



A Family Guide to Talking About Race

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Introduction

This Family Guide serves to advise parents or caregivers on how to talk to their children about race and provides a menu of activities that parents or caregivers can do together with their child. The Guide focuses on young children, ages 3-10 years of age (Pre-Kindergarten – Grade 5). As a companion to the *RACE* Project general brochure, the Family Guide is designed to help parents or caregivers answer questions that may arise after visiting the *RACE* exhibit or while using the *RACE* website. The Guide may be used as a resource for parents and caregivers to discuss race and racism with young children.

What is the *RACE* Project?

The *RACE* Project is the first national collaborative effort to develop and promote a broad understanding of race and human variation for the public. The *RACE* Project presents an integrated view of race and human variation through biological, cultural, and historical perspectives. The *RACE* Project exhibit, website, and educational materials explain how human biological variation differs from race, when and why the idea of race was invented, and how race and racism affect everyday life. The *RACE* Project has **three primary messages**:

1. Race is a recent human invention.

Race is a concept that was superimposed on existing patterns of human biological and cultural variation to create and maintain power and privilege. Because race is culturally defined, how we think about and use race in the U.S. has, and continues to change over time.

2. Race is about culture, not biology.

Race is an inaccurate description or explanation of human biological variation. Race is the partitioning of people arbitrarily into groups using biological and cultural characteristics. Humans are actually more alike than they are different.

3. Race and racism are embedded in our institutions and everyday life

Race and racism are powerful ideas that shape how one sees and is seen. These ideas often affect many of the decisions we make, and our relationships with other people.

Why is it Important to Talk about Race with Our Child? What are the Outcomes?

The idea of race is a significant part of American culture. It affects many aspects of our lives: the places we live; the people we hang out with, date and marry; and the schools we attend. Because the idea of race is such a tangible part of American life, it is only natural that your child will have questions. Parents are encouraged to take the time to answer their child's questions and initiate open dialogues.

Children learn about the idea of race and to recognize physical differences at a very early age from observations and interactions with their parents, playmates and their families, teachers, and many others. Also, many young children adopt their parents' ideas and attitudes about race

and human difference. What children learn about the idea of race at home and from family members often affects their attitudes and ideas about race as adults.

Conversations about race will bring families closer together and foster more open communication between you and your child. Conversations about race also help your child better understand and appreciate the similarities and differences among people, and will positively shape the way your child looks at and treats other people. Conversations about race during early childhood also promote positive, lifelong relationships as children grow into adulthood, and foster better relationships among people in their communities, now and in the future.

There are many misconceptions about the idea of race and human biological variation. It is important for children to have good information early to promote positive lifelong experiences. Additionally, conversations about race at home provide an opportunity for parents to reflect on their own experiences with race and racism. Together, parents and children can make a positive difference in relationships among people in their communities, and the world.

When having a conversation about the idea of race at home, we suggest focusing on **three primary lessons**. These lessons are:

1. People are much more alike than different because we are all human.
2. The idea of race does not explain or describe human biological or cultural variation.
3. Grouping people into races is arbitrary and subjective, and is influenced by culture and human experience.

How Can I Best Approach the Topic of Race with my Child?

The idea of race is often a highly charged and sensitive topic in the adult world. This is not necessarily so among young children. Children are open and curious about the world and want to understand similarities and differences. Parents are encouraged to approach the topic of race openly and without boundaries. Prior to having discussions with your child, parents may want to acquaint themselves with the **current knowledge** about race and human variation. The *RACE* Project has produced the following **materials to assist** in this process: A **general brochure**, ***RACE* website**, ***RACE* exhibit**, and a **glossary of terms**.

In approaching the topic of race parents are also encouraged to look for “teachable moments” for opening a conversation about race with their child. “Teachable moments” are opportunities that present themselves in everyday life. These moments provide parents with an opening to discuss race, human variation, and racism. A useful resource for finding “teachable moments” is found in the article, “Teaching Tolerance” by Carolyn Hoyt from *Child Magazine*, December/January 2005. The following **steps for creating** “teachable moments” about race are modeled on her suggestions:

- Bring up the topic when appropriate. For example, if your child observes that an individual “looks different,” use this moment to discuss human biological variation, and to differentiate between race and human biological variation.

- Create situations where your child can meet people of diverse backgrounds, religions, and traditions. Meeting many new people will lead to questions and “teachable moments” and foster a better understanding of human cultural and biological variation.
- Talk to your child about your family history. Explain to your child where their grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents came from. If appropriate, talk about the relationship between ancestry and race. Explain that ancestry is an important factor in one’s physical appearance. If possible, differentiate between ancestry and “race.”
- Recognize situations where bias or discrimination has occurred. It is important to point out intolerance when it happens, so your child understands the situation. Talk about how bias or discrimination and intolerance are hurtful to everyone. When discrimination or bias occurs it is important to recognize both your child’s feelings and the potential feelings of all individuals involved in the situation. After recognizing a situation in which discrimination has occurred, discuss ways that the situation could have been handled better.

Guidelines for Productive Family Discussions about Race

Having a conversation about the idea of race with young children can be challenging. Parents may find the following guidelines useful, as methods to foster productive discussions at home.

1. Do not be afraid of sensitive topics.
There are many topics, like race, that adults think are too sensitive to discuss. Children perceive their discomfort. Use conversations with your child to teach him/her to feel positive about talking about race and to become more comfortable doing so yourself. Race does not have to be a taboo topic.
2. Create an environment that allows free expression.
As a parent it is important to create an environment where your child feels comfortable expressing his/her ideas and confusions. Parents, too, should be comfortable in acknowledging their confusion and limits in knowledge about race and human variation. Parents may want to emphasize that all questions are good questions.
3. Provide short and accurate answers to your child.
Although race is a complex topic, use your wisdom and experience to provide simple answers to your child’s questions. In cases where a parent is unsure of the answer to a question, take the opportunity to search for the answer with your child.

How to Deal Effectively with the Challenges that Accompany Conversations about Race

Although conversations about the idea of race are extremely useful, there are many potential challenges, especially with young children. Presented here are some possible challenges a parent may encounter, and ways to respond to them.

- Your child is not interested in talking about race.
If it is difficult to create “teachable moments,” then bringing up race can be difficult. It will be helpful to avoid putting your child on the spot. Rather, draw your child in with something he/she is already interested in. Use familiar subjects to contextualize an unfamiliar topic.
- A teacher has given incorrect information.
Although it is important to maintain the authority of your child’s teacher, use this opportunity to present conflicting information (i.e., watch a movie or read a book). Talk about how your presentation differs from what was said in school. Ask your child what he/she thinks about the difference. Allow your child to form his/her own opinion
- Misinformation from your child’s peers.
Although it is challenging to compete with the information children receive from their peers, children will generally defer to a parent for guidance and the “truth.” Try not to openly criticize your child’s peers, simply correct misinformation when it is heard or seen.

Family Guide Activities

Activities are productive methods to engage your child when trying to present new or complex ideas. The activities presented here are geared towards promoting the three primary messages of the *RACE* Project. We have developed activities that can be conducted with a parent and child, or with a parent and several children. These activities may be used as an alternative to a conversation about race, or can be used to support topics that parents have already discussed with their child.

Stories and poems

Reading a story or poem with your child provides a useful and accessible way to talk about race and human variation. Presented here are several poems and stories a parent can read with his/her child, discussion topics, and activities that will support the primary messages of the *RACE* Project. The stories and poems presented are available in your public library.

Poem: “No Difference” by Shel Silverstein from *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein, published by HarperCollins, 1974.

This is a short poem that talks about the things people have in common. In this piece Silverstein uses “turning off the lights” as a metaphor for finding the many similarities among people. For this activity a parent can read the poem to a child, or have the child read the poem

aloud. After reading the poem have a discussion about why the poem is significant and what we can learn from its message.

- Age group: pre-kindergarten - grade 5
- Objective/Goal: To teach your child to recognize similarities in people despite the physical differences we have been taught to discern.
- Outcome: Your child will become more aware of the similarities among all people.
- Materials: A copy of “No Difference” and quiet time for discussion
- Possible discussion topics
 - What characteristics make a person seem different? When the lights are “on” are we all the same size? Do we all look the same?
 - What characteristics make all people similar?
 - What would it be like if everyone looked, acted, and dressed the same way?
 - How important are similarities and differences among people?

Story: *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes, published by HarperCollins, 1991.

Chrysanthemum is a story about a little mouse who thinks her name is marvelous, until she starts school. On her first day of school the children tease her because her name is the longest name in the class. However, after some kind and insightful words from a music teacher the other children in *Chrysanthemum*'s class realize that having a name like *Chrysanthemum* is quite special and unique.

For this story we have developed discussion questions and an activity. The story can either be read aloud by the child or the parent. After reading the story take time for discussion and questions, or proceed to the second activity. Use this story as a springboard for a discussion about individual differences and the celebration of our unique qualities.

- Objective/ Goal: To recognize that each of us is unique. To discuss what to do when we recognize differences among individuals. To discuss and celebrate individuality and ancestry.
- Outcome: Your child learns that individual differences among people are positive and to be appreciated and celebrated, not criticized. Your child is given the opportunity to celebrate their individuality and ancestry.
- Activity: **Story time and Discussion**
 - Age Group: Kindergarten – grade 3

- Materials: A copy of *Chrysanthemum* and quiet time for discussion
- Possible discussion questions
 - Why were the other children teasing Chrysanthemum?
 - Has anything like this ever happened to you or someone you know?
 - What did Mrs. Twinkle do to help stop the teasing? What can you do if someone is teased?
 - What makes Chrysanthemum unique?
 - What makes you unique?
- Activity: **What is in a Name?**
 - Age group: grade 2 – grade 5
 - Materials: A copy of *Chrysanthemum*, paper, crayons, and markers

After reading the story talk about why our names are so important. Tell your child that names are often passed down through generations within a family. Discuss why and how our names help define our individuality and family history. After discussing why our names are important to our families and to our identity, ask your child to write an acrostic poem using his/her name. Instruct your child to use words that describe his/her personality in the poem. Use this time for a conversation about what makes your child unique.

After your child has completed the poem, begin a discussion about your family name. Talk about ancestry and where your family name originated. If you can, talk about other families' last names. Use this time to discuss ancestry and where different people come from.

Group activities

The following group activities can be undertaken by a parent and child or with a parent, child and their friends. These activities are geared toward promoting the three primary goals of the *RACE* Project. Present here are four activities that will further support the material discussed in the *RACE* Project exhibit and website, or can stand on their own as family activities that will introduce your child to the complexities that surround the topic of race.

Activity: **Turn - off the Lights**

- Age group: All ages
- Outcome: To make your child aware of human similarity.

- Materials: An open safe space, paper, markers, and cloth to use as blindfolds

This activity may work best with a group of friends, but can be conducted with a parent and a child. Spend a few minutes talking with the children. Ask them how they tell one person apart from another. As the children respond, record their answers. Next, tell the children you are going to blindfold everyone. While they are blindfolded instruct the children to differentiate between their friends. Instruct the children not to speak while they are blindfolded, and to only touch their friend's faces. After several minutes in the dark, remove the blindfolds. Ask the children if it was difficult to tell one person apart from another. Lead the children in a discussion about human similarity and record their responses. When we cannot use visual appearance are we more similar than we are different? Can race be identified in the dark? What do we all have in common?

Activity: **What Makes a Good Friend?**

- Age group: Kindergarten – grade 3
- Outcome: Your child will learn to discern the difference between visual appearance and personality, or other important characteristics of a good friend. Your child will also learn to recognize that we know a good friend by the way he/she treat others, not by his/her appearance.
- Materials: A round table with chairs, paper, and colored markers

This activity can easily be done with a parent and a child, or can be adapted for a group of friends. Ask your child what makes a good friend. For example, ask him/her how he/she recognizes someone who is nice, or someone who is friendly. As he/she brainstorms, record his/her responses. When enough responses have been recorded re-read the responses to your child. Then, ask him/her if the qualities we look for in good friends are qualities that can be determined from someone's appearance. From his/her responses your child should realize that knowing a good person means knowing more about them than their appearance.

Activity: **How Many Colors?**

- Age Groups: Kindergarten – grade 2
- Outcome: This activity should teach your child that it is sometimes very difficult to put things and people into categories.
- Materials: A round table and chairs. A box of eight crayons, a box of 16 crayons, a box of 24 crayons, and a box of 64 crayons

This activity will work well as a parent/child game, but can also be adapted for a group of children. If a parent chooses to play this game with several children, additional boxes of crayons may need to be purchased.

First present your child with the box of eight crayons. Ask your child to identify and separate each color. Then, present your child with the crayons from the box of 16 crayons. Ask your child to group the new crayons with the colors from the original box. Then, present your child the box of 24 crayons, and ask your child to continue grouping the crayons based on the eight colors originally identified. Finally, present your child the box of 64 crayons, and ask your child to group the new crayons with the eight colors.

Grouping the crayons into eight groups may become more difficult as the level of variation increases. You and your child may argue over which group some colors belong to.

After all the crayons have been assigned to a group, talk about the sorting difficulties that occurred when a lot of variation was present. Next, ask your child if they think it is easy to sort people. Ask your child if they might encounter the same problem when sorting people, as he/she encountered when sorting the crayons. Your child will realize that sorting people is just as difficult as trying to put a variety of colors into a few categories.

Activity: **Understanding Discrimination**

- Age Group: grade 3 –grade 5
- Outcome: This activity will create a situation for your child to personally understand discrimination/bias, and how hurtful these actions can be.
- Material: A round table with chairs

This activity will work best with an older child or group of children. For this activity it is important to stress that the situation of discrimination that will be described is not real. This activity is designed for you child to *imagine* what it feels like to experience discrimination.

Ask your child to imagine a situation where people are treated with differential preference based on their eye color. For example, explain that children with brown eyes are allowed thirty minutes of recess, while children with blue eyes are only given twenty minutes of recess. Explain that brown-eyed children are given treats for an afternoon snack, while the blue-eyed children are not allowed to have an afternoon snack.

After a situation with a clear bias toward brown-eyed children has been described, ask your child how he/she might feel in this situation, given his/her eye color. Then ask your child if they can imagine how someone with an eye color different from his/her own might feel.

After you have talked about eye color discrimination talk about how this scenario is similar to racial discrimination. Talk about the history of discrimination, and the types of discrimination that still exist. Additionally, talk about what your child can do when they experience discrimination, or if they witness discrimination. Emphasize that children and families can intervene in these situations and make a difference in their communities.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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Additional information on race and human variation as well as other resources are available on the *RACE* Project website at www.understandingRACE.org.