

Starting Point: Talking With Your Child About Racism

How can caregivers and community members, many of whom are struggling themselves with the effects of Racism, help children and community process what is being witnessed and/or experienced?

There is no one approach to address the impact of Racism.

The most important element is to begin the conversation. Halifax Regional Centre for Education's (HRCE) Program Department has compiled the following suggestions that you may find helpful:

- **Start** by checking in with your child.
Children are perceptive and most likely know more about recent situations than you might expect. It is quite possible that they may have worries or concerns that they are not sure how to express.
- **Stop and listen** to what the child has experienced.
When a child encounters racial stress in the form of unfair treatment, direct discrimination (racial slurs, name calling, violence, etc.), the first thing you need to do is ask them is how it made them **feel**. This is critical in developing what we call *emotional intelligence*. Emotional intelligence is building the emotional awareness and the ability to handle and process difficult feelings.

Outlined below are some guidelines to keep in mind when discussing the realities and struggles of what is happening in our world today:

- **Paraphrase** by using the child's words and language to repeat what they have just shared.
- **Ask**, "how did that make you feel?"
- **Listen** fully until they are finished expressing. Allow a moment of silence before responding to ensure they have finished. Do this without trying to change the emotion that they are feeling. This may be difficult at first. Your internal experience is not theirs, so it is important to leave your emotions and personal stories out of their space.
- **Validate** your child's emotions. Validating your child's emotional experience – even if you do not personally agree – will have a calming effect for your child. It also helps them feel understood. For example, when your child tells you they feel angry about someone calling them names, rather than leading with a typical response such as: "I can understand why you might feel angry BUT you can't let them get you worked up," imagine first why it would make sense for them to feel angry. Then, convey your understanding in a phrase using the word "**because**," such as: "I can understand why you might feel angry, **BECAUSE** those words are hurtful and no one likes to be called names."
- **Organize** the experience. "Sometimes people will treat you differently or unfairly because of your race, and that will make you feel confused, hurt, angry, and sad. Your feelings are a normal response to Racism."
- **See** if they understand. Ask them to explain in their own words what they know and how they are feeling.
- **Reflect** by asking yourself these questions: *How did it go? Did they understand? Did I speak too fast? How did that make me feel?* Remember, you and your child are learning together and you do not have to have all the answers. It's also normal to be emotionally impacted by a conversation of this nature with a child and it's okay to debrief with another adult once concluded.
- **Action** is important when your child experiences Racism. They need you to validate their feelings, to be their advocate and to be their support. As a caregiver, you can inform your School Principal and the Regional Coordinator of African Canadian Education Services.
- **Check-in** with the child hours later or in a few days to see if they have any follow-up questions to the recent experience and conversation.

This process will have to be repeated multiple times. It will not look or feel perfect in every situation, but the key is that until Racism and discrimination stops, it's important to take care of our emotions by talking about them.

In doing this, people who face Racism and discrimination will slow down and/or avoid internalizing and developing an inferior self-image. They will also better understand their emotional lives—which means better recovery from Racism and discrimination, and a building of personal resiliency.

Reference:

Broderick Sawyer, MS., (2018, July 25). *How building a positive self-image helps parents and children of color cope with racial stress*. Psychology Benefits Society. <https://psychologybenefits.org/2018/07/25/how-building-a-positive-self-image-helps-parents-and-children-of-color-cope-with-racial-stress/>



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