



# Talking About Racism

Systemic racism is deeply imbedded in our society. It is something we've been taught to look away from, stay quiet about, to accept. Still, change is possible, and youth are leading the charge. And their parents and caregivers have a big role to play.

Combatting racism means confronting it head-on. Not only in our society, but in our communities, our families, our relationships — and in ourselves. Conversations like these take patience, compassion, and openness. Here are some tips to help parents and caregivers initiate and navigate discussions about race and racism, and support teens and young adults as they work to create a better, more equitable world.

## **Be present, thoughtful, and ready to meet teens or young adults where they are.**

Be prepared to broach hard topics and don't shy away from exploring difficult or upsetting feelings.

## **Know that colorblindness is not a virtue.**

Don't gloss over the fact that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals are often treated unfairly purely because they are not white. Likewise, remember that diversity helps us see things differently.

## **Educate yourself.**

Make a point of consuming media by BIPOC authors, artists, and thought leaders. Be intentional about reading, watching, and sharing media that helps you expand your horizons and encourages new and diverse perspectives.

## **Acknowledge that everyone has biases.**

Confronting and working to change your own biases and encouraging teens and young adults to do the same is an essential part of combatting racism.

## **Check your privilege.**

Privileges (or social power) are the unearned, often unacknowledged rights and advantages accessible only to members of a dominant group. For example, if a society values whiteness and wealth, then having light skin and growing up with wealth will create privilege. Understanding the advantages your privilege grants you — and how lack of privilege disadvantages others — will help you and your teen or young adult become stronger, more helpful allies.

## **Rely on your support system.**

This is especially important for BIPOC parents or caregivers, for whom talking about race and racism can be exhausting and traumatic. Prioritize your own mental health, and lean on trusted friends, family, or professionals for support when you need it.

## **Acknowledge discomfort but also keep going.**

Teens and young adults benefit from seeing parents persevere through difficulty and discomfort. Talking about racism is often hard and upsetting, but by sticking with it you'll be setting an important example. You can say: "I find it really hard to talk about this. But it also makes me more hopeful about making change."

## **Listen to your young adult.**

Teens and young adults are often very aware of issues around race and social justice — sometimes even more so than parents and caregivers. Whenever possible, let your teen take the lead and be curious: What are their thoughts? What are they seeing, hearing, and learning from friends, at school and online? You can start conversations with thoughtful questions, then listen. For example: "I saw that a lot of the protests are being led by kids the same age as you. What do you think of that?" Or: "I'm looking to learn more about structural racism, have you read anything interesting lately?"

## Model being an ally.

Let's be real, teens don't always want to talk, but they are very aware of how parents act. It's essential for white parents in particular to show that racism, overt or subtle, will not be tolerated. Calling out racism when you see it is a great way to model anti-racist behavior. For example, pushing back when someone tells a racist joke: "Jokes like that aren't funny, they're gross and harmful." Acknowledging examples of systemic racism: "Every Black character in this TV show is a sidekick." Or taking action: "I'm writing to our council person."

## If a child has experienced discrimination or racism, help them process it.

Racism and discrimination are facts of life for BIPOC adults and children. When kids encounter racism, it may take time for them to process the experience and their feelings. Make a point of checking in regularly and let them know you're there if they want to talk. "I just wanted to check in on how you're feeling after what that racist guy said at the march today. I'm here whenever you need to talk." Or, "I noticed your English teacher has only assigned books by white authors. How are you feeling about that?"

## Show how you've changed.

One of the most valuable skills to model is a willingness to change your mind, even when doing so is uncomfortable or upsetting. For example: "I used to stay quiet when I heard people say racist things because I was uncomfortable speaking up, but I'm working to change that."

## Keep the conversation open.

Confronting racism takes much more than one discussion. Weave conversations about race and racism into your daily life and make talking to teens and young adults about racism an ongoing practice.

### Here are some resources that can help you continue the conversation:

- ✓ Anti-racism resources for parents and teachers: <https://www.embracerace.org>
- ✓ Talking About Race: From the National Museum of African American History and Culture <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/audiences/parent-caregiver>
- ✓ Colorlines: The Dos and Don'ts of Talking to Kids of Color About White Supremacy <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/dos-and-donts-talking-kids-color-about-white-supremacy>
- ✓ Resources for Race, Equity, Anti-Racism and Inclusion: <https://diversebooks.org/resources-for-race-equity-and-inclusion>



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*Throughout the past several months, young adults have witnessed many acts of racism throughout the country such as police brutality. I can say from personal experience that my peers and I have used this period as a time of reflection; we have reflected on our implicit biases, actions within our community, and we have taken accountability.*

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