The Science Of How to Talk to Kids About Race

A Typewritten Look at the Evidence

(My Letraset sheet ran out of "o"s.)

** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** **
** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** **

Careful surveys find that most White parents avoid talking about race with their kids. Even when given the opportunity, only 6% of parents made comments about race, ethnicity, or diversity with their preschoolers.

* * *

But what if they did?

A few years ago, social psychologists facilitated conversations between 84 parents and their kids. They played brief cartoon scenarios of subtle and blatant racial prejudice and invited them to talk about what they saw.

* * *

These conversations reshaped prejudice.

Both kids *and* their parents were less quick to associate "White" with "good" and "Black" with "bad" following their discussions.

* * *

BUT! The type of conversation mattered.

Sometimes, kids and parents made colorblind comments, denying the role of race or directing attention away from it. This approach made the conversations less beneficial for reducing prejudice.

* * *

Another approach was the clear winner: color-conscious messaging. This included calling out prejudice for what it was and connecting what happened in the videos to societal racism.

** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** **
** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** ** **

These benefits were strongest when discussing instances of subtle racism: videos where bias may have ocurred but wasn't obvious. Like a White child being uncomfortable around a Black child. These discussions may be most beneficial because they help kids navigate common situations that they don't otherwise notice as wrong.

* * *

So, these findings suggest that parents can help their kids (and themselves) have more tolerant views by explicitly acknowledging racism, especially in its more subtle forms, and not just redirecting attention away from race or just emphasizing that it doesn't matter.

* * *

For more on this, listen to my conversation with Dr. Sylvia Perry on Opinion Science wherever you get your podcasts!

Perry, S., et al. (2024). White parents' racial socialization during a guided discussion predicts declines in White childrens' pro-White biases. Developmental Psychology, 60(4),624-636.

Andy Luttrell
OpinionSciencePodcast.com