

You Can Do It! Talking to Young Children About Race

By [Nicol Russell, Ed.D.](#)



As a researcher and early childhood education (ECE) professional, I often think about the ways big and important issues show up in the lives of young children (ages newborn to eight years old). When I was a classroom teacher, one issue I thought about a lot was race and the ways in which race privileged some children and families, while it negatively impacted other children and families. I thought about race as a single issue, as if race alone was problematic. But now that I'm a more experienced, more knowledgeable (because of the experience) ECE professional, I think about the ways race intersects with everything from identity formation for young children to self-efficacy perceptions for families and even teachers.

Because race impacts so much in the lives of young children, it's critical that the adults in their lives normalize discussing race and get comfortable answering tough questions. I know that can feel like an enormous undertaking, especially because you're likely already carrying a heavy teacher or caregiver load. Here are four ways to get yourself motivated to talk about race with young children:

1. Do it in your relationships.
2. Do it with your words.
3. Do it with your actions.
4. Do it when you're not sure.

For more, watch these webinars:

[Why & How to Talk to Young Kids About Race](#)

[Anti-bias Education in the Early Years](#)



1. Do it in your relationships.

Find or create your own “let’s talk about race” community. Put out a call to your fellow teachers or caregivers, asking them to join you in getting ready to have brave conversations about race. If you can’t find anyone locally, join an online community. When you’re looking for online communities, try searching social media platforms for learning communities focused on key terms like social justice, racial justice, and equity. If you can’t find what you are looking for online, try starting your own anti-bias community. Yes, that’s right; YOU can create a community to help support yourself and others. An idea for getting started is to host a watch party for the film *Reflecting on Anti-bias Education in Action: The Early Years*. The film includes footage of anti-bias strategies being used by ECE colleagues and can encourage you when you see the power of an intentional focus on racial and social justice. Watch the film and find the support resources [here](#).

If there is anything more important than your words about race, it is your actions about race. Get in the habit of checking in with yourself and asking questions.



2. Do it with your words.

To have brave conversations about race you’ll need to familiarize yourself with the words you want to use with children. You may feel like you don’t know how to explain some racial terms so young children will understand them. Don’t despair! There are many high-quality resources out there to help you. A book I would recommend is [Our Skin: A First Conversation About Race](#) by Megan Madison and Jessica Ralli and illustrated by Isabel Roxas. I like this book so much because it uses simple-to-say words to explain advanced concepts like racism and racial justice. Those words can empower children to feel like they can contribute to the conversation.

3. Do it with your actions.

Do it with your actions. If there is anything more important than your words about race, it is your actions about race. Get in the habit of checking in with yourself and asking questions like:

- How did I show the children in my care that I care about racial justice?
- When are there opportunities during the day for me to model fairness?
- What are ways I can encourage the children to learn about and include others?

4. Do it when you're not sure.

If you are planning on waiting until you feel adequate or ready in some other way, stop waiting. Many of your colleagues, including me, would tell you that you never feel “ready.” You will always have questions. You may always feel you haven’t been prepared to have conversations about race. So, don’t keep waiting for a feeling that may never come. Instead, help boost your confidence by starting with right-sized, achievable pieces. A good starting place would be to familiarize yourself with the *Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement* by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The position statement includes recommendations for actions early childhood educators can take to create more equitable environments for young children. These actions can help you create the contexts you need to feel more comfortable talking about race with young children.

For more, watch these webinars:

[Why & How to Talk to Young Kids About Race](#)

[Anti-bias Education in the Early Years](#)



EmbraceRace is a multiracial community of parents, teachers, experts, and other caring adults who support each other to meet the challenges that race poses to our children, families, and communities. We welcome your participation.

embracerace.org

