

Talking to Kids About Racism

A school counselor and a children's book author offer advice for talking to children about racism and George Floyd.



By **Marie Tae McDermott**

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Christian Robinson, an author and illustrator, as a child.

Good morning.

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The protests in response to the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor have elicited questions from children of all ages, and many parents are left wondering how to respond.

Children are like sponges. They soak up news headlines and images of unrest on TV and social media. They may also be keenly attuned to conversations about current events happening at home. Parents and educators alike (and those of us now wearing both hats) should address questions about racism that arise and maintain an open dialogue with children.

To help navigate the best way to do this, I asked Christiana Cobb-Dozier, a school counselor in Los Angeles, and Christian Robinson, a Sacramento-based author and illustrator of children's books, about how to talk to children about racism.

Here's what they said:

1) All parents should talk to their children about racism. “We don't talk about race and disparities and inequity enough,” said Ms. Cobb-Dozier. Too often, the burden of talking about race falls to the parents of black children.

Mr. Robinson, who grew up in Los Angeles, said that as a black child, race was always talked about in his family. “I wouldn't even call it a topic of discussion, it was just discussion,” he said.

“We should all be having conversations with our children that the color of your skin in this country, specifically, will dictate your experiences in the world,” Ms. Cobb-Dozier said.

There are ways to broach the topic of race with children at every developmental level, even with kids as young as 2. It's important to follow their lead. If children approach their parents ready to talk about race, it's a good sign that they are ready to talk about it. “If they're asking about it, they're ready to know about it,” Ms. Cobb-Dozier said.

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- [As protests stretch into a second weekend, the virus and job losses have hit black Americans especially hard.](#)
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2) Be honest with yourself and with your children. When talking about racism, it's important for parents to also check their own thoughts for biases, unconscious or not.

One way of rooting out unconscious biases, Mr. Robinson said, is to use the power of imagination, an idea he heard while giving a talk with the founders of Abundant Beginnings, a school in Oakland.

"Imagine that for some people, there's a fairy that lands on your shoulder. And that fairy is called racism," he said. "And it will say something from time to time in your ear, like, 'Don't trust that person,' 'You should cross the street,' 'You should be afraid.' You got to recognize these things as thoughts. And I think that's a good practice for young people to be working on."

3) Have diverse books around for children to read. Ms. Cobb-Dozier, who is black, talked about the experience of having two black godchildren. She said, "I'm constantly sending them affirmation coloring books or poems that will remind them as they are growing up about the beauty of who they are and the resiliency of their people."

She recommends the following books: "Black Is a Rainbow Color," "Last Stop on Market Street," "Each Kindness" and "Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You."

[These books can also help explain racism and protest to your kids.]

4) Allow for questions even when you don't know the answers. You may not have the answers to questions like, "Why is this happening?," but it's important to hold space for them and explain how you feel, nonetheless.

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"Brace yourself. Be ready for their response and just be with them," Ms. Cobb-Dozier said. "If they're crying, hold them and tell them you're sad, too."

Every Sunday on Instagram and YouTube, Mr. Robinson posts a new "Making Space" video, a personal project he started during the pandemic as an outlet for creativity. Each episode features a theme with the most recent one being anger. It's his way of encouraging creativity in children, too. "Creativity was the thing that got me through a lot of hardships and helped me process the world around me," he said. "Children may not have much control over the world around them, but they can have some say over the world they create on the page with their imaginations."

5) If speaking with black children, let them know their lives matter and encourage their whole identity.

The message of Mr. Robinson's latest book, "You Matter," is one his grandmother, who raised Mr. Robinson, his older brother and two cousins in a one-bedroom home, instilled in him from an early age. Drawing became a way for him to make space for himself and to create the kind of world he

wanted to see.

The message he wants to send to young people, he said, is simple.

“Your life doesn’t matter just because of how big or important you are. It’s not about how great your grades are or how many trophies you won. You matter just because you exist. Because you’re here.”

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times

- Officials in L.A. County **did not issue a curfew Thursday night, for the first time in days.** The announcement came a day after the American Civil Liberties Union filed suit against the county and city to end the curfew. [The Los Angeles Times]
- City leaders in San Leandro **plan to ask the state attorney general’s office to conduct an investigation into the death of Steven Taylor,** a black man who was fatally shot by the police in April. [The San Francisco Chronicle]
- A study found that the rate of calls to 311 to complain about homeless people in San Francisco **has risen faster than the rate of homelessness itself.** [CityLab]

- Battery-powered electric bikes are making a comeback and **they are now as difficult to buy as a bottle of hand sanitizer was a few weeks ago**. [The New York Times]
 - Although the 73rd edition of the Cannes Film Festival was scuttled by a global pandemic, **organizers have released an official lineup with movies from Wes Anderson and others**. [The New York Times]
 - Physical acts of affection like **hugging reduce stress by calming our sympathetic nervous system**. Here's how to hug loved ones during a pandemic. [The New York Times]
 - **Three mountain lion kittens have been born in the Santa Monica Mountains**, the National Park Service announced Wednesday. All three kittens appear healthy and were tagged by biologists, who also took genetic samples from the kittens for further testing. [City News Service]
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California Today is edited by Julie Bloom, who grew up in Los Angeles and graduated from U.C. Berkeley.