

Resist Racism as a Family

The national outrage over racial injustice could be a true turning point in our country's history. To help children create a better world one day, white parents need to talk about race. Here, experts share some pointers.



● KNOW THAT BRINGING UP RACE ISN'T RACIST.

"Although Black parents often speak with their kids about discrimination, white parents who want their kids to treat others with fairness often think they need to be color-blind and avoid talking about race," says Melanie Killen, Ph.D., professor of human development and quantitative methodology at the University of Maryland, College Park. However, being silent sends the message to kids that the topic is taboo and implies inequality is okay. Kids are pretty poor at predicting their parents' racial attitudes, and proactively discussing race is a crucial part of the solution even if it feels awkward.

● **START EARLY.** Studies have shown that kids pick up on racial differences from a very young age. "Between the ages of 2 and 5 is a critical time when kids are absorbing information

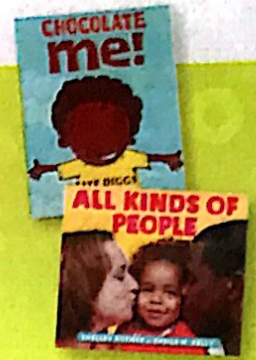
about the world," says Brandi K. Freeman, M.D., a pediatrician at Children's Hospital Colorado and director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Department of Pediatrics. Preschoolers are curious about skin color, and we should calmly respond to them in an age-appropriate way. If you're in public and your child blurts out, "Why is his skin so dark?" just respond, "Yes, he has brown skin. We all have different skin colors and hair colors and eye colors, but on the inside, our feelings, hopes, and fears are all the same." Even at this age, you can talk about race and explain that this word has been used to describe and separate people from each other for a long time, but the truth is there's only one race and we're all members—the human race.

● **CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION.** By the time the kids are school-age, ask them questions as if you

were a reporter so you can find out what they know and think, and why, says Dr. Killen. Kids make a lot of assumptions, and you can help unpack them. You might ask, "What would you say if a kid at school didn't want to be friends with a girl because of her skin color?" Even if your child says something that reflects implicit bias ("Maybe she thinks they won't have anything in common"), don't rush to admonish. Simply ask, "Why do you feel that way?"

● **BROADEN YOUR SOCIAL CIRCLES.** Kids who have friends from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are much less likely to be biased, studies show. "Friendships are extremely important because they counteract stereotypes and help children learn to appreciate different cultures," says Dr. Freeman. You should also make an effort to reach out to parents across the racial spectrum. "If white kids don't see their parents interacting with Black friends, they may assume it's because their parents don't like them," says Brigitte Vittrup, Ph.D., professor of human development, family studies, and counseling at Texas Women's University, in Denton.

● **PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR.** Biases don't develop because we intentionally want to be prejudiced—they develop because of the messages we've received throughout life. "Children notice if their parents show subtle signs of fear or discomfort around people of color," says developmental psychologist Christia Spears Brown, Ph.D., director of the Center for Equality and Social Justice at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington. If you describe predominantly Black neighborhoods as unsafe or



BUILD BRIDGES WITH BOOKS

It's important for kids to be able to see themselves reflected in the pages of books they read, and books that highlight friends who are from different racial backgrounds can create a positive change. In fact, studies have shown that white kids ages 6 to 12 who read stories in which a white child has a best friend who is Black are less biased. Especially for kids who live in mostly white communities, books that show diversity help kids recognize that shared interests—not shared race—are the core feature of friendship, says Dr. Melanie Killen.



Find Diverse Stories

Simply hover your phone over the smart code for a list of children's books to help spark conversation.

predominantly Black schools as bad, you're setting a tone your kids will pick up on.

● **BE WILLING TO MAKE MISTAKES.** Talking about race is not a one-time conversation, and if we wait until children ask questions, the conversations may never happen, says Dr. Vittrup. You won't always get it right—and that's okay. The more discussions you have, the more comfortable you'll be—and if you can get used to talking to your kids about race, they'll be able to continue the dialogue when they grow up.

—Diane Debrovner and Barbara Brandon-Croft