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OPINION | FAMILY

# How to Talk About Race with Your Kids

Children naturally notice differences—and that is a good thing.

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My toddler is incredibly aware of the fact that his mommy is brown. He is really into colors right now, and we're constantly talking about them. I ask him questions like, "What color is that ball?" and "What are the colors of your blocks?" and he happily shouts out, "Yellow! Blue! Red!" But when it comes to something that is brown, like our weekly garbage truck or a teddy bear, my son doesn't just say the color. He identifies it while also pointing to my skin.

The first time my son did that I was both delighted and shocked. I replied to him, "Yes, you're right. Mommy is brown." I am an East Indian woman, and while I'm proud of my heritage, it's not something that is always at the forefront of my mind. Yet here was my son, reminding me of my ethnicity and appearance, and I realized that these were issues I needed to address with him more directly.

I have a profound opportunity to teach my son the deeper meaning behind the colors he loves. We live in a multiethnic world, and it is both my privilege and my duty to help my son understand and navigate it.

## Foster healthy awareness of racial differences

The first thing I started to do is intentionally move away from notions of "colorblindness." Cultivating colorblindness in our children is not only unhelpful, but it is even detrimental. Early childhood educator Madeleine Rogin talks about this in her PBS article, "[How to Teach Kids About Race](#)," stating:

Many white parents avoid talking about race ... thinking that a colorblind child is a more inclusive child. Yet, young children notice difference all the time. At a young age, they are busy sorting and categorizing their environment by a single attribute, or putting "like" with "like." They often point out differences

amongst each other. When they are silenced or pick up on the idea that pointing out differences is not okay, they begin to think there must be something wrong or bad about these differences.

Being “colorblind”—not acknowledging racial or cultural differences—is not what we see reflected in Scripture. God created peoples of all tribes, tongues, and nations, and the Bible celebrates and recognizes this diversity (see Rev. 5:9; 7:9). The apostle Paul recognized this when he said in 1 Corinthians 9:20–21, “To the Jews I became like a Jew. ... To those not having the law I became as one not having the law.” His awareness of ethnicity propelled his mission. He didn’t ignore peoples’ skin color or traditions. Instead, Paul embraced those differences, talked about them, and even adjusted his behavior accordingly as an expression of love.

As parents, we can teach this same awareness to our children. Rather than being colorblind, we can raise our children to be “color-cognizant”—and this requires parental intentionality. The books I check out from the library, the toys I buy (such as *luchadores* with olive complexions as opposed to superheroes with peach skin), and the movies we watch all have a direct impact on my son’s view of the world. We have books in his bedroom that discuss skin color. Books like *The Skin You Live In* by Michael Tyler (great for toddlers), *All the Colors of the Earth* by Sheila Hamanaka (kindergarten appropriate), and *The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz (suitable for elementary age) have not only provided exposure to issues of ethnicity, but have also been the catalyst for some important (albeit simplistic) conversations on issues of sameness and difference. For example, when my young son points to a picture of an African American boy and says “brown,” I respond, “Yes. You are light brown and this boy is dark brown, and you both like dump trucks.” When we talk about skin color, I find it helpful to use a wide spectrum of color; for example, “peach” instead of only “white,” or “tan” and “olive” instead of only “brown,” and so on. This is a simple yet powerful way to respectfully incorporate diversity into our vocabulary.

As children grow beyond the toddler years, it’s also important to teach them that we don’t point to people and immediately say something about their appearance or characteristics, even though we may naturally notice these traits. We also generally refer to people by their names, not what they look like. If older children are interested in talking about skin color, it should be done in a way that values and esteems a person (for example, linking ethnic distinctions to discussions of culture, traditions, and values).

## Develop appreciation for the other

It’s not enough to just increase a child’s awareness of racial differences. The way we talk about others also plays a huge role in either reinforcing power structures or breaking them down—in rejecting “the other” or in planting the seeds for our children to view others the way God views them.

This is where a child’s understanding of the *imago Dei* plays an important role. Genesis 1:26–27 tells us that God made all of humanity in his image and, as such, every person has equal value and worth. This is an important theological truth that I dearly want my son to know. Diverse ethnicities are God’s doing; he made and delights in all the peoples of the earth, and so should we.

To this end, my husband and I have structured our family life to engage with and enjoy other cultures and people groups. This takes on a variety of forms, from eating meals with our Malaysian and Columbian neighbors to attending a diverse range of cultural events. Through these experiences, we teach our son to enjoy others simply for who they are.

Sachi Feris, co-founder of [Raising Race Conscious Children](#), talks about how important this type of cultural exposure is for children. In a *Quartz* article, writer Lila MacLellan summarizes Feris's [view](#) that “exposing children to other races in books and at cultural events is a common—and smart—piece of advice” but Feris believes parents should go further “by drawing attention to that intentional effort. Don’t pretend it’s a coincidence that we’re going to an unfamiliar cultural event in a distant neighborhood today. If the aim is exposure to and celebration of a different race or culture, make that the point. Then talk about it.” For our family, this goes beyond just talking about how delicious Persian food is or how much we like tacos. We marvel at these image-bearers with different palettes, and we thank God for our ability to see more of him through these peoples.

## Have age-appropriate conversations about racism

I have not had specific conversations about racism with my two-year old son yet, but I’m preparing for it. We are a multiethnic family—I am Indian, my husband is Latino, and our son is a blend of both these cultures. I wonder, *Will he associate more with the majority culture or his ethnic roots when he gets older? What will I do if he ever makes racist comments? What if he’s the target of racial slurs?* I don’t have all the answers, but I know where I can start: the Bible.

There are many stories in the Bible that deal with racism. Moses, a Jew, caused quite a bit of controversy with his interracial marriage to a black Cushite (African) woman in Numbers 12. His two siblings were angry and, significantly, God’s anger “burned against them” (v. 9) and he punished them. There are also numerous clashes in the New Testament between Jews and Gentiles (consider the Jewish bitterness against Samaritans in John 4; Peter’s embarrassment about eating with Gentiles in Gal. 2:11–14). I hope to sit down and read these stories with my son someday, because I believe they will provide an important foundation for talking about the root problem of racism, namely, that humans are sinners.

Many parents, particularly those who are ethnic minorities, sit down with their children at some point and have “the talk” about racism. They want their kids to recognize the challenges of their future and be prepared to handle them. For white parents, this may be a foreign idea, but recent events like the [white nationalist protests](#) in Charlottesville, Virginia, are explicit reminders that white supremacy, racism, and racially unjust systems still exist in our country. I believe that *all* parents should have this sort of “talk” with their children, and for Christians, we should start with the basic truth about sin. We are all sinners, and in our sin, we say and do things to make us feel better and to make other people feel inferior. One way we do this is by assigning merit to a particular appearance, body type, or skin color, and when enough people do this, racism grows from an individual level to a societal level. We need to teach our kids about the ugly sin of racism and our need to cling to Christ for an ultimate and beautiful redemption from this sin—as both victims and perpetrators of it. As our children cling to Christ, we can be confident that God will conform them more and more into his image.

In “[Many Ethnicities, One Race](#),” Thabiti Anyabwile discusses how Christians should strive for racial equality in Christ. Anyabwile states that “by God’s grace, we are *one* nation, *one* new and redeemed humanity in Christ.” Whether we or our children are the victims of racism or have ever taken part in perpetrating it, we can learn from the example of Christ and strive for forgiveness, reconciliation, and unity. That, I think, is the long road ahead. It is the way we should live our life in whatever we say, do, and teach.

These are complex matters to be sure, and will certainly get even more complex as my son gets older—but they are of utmost importance. Addressing the issues of racial difference and appreciation of the other and naming the sin of racism

with our children from a young age are crucial parenting choices for any Christian seeking to raise up a child who understands the *imago Dei*, God's heart for the nations, and the promised redemption and unification of all races in Christ.

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