



# Tip Sheet for Families Talking to Kids About Racism and Violence

Whether they see it on the news or in their own communities, youth are aware of the violent acts of racism that our country continues to confront. Many racialized students have experienced such racism themselves, or seen it affect their loved ones. From police brutality against Black people to attacks on Asian American people during the coronavirus crisis, there's a lot going on that can be scary and confusing for youth to deal with.

How can parents, many of whom are struggling themselves, help children process what they're seeing and manage their feelings?

There's no one right answer. That said, there are a few guidelines parents can keep in mind to help kids [deal with troubling news about racism and violence](#).

## Validate their feelings

Start by checking in with your child. Kids, even very young ones, are extremely perceptive, and they may have worries or concerns they don't know how to express.

This will look different for every child. Youth might be afraid of being hurt by the police, or worried that something bad could happen to their loved ones. Avoid making assumptions. Instead, ask broad questions that give kids space to talk over what they're feeling: "How did you feel about what we saw on the news? What did it make you think about?"

For young children, drawing, painting or acting out stories with toys can be helpful tools for expressing thoughts and feelings that aren't easy to put into words.

Do your best to meet your child where they are and acknowledge their feelings, fears or worries, even when they express things that make you uncomfortable. It's also important to assure kids that you're doing everything you can to keep them safe. This is especially true for very young children, who may mistakenly believe that whatever they're seeing or hearing about is an immediate danger to them and their loved ones.

## Don't avoid talking about it

"Racism is not new," says Dr. Kenya Hameed, PsyD, a clinical neuropsychologist at the Child Mind Institute. "These are ongoing problems. It's going to take all of us changing the mentality and the mindset to work towards a better future and fix them."

That change, she emphasizes, can't and won't happen without frank, open conversation — a conversation that for racialized individuals has never been optional. "It's really not a choice," says Dr. Hameed. For racialized individuals, racism is a daily reality.

## Be clear, direct and factual

Even with young children, use clear language. Don't say, "People are upset because some groups treat other groups unfairly." Instead, be specific: "This is about the way that white people treat Black people unfairly." Or: "This protest is happening because a white person hurt an Asian American person because of her race."

"If you expect children to read between the lines, they can miss the message," says Dr. Hameed.

It may seem obvious, but be sure to emphasize that racial violence is wrong. Help children understand by speaking to them in a developmentally appropriate way. Emphasize to your child that treating people unfairly is wrong, and that racialized individuals have been treated unfairly for a long time. It also helps to give very clear information about the specific situation you're discussing.

## Encourage questions — and don't worry if you can't answer them

Kids are likely to have lots of questions about racism and violence, and chances are they won't be easy ones. They might want to know how racism affects them or why white people treat people of other races unfairly. These aren't easy subjects and feeling uncomfortable during the conversation is normal — but it's not a reason to stop talking.

By tolerating discomfort you're modeling an important skill for your child. Be honest. You might say, "I find it really hard to talk about this. It feels scary. But it also makes me more hopeful about making change."

When you can't answer a child's question, that can be an opportunity to model curiosity and learn more together. It's also a chance to demonstrate that this isn't about being right or being perfect — it's about doing your best to understand a complex situation and fight injustice. Sometimes, that will mean rethinking your beliefs or owning up to things you've done wrong in the past. "It's cognitive flexibility. It's a strength," says Dr. Howard. "You don't have to be perfect. You're allowed to make some mistakes. It's just that you don't want to make mistakes stubbornly and willfully, without listening."

## Try to be calm, but don't hide your emotions

Children take their cues from parents, so [talking to them calmly](#) and staying factual helps them process information. It's helpful to pick a time when you're feeling centered and have had a chance to work through your own feelings.

At the same time, it's important that we don't hide our emotions from children, especially when the subject is so important. Let them know that you're sad or angry, says Dr. Hameed, and acknowledge that it's good to be upset by injustice, as long as it doesn't stop you from working to make it better. That way, you'll leave kids with a clear lesson about the family values you want to pass on to them.

If you find your emotions getting overwhelming, remember that you can step away from the conversation and [take some time for yourself](#). “It’s okay to take a break,” says Janine Domingues, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. “It’s okay to do some deep breathing, take care of yourself, whatever it is that helps you turn down the intensity of the emotion. Then you can return to the topic later.”

## **Rely on your support system**

Witnessing scenes of racist violence is deeply upsetting for many parents, but for racialized individuals, it can also be traumatic. Take time to check in with your own mental health. If you’re feeling exhausted or overwhelmed, reach out to your networks for support. Friends, family members, religious leaders and mental health professionals can all help you process your own emotions and plan conversations with children.

It can also help to bring in trusted allies to talk to your children themselves — having an adult perspective that doesn’t come from a parent can give them more space to sort through what they’re feeling and ask questions.

## **Keep the conversation open**

Like any important topic, racism and violence aren’t something you can have “the talk” about just once. For kids of any age and race, this is something that’s going to keep coming up, so emphasize that you’re there for them whenever they need to talk — and keep checking in proactively, too.

“You want to set the tone that curiosity is a good thing when it comes to talking about topics like this,” Dr. Domingues says. “And make sure kids know that there’s no wrong question; you just want them to feel open about asking it.”

## **Explore resources**

No matter what challenges come up as you talk with your kids, there are lots of great resources out there to help you continue these crucial conversations and take action as a family. \*adapted from Child Mind Institute, “Talking to Kids About Racism and Violence”, [childmind.org](http://childmind.org).