By: Glenna Wilson

In today’s world, the news is full of stories about racial tension, discrimination, and violence. It is very possible that even though your young child may not watch the news, they will hear bits and pieces of stories, or hear adults’ conversations, often heated, about the issues. Many families think that their children aren’t aware of this.

The foundation of ACT is based on teaching our children at the earliest ages to be non-violent. This is the time when our children are ripest for learning and many of their foundations for life are established. We need to remember this is also an appropriate time to deal with issues of racial prejudice and mutual respect.

When we approach this issue with our children from a “colorblind” perspective, we are ignoring the truth of the matter. Racial identity is a social distinction with no scientific basis. It allows the dominant group to determine the norms of behavior. Caucasian families have the privilege of ignoring color. Families of color are put in a position of raising their children to be hyperaware, and to teach them how to fit into the dominant culture. Many must also teach their children how to stay safe and protected in what is an unsafe world. As parents we need to be more aware of the unconscious messages we are sending our children, recognize that not talking about it does not help or solve the problem.

It is important that we not avoid the conversations with our children. Our children do notice colors of skin. One example is when a child asks, “Why is that girl brown?”

A good general answer for this age group is simply: “Everyone’s skin is different”. Whatever the context, the key is to embrace diversity with your tone and words (How to talk to your child about race). This is a simple, yet appropriate response to a child who is not colorblind. Often in these situations parents over-react to a child’s innocent description. This is a time to practice RESPONDING not Reacting, a great ACT principle. These moments often happen when we are least prepared for them and we react. Take a deep breath, and gently correct the child. When we overreact we communicate that it isn’t safe to ask questions or talk about these matters. The mother mentioned above responded in a non-threatening way.

Throughout this newsletter you will find tips on how to talk with your children and ways to understand more about the importance of having the tough conversations with our children on many topics, but especially Race.
Many people struggle with and are extremely uncomfortable discussing the topic of race. This is true for parents particularly white parents. Brown, Tanner-Smith, Lesane-Brown, & Ezell (2007), found that non-white parents were about three times more likely to discuss children’s ethnic/racial heritage than white parents. This demonstrates that “families with the most cultural and economic capital in U.S. society (ie, Whites) were least likely to socialize their children regarding ethnicity and race” (Brown et. al, 2007 p. 20).

Color blindness has long been an approach that most, primarily white parents, have used in an attempt to promote diversity by minimizing racial differences with the hope that it will lead to equality and tolerance. The belief is that children are “socially color blind” but what you will see in the next few articles is that this is far from the truth and in fact they are aware of race at a very early age. “According to the researchers from Northwestern, Stanford and Tufts, taking a colorblind approach with young children — such as instructing them to “focus on what makes us similar” rather than dealing constructively with difference and challenging bias directly — actually reduces the likelihood that those young people will recognize discriminatory behavior when it occurs, or seek to do something about it” (Wise, 2010). The problem is that this notion of ignoring race and being “colorblind” has not and will not stop racism in America. Want more motivation? Check out 5 more reasons below.

1. If you don’t someone else will

To simply ignore race and teach our children to be “color blind” will not erase racism. What we have to remember is that we are not our children’s only teacher. When we refuse or ignore the discussion about race with our children someone can always step in (friends, neighbors, family members, etc.). And who knows what they are teaching your kids about race?

2. Talking to kids about race helps them see beyond race

Rebecca Bigler, director of The University of Texas at Austin’s Gender and Racial Attitudes Lab performed an experiment where half of a preschool class wore red shirts and the other blue shirts. After 3 weeks, with no mention of shirts or separation of children based on these shirts, kids showed favoritism for kids wearing the same color shirt.

What does this mean? In terms of race, kids with no information about race will be more likely to use the visual cue of skin tone to separate people into “us” and “them” groups. Where as children that have open, honest, specific discussions about race can begin to see beyond outward differences and look deeper for common interests, beliefs, attitudes, values, etc.

3. Not talking about race can lead to implicit racism

Every time we keep silent after hearing a racist remark or not discussing the problem with stereotyping we are not helping to stop the spread of those ideas. Also, there is a chance that these harmful stereotypes will influence children’s beliefs about individuals of different races/ethnicities.

4. Racial ignorance erases racial history and denies lived experience

“When we are “color-blind,” we also tend to discount or dismiss other people’s experiences of race, racism, and bigotry” (Ervin, 2014).

5. Educating our children helps them fight racism and create change

Not addressing the topic of race and promoting “colorblindness” causes children to assume that we all come from the same beginning, have the same experiences, and are all treated the same. “By educating our children about race, we help them to be more compassionate toward people who are living under the burden of America’s racial systems. We help them to see the areas where they are privileged – and thus where they can help to push the lever toward true equality” (Ervin, 2014).


A popular belief about children’s understanding of race is that young children are “colorblind” or really don’t notice race. This can be far from the truth. In fact, children as young as six months have been found to categorize people by race and gender. As sited in Winkler 2009, a study performed by Katz and Koek (1997) found that infants age 6 months looked much longer at an unfamiliar face of a different race than they did at an unfamiliar face of their same race. Multiple studies have showed that three to five year olds are able to categorize people by race while also formulating bias based on race (Winkler, 2009 p. 1). This is why it is important to move away from the notion that discussing race with children as young as preschool will “put thoughts into their heads” or that children “don’t know what they are saying” when it comes to race. The list below was created to give you a general idea of development of racial identity and attitudes in an attempt to help you better understand how to address race with your children in age appropriate ways.

**Children less than 2 years**

- Gradually becoming aware of self as a separate being.
- Beginning to absorb a cultural identity through daily care giving interactions, household smell, sounds, etc.
- Beginning to babble a range of sounds and imitating intonation and sounds of the home language
- Beginning to notice and respond to skin color cues (around 6 months old).
- Learning to interact with others within the cultural rule system of their families.
- Curious about physical characteristics of self and others (skin color, hair texture, gender)
- Sometimes showing discomfort around unfamiliar people, including individuals with different skin color. May not have language to express or ask about aspects of difference that intrigue them.

**3 to 6 years of age**

- Identify and match people according to “racial” physical characteristics and groups, but often confused about complexities of group categories (e.g., “How can two children with dark brown skin be in different groups, e.g., African American and Mexican American).”
- Absorb societal stereotypes from people and from media about other groups and may show discomfort or fear. May tease or refuse to play with others because of skin color, language differences, and physical disabilities.
- Have a strong sense of empathy and interest in fairness and can begin to develop critical thinking about hurtful images, comments and behaviors.
- Interested in how people get skin color and can understand simple scientific explanations about skin color differences.
- Show evidence of societal messages affecting how they feel about their self and/or group identity.
- May select to play only with children close to their gender and racial/cultural identities, but may also reject members of their own racial/cultural group (e.g. darker skinned African American children).
- May use prejudicial insults and name-calling to show anger or aggression, knowing that these terms hurt.
- Enjoy exploring the similarities and differences in the home cultures of their peers/classmates and can identify stereotypes.


Establishing group identities and membership.
- Often form groups to act within own cultural rules and to reinforce sense of group identity.
- Children of color aware of racism against own racial/cultural group.
- See rise in name-calling based on racial, gender, class, disability and sexual orientation identities.
- Show influence of dominant culture myths about class (being poor is the individual's choice/fault; having money is a sign of superior abilities).
- Can identify and critically think about interpersonal dynamics of racism, sexism and classism, and how to interrupt them.
- Understand nature and harm of stereotyping but have a greater capacity for empathy about the hurt name calling can cause.

Want to learn more in-depth information about their cultural group and its true history.
- Aware of differences in perspective between dominant culture and their own group's culture.
- Continue to show impact of learned misinformation, stereotyping and dislike of other racial/cultural groups.
  However, have the cognitive ability to examine these more objectively with new information and can compare & contrast two different perspectives in an issue.
- Conscious of and often disturbed by contradictions between what significant adults (e.g., family, teachers, religious figures) say and do about racial issues.
- Interested in learning about current and past people who engaged in a range of anti-racist and other social justice activities from all racial/cultural groups.
- Can engage in anti-racist activities in their community related to their understanding and interests.

Child development refers to the biological, psychomotor and emotional changes that occur in children between birth and the end of adolescence. Development is a predictable continuous process that is unique to every child. Key areas of child development include cognitive (intellectual), gross motor (catching a ball), fine motor (writing), language, and social emotional. Of all the areas of child development, social emotional learning takes a lot of effort on the part of the parents mainly due to the fact that it is parents who model and teach children how to interact with the world around them. Social emotional competence is the “ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (Elias et al, 1997).

There are five competency groups associated with social emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Social awareness, which plays a large role in building tolerance and respect, is the “ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior” (CASEL, 2015). This includes things such as accepting individual differences and having compassion for others. In general, social awareness affects children's responses to people and social situations. And how better to contribute to healthy social development and social awareness? A start, talking to our children about race. Below are some tips provided by a wealth of great resources which are listed at the bottom of the page. Hopefully these tips can assist you in striking up thoughtful age appropriate conversations about race.

1. Get comfortable talking about race by talking to other adults. Recognize that you may consciously or unconsciously hold negative feelings or biases about others. Reach out to experts or other parents for support and/or practice.

2. Start young. "What holding off the conversation does is simply (a) teach children that we do not talk about race (although they can clearly see through media, curriculum, and the world around them that it seems to matter), and (b) leave children to come to their own conclusions about why the racialized patterns they see in the world exist" (Sager, 2014).

3. Take advantage of teachable moments. Build off what you see. Point out and address stereotypes, acts of prejudice depicted on TV, movies, and other media. This helps children to recognize unacceptable behavior or attitudes.

4. Don’t treat racism as something from the past. When talking about racism with children, adults tend to focus on past events and heroic figures from the past. Although important, try to teach history as well as current, especially those occurring in your own community.

5. Accept that prejudiced comments may happen—and that doesn't mean your child is racist. If your kid makes a questionable remark, don’t freak out. Ask questions. ‘What made you say....?’ Gently dispute the stereotype or prejudiced attitudes and give an example to challenge the stereotype.

6. Avoid colorblindness. It may seem like a positive thing to teach kids to ignore race, but it can increase racial prejudice and make it harder for kids to recognize racial inequalities.

7. Don’t stop your kids from talking about race. Use the child’s comments to open the door and start the conversation. Explain to them why what they said was inappropriate or not.

8. Get kids involved. Take kids to meet someone in your area who is working for social justice or get the child thinking about things they can do to make their town or school a fairer place for all!

Tips Resources  (Note: Majority of the tips came from Jeanne Sager’s article)


Explore the resources and books below to help start the conversation about race. Your local library can be a great place to find these wonderful titles.
ACT Raising Safe Kids Program

1 Smithfield St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
Phone: 412-350-2770
E-mail: safestart@alleghenycounty.us

Office of Community Services
Safe Start Program

Editor: Heather Arenth
Early Childhood Behavioral Health Specialist
Safe Start Program

ACT

ACT Raising Safe Kids Programs, is an anti-violence program that educates communities and families on how to raise children without violence. The focus is to help parents learn ways to create safe, healthy environments that protect children and youth from violence.

The Allegheny County Safe Start Program

Safe Start is an outreach program which supports and assists families to provide safe, nurturing care for children. Through the use of a family and neighborhood based approach, Safe Start seeks to reduce exposure to and the negative impact of violence by identifying and supporting parents and young children within communities affected by violence.

Find more about Safe Start on the web at:
http://alleghenycountypa.gov/dhs/safestart.aspx

Find more about ACT on the web at:
http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/