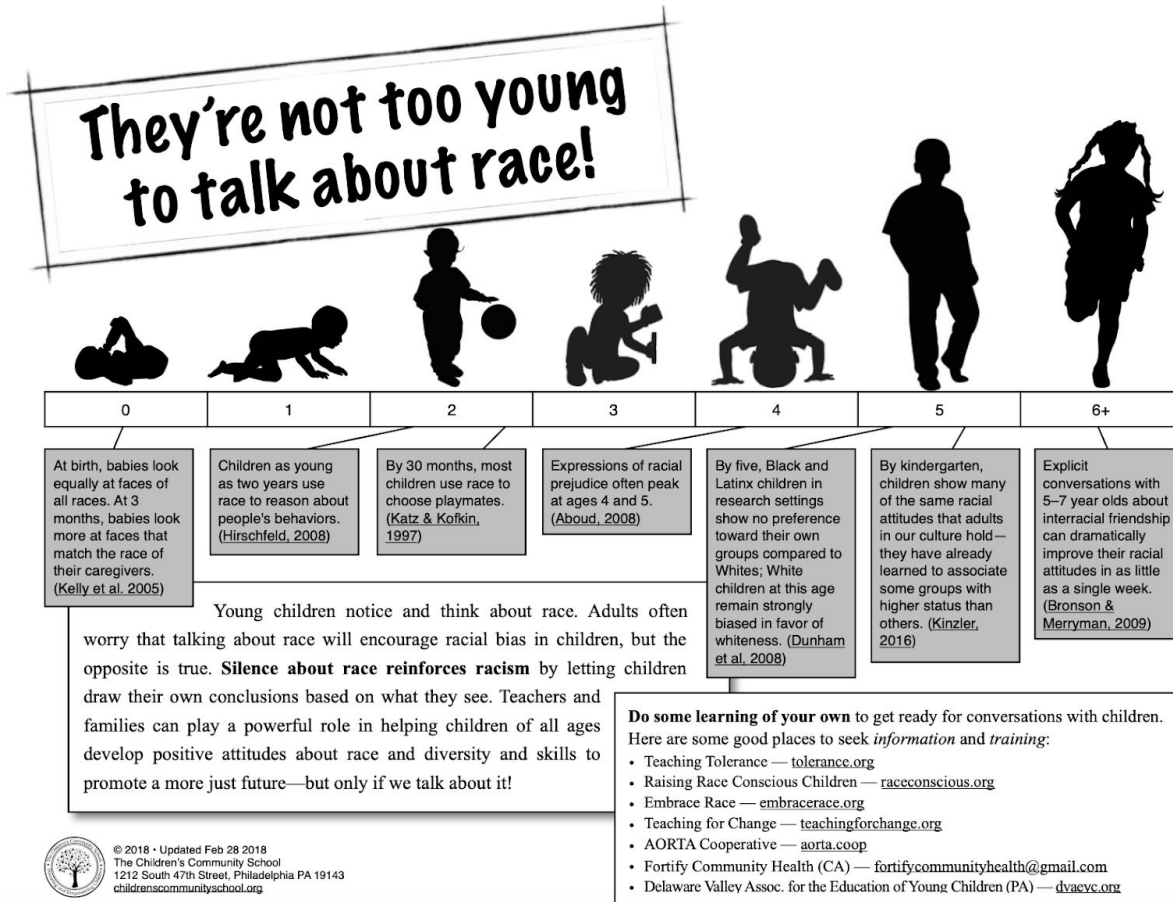


Some ideas for talking to young people about racist violence and #blacklivesmatter

Note: I'm a light-skinned, mixed-race, queer school counselor. I am not black, which means: 1) It's my obligation to share labor and resources, and 2) I expect to get some things wrong. If you have helpful additions or corrections, I welcome them and thank you in advance for your time and effort. [DM](#) or [email](#) me. I am also willing to work alongside you if you have further questions about how to engage with kids about this.

The language we use to broach conversations with young people is helpful...

- to check our own understanding
- to use as building-blocks when engaging with other adults who haven't been exposed to social justice frameworks that are often inaccessible and make people feel uneducated or shut out
- to keep us humble in how we use language to engage with people for whom English is not their first language, for our elders who may need slower or simpler explanations, for our beloved community members who have different cognitive abilities
- and so on



From Children's Community School

Is my child, sibling, student too young to talk about race and injustice?

No. Developmentally speaking, kids are behaving based on perceived differences in race, gender presentation, class, and much more by the time they are 2 and 3 years old — or even younger. Because

of the way representation works in film, media, and advertising, even really young kids are developing ideas about who heroes are, what beauty is, who the “bad guys” are, etc. The younger we speak to them explicitly about race as a social construct, consequences of bias, what their rights are, and how to actively be a good friend in solidarity to others, the better. My guiding light is this simple call to action: ***We absolutely must tell kids the truth.***

But won't it traumatize them or rob them of their innocence?

It's sad and it sucks to share sad, hard stuff with our kids. But if you are in a position to have a loving, safe conversation with young people about racism, do it. Do it with intention and care. Families of color, and especially black families, have to [explain to their kids](#) at an exceptionally young age that they are not always safe, that they can't always [rely on asking neighbors for help when they miss the bus to school](#), can't always rely on the police to have their best interests in mind or give them [the benefit of the doubt](#), can't even [be out](#) after a certain hour because bad stuff could happen to them.

Nobody gets to stay innocent, not the people who are being marginalized, and not the people wanting to cover the eyes of their kids. If we are outraged at robbing young people of their innocence too early, then the only option is working to create a world that is safer and more just. This means raising young people to know better than we did. Summon the same courage it took to talk to your kids about COVID-19 and death, a shared global crisis that affects kids deeply — from cancelled school to brushing up against death and risk and personal responsibility. As a result of its pervasiveness, many of us developed great creativity and patience in how we explained it to young people. The violence of racism *also* affects kids deeply, in every aspect of life, in a shared global crisis.

For black adults reading this and talking to kids in your life: I see you, I see the absolutely beautiful and heartbreaking and *nimble* work you have had to do by telling the truth to your kids, by showing them your real fears and emotions when you have to explain that things are not fair for them. I have learned so much from you. Thank you.

Model humility and transparency

Kids watch adults closely. They see us attempt to keep control and attempt to know everything. Yikes, am I right?!?!?! I always say that one of the most radical things we can do is share transparently with kids that we don't know it all, we have been wrong, and we have been able to change. Model apologizing to kids, model saying you don't know and then look things up together.

In conversations about racism, demonstrate your own flexibility in your thought process and be vulnerable. For instance:

- “I wasn't sure how to talk to you about this because I felt I didn't know enough and I didn't want to make you sad. I was scared. Now I understand that it's important to talk about the problems in the world even if we don't feel like experts, and I think you deserve the truth, even if it makes you sad. Being sad means you care. If you become sad, I'll be here to help you feel better.”
- “The problem of racism and violence has existed for a long time, and it took me a little too long to realize that it was my problem too. I was wrong to stay on the sidelines for so long. But I had some really smart people explain to me what I could do to help, and I appreciated those conversations and the books I read, even though it did make me feel bad and guilty at first.”

- “Sometimes I get so personally hurt and upset about this topic that it was hard for me to bring it up with you. But I know it’s important to talk to you, so if you notice me getting upset, you can hold my hand or give me a hug, but know that I made the choice to talk to you today because I want you to be able to ask questions and understand what you’re seeing on social media.”

Be concrete and engaging

It can often be helpful and grounding to center your conversation around a concrete activity or ritual. This feels engaging to kids who are putting together very abstract new ideas about justice, fairness, and race. Using art and other activities can pull in kids who are very young, kids who aren’t verbal processors, aloof teens who aren’t super interested in talking it out with you right now, etc.

Kids sometimes react to trauma or misunderstanding with anger, confusion, awkward jokes or humor, distraction, denial, etc. This is normal. Depending on your family’s experiences and positionality, consider: coming back to this conversation later, allowing breathing room, or persisting. I can imagine a white middle-class family really wanting to persevere through several conversations over time, and I can imagine a family of color being flexible about offering space if it doesn’t seem like a good time.

You might find yourself explaining death. Take a deep breath. You can say, “When people get really hurt or really sick, sometimes they can’t get better and stop living, and that’s death.”

Bringing up the subject — feelings first

“I am feeling sad and worried about something. Can we talk about it?” If they seem to be engaged with it, I go further: “We try to make good choices that don’t hurt people, and we get sad when other people hurt people. Right now I’m sad because some people are being hurt and killed, and it’s not right. The reason they are being hurt is not fair. It is about their skin color. Do you think it’s fair for people to get hurt because of how they look?” Then take some time to really dissect this.

Explain why you’ve chosen that activity

“Today I want us to light a candle/make a card in memory of someone/some people who have died. They died unfairly and a lot of people are hurting and angry right now because they’re scared it won’t stop. We are lighting this candle because even though I didn’t know this person, I feel sad too and I want them to be remembered lovingly.”

Let kids ask questions and try to be honest, simple, and vulnerable in your answers.

Activities

- Light a candle or create an altar, and talk about the person who died like a memorial service
- Make a card for that person, or for their family. Put it on the altar so it stays in sight, and/or see if there’s a way to send it with a donation or share an image on social media.
- Coloring pages. The [#blacklivesmatteratschool coloring book](#) is a wonderful place to start. I also love the idea of printing out the beautiful [images](#) circulating of our beloved black community who have died, including babes Ahmaud, George, Breonna, Tony. Let kids show their grief through the meditative act of art. My youuuung K-5 students are still coloring XXXTentacion because they just miss him and love to spend some time rendering care and beauty around his image. Explain who or what you are coloring, and that it’s an act of respect and sadness to spend some time with their picture and make a beautiful piece of art.

Do some research around who died, and share things about them as you color, like, “George Floyd really loved going to church and his friends and neighbors remember him sharing his love of spirituality with others,” and, “Breonna Taylor saved lives in her job as an EMT. She dreamed about becoming a nurse.”

- Donate together. “Part of how we can help is by sending money to the family who is suffering and has to pay for a funeral, or to an organization that is working on making the world a better place. What should we say in the donation note? Do you want to enter my name and our address in the payment form?”
- Pick a word of the day and contextualize, like this fantastique breakdown of [Protest](#)
- Look at protest images. This compilation from my hometown, Portland, shows [lots of signs and kids in the crowd](#). Ask questions: What do you think is going on? What do you think this means? What would your protest sign be? What do you think the people who are protesting are feeling? Why did they decide to go?

Ask all kids:

- How does this make you feel?
- How should we show how sad we are?
- How should we mourn?
- Knowing all of what we’ve talked about together, how can you make sure that you act with fairness and love toward all people?
- What do you do when you see something unfair happening? How can you act?

Special care for our black babies:

There is tremendous expertise and experience in the black community around how to talk to kids about hard things, death, and unfairness. I wish this wasn’t the case. I defer to the lived experience of black families around this. As a humble counselor who just really loves you and your kids, even if we’ve never met, let me offer these loose guidelines for you to take or leave.

- You are a source of safety and unconditional love for your kids, so you are uniquely qualified to have this absolutely devastating conversation with them.
- You also may have too much trauma to feel like you can do this right now, or ever. That’s extremely understandable. See who you can rope into the conversation, like the kid’s school counselor, another mental health therapist, a friend, another family member, a book, a video, etc.
- You may have already talked about this to or in front of your kids. That’s normal. Give yourself grace and understanding when you have an emotional or heightened reaction, and you aren’t taking anything away from them by being real. They are watching you react with human emotion and they will be able to understand your anger, sadness, or coping mechanisms as love. If you worry, be explicit: “I am having a really strong reaction to this situation because it makes me think of our family. I want you to know that *your own* anger or fear or desire to be distracted is normal and okay too.”
- Ask, “What do you need to feel better?” If they come up with some stuff that you don’t have, consider making an ask to white people to bring it for you. There’s a lot of white guilt and desire for action floating around, and as awkward and uncomfortable it is to make a Facebook or Insta post about it...y’all deserve it and I hope you have people in your life who would show up for you in that way.

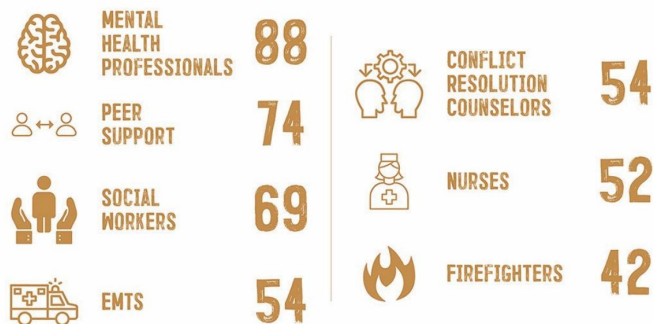
- Cultivate a sense of safety in the places where you do have more control. We know that black people are never really safe in this country, but perhaps the child’s bedroom or your living room could be a safer space that you could decorate together, make a soft pillow fort, turn the lights down, etc.
- “I love you. I want you to be safe and I will always try to keep you safe.” This. Goes. So. Far.

Dream big

In the world of public education, we recognize every day that the world is changing rapidly and that we’re learning alongside kids whose careers and lives might look very different from ours right now. There’s an opportunity here: we can open up conversations that **imagine more** than traditional models of governance, policing, jobs, capitalistic and materialistic values, etc. When our kids regurgitate aspirations of wanting to be a police officer, for instance, we can say, “Why?” Listen to their answers, validate. If they come up with answers like, “They get bad guys,” offer nuance. Say, “Actually, the job of a police officer is supposed to be to serve the people and protect, the gentler the better. There are not really ‘bad guys’ that they ‘get,’ mostly people in really bad circumstances who need help.” And then broaden worldviews beyond the traditional. Ask, “Are there other jobs that protect people? What could those be? Who else is protecting people?”

If not police, then who?

People experiencing homelessness in Portland were asked who should be involved in first response instead of police:



Teams engaged people experiencing homelessness in discussions about what the Portland Street Response pilot should look like, including who the first responders should be, how they should approach individuals in crisis, what types of services and resources they should bring with them, and what types of training they should have.

Read the full report, “Believe our stories and listen,” at news.streetroots.org

[Street Roots](https://www.streetroots.org)

One of the best things about young people is that they have great ideas. I don’t buy rhetoric that says “omg they are just not jaded or corrupted so their imaginations are wild!” Kids are jaded sometimes. But it’s true that they are smarter than us. Quote me on that! Engage with kids on dreaming up what a better world could look like.

Draw it, write a story about it, act it out in a skit, record it to put on Tik Tok!

- What would a world where everyone is safe look like? Feel like? Who’s there? What are they doing?
- Who could protect communities and what would protection look like? How would we know they are being fair?
- If you were president/queen/mayor, what would you change that would make sure racism ends?

Be brave in how you defend radical actions



To the untrained eye, it's funny to think about how, on the one hand, we try to get kids to see that they shouldn't rip up their homework assignment if they are frustrated, but on the other, we have an obligation to change rhetoric around rioting and violence as a logical act of resistance (also, maybe sometimes they should rip up the homework too. Life's complicated). These are **not** equivalent and we can encourage emotional resilience and emotional regulation about life's expected frustrations AS DIFFERENT AND NOT EQUIVALENT to strategic acts of protest against wildly unfair and horrific systems of oppression. HAVE STAMINA IN YOUR ARTICULATION OF NUANCE. IT CAN TAKE A WHILE. Engage with young people in a nuanced manner about how you can understand the reactions emanating from pain, suffering, and unending forced endurance under a terribly racist and violent system.

If you are reading this feeling squeamish or doubtful, I urge you to [deconstruct](#) that. [Private property](#) is not as valuable as human lives, and destruction, riots, and violence are legitimate forms of protest. Please understand that peaceful protest is historically not what produces results — not for queer people at Stonewall, not for suffragettes getting the vote for (white) women, not for union workers who fought for labor rights, not for colonized people fighting for independence, not for civil rights activists fighting for black lives as far back as we can remember.

- Empathy first. “I understand what people are mad about and I understand the reactions of protestors. Buildings can be fixed, but people who have been killed can't come back.”
No matter where you are in your comfort level with radical acts of protest, please focus on this message: anger is valid, and property is not more important than lives lost. Protests are happening to try to get the world to see that racist acts of violence should stop.
- “This is different than being violent for no reason. We know it's not right to hit someone for no reason, and it's not right to hurt someone weaker than you. This is a situation where lots of people have been hurt unfairly, and it doesn't look like it will stop or change. This group of people is trying to send a message and ask for better treatment in the future. They are saying, ‘Enough is enough, and if you hurt us for this long, we have to stand up for ourselves.’”
- Share examples of people who are in solidarity with protestors, like the Gandhi Mahal restaurant-owners who understand the bigger picture and said, “[Let my building burn.](#)”
- Look into histories of revolution against oppressors like colonizers. Here are [Colonialism Facts for Kids](#), including lots of pictures to spark conversation.

Don't forget, don't let it go

So many things in the world are happening while we are apart because of COVID-19, and even distance learning is about to peter off for summer break. It's our obligation as adults to provide young people the opportunity to process often, and especially for educators, as soon as we can get back together in schools. Young people need an opportunity to share how they feel and ask questions about many ways the world feels fraught and uncertain right now. Open space for that when our classrooms open back up, bring it up, remind people. Let them talk about quarantine, let them talk about racism and these most recent bouts of unjust black death. If you do not intentionally carve out time for this, it may never happen. What a disappointment and missed obligation that would be.

More resources

- A resource roundup for [talking to kids about race](#) and racism, including articles, books, podcasts, etc.
- An [anti-racism resource](#) masterpost that includes stuff for kids, articles, podcasts, books, etc. Designed mainly for white and non-black folks to educate themselves.
- [#blacklivesmatterschool](#)
 - [Coloring book](#)
 - [Teaching materials](#)
- [Self-care for people of color](#) in the wake of racial tragedy
- Resource roundup for [parents of white kids](#) to educate themselves and their families
- [Scaffolded Anti-Racist](#) resources organized by topic
- [There Is No Apolitical Classroom](#) teaching resources
- Embrace Race's [10 tips for talking to kids about racism](#), available as PDFs in English and Spanish
- Embrace Race's presentation on [supporting kids after racialized violence](#)
- Children's community [school social justice resources for families of kids](#)
- [31 children's books](#) to support conversations on race, racism, and activism
- [Action items](#)
- Places to [donate](#) specific to the death of George Floyd and Minneapolis jail/bond activism
- Even more places to [donate](#) to support protestors
- [The Conscious Kid](#) instagram — follow for book recommendations, resources, and access their Patreon of even more
- “[Safe](#),” a short video story for young audiences by Woke Kindergarten about how black people deserve to feel safe.
- Books for [kids and teens about police brutality](#)
- [Teaching Tolerance](#) for social justice and diversity-centered lesson plans
- Showing Up for Racial Justice ([SURJ](#)) for action guidance
- A poignant and telling video of [black parents talking to their kids](#) about how to interact with cops
- Crucially important scholarly [article](#) about how white activism can do contribute to burnout for activists of color
- The American School Counselor Association ([ASCA](#))'s list of resources on talking about race
- The American Counseling Association ([ACA](#))'s preliminary discussion points for addressing racial injustice (geared toward white folks)
- [Race and Mental Health](#) resource roundup
- An oldie but goodie: [Curriculum for White Americans to Educate Themselves on Race](#)

If you have other great resources, peep my contact info at the top of the post to send more or share corrections. Compiled by Marissa Yang Bertucci, June 2020