How to talk to kids about race

Conversations about race are tough. How adults handle them can change the way kids see each other. Experts offer tips to handle tough questions and empower kids to know their worth.

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Robin Chenoweth: Isaiah was a second grader when a child he considered a friend asked him a question at school.

Stephanie Power-Carter: The kid asking the question, he was curious. The kid said to him, why do you have to be Black? And so that, that exchange was pretty jarring to my son.

Robin Chenoweth: The teacher, who was White, let’s just say she didn’t handle the situation as well as she might have. To be fair, talking to kids about race is uncharted territory for a lot of folks. What do you say to either child in a situation like that? Isaiah’s teacher ended the conversation.

Stephanie Power-Carter: But the silence that message sent both of them?

Robin Chenoweth: Isaiah’s mom, Professor Stephanie Power-Carter, studies Black youth and discourse analysis.

Stephanie Power-Carter: The ways that people use language to navigate their lives as they act and interact.

Robin: This exchange between her son and his friend, and then their teacher’s lack of response, was a textbook case.

Stephanie Power-Carter: In that short minute of two kids interacting, and what happens when you don't…? Like so my son left that experience wondering what was wrong with being Black. And the kid left feeling like something is wrong with being Black. And so as an adult….it is in our response to those kids, right? It's how we are responding to them, that they're picking up those cues. And we're teaching them in essence, how to treat people, how to see people …. We have to talk. We have to create space …. If we don't create spaces and opportunities to educate ourselves when those instances come up, so that we can address it and call people in our silence doesn't protect us.

Robin Chenoweth: How should we talk to kids about race? How to handle the hurt feelings, the miscues, and the curious, uncomfortable and sometimes embarrassing questions? In this episode of The Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, four experts teach us how to use words and relationships to make all kids feel good about who they are and make them better people because of the rich diversity that they invite into their lives. I’m Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Meghan Beery is our student intern. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Robin Chenoweth: Let’s face it. Kids notice difference. That’s to be expected. They are inquisitive creatures actively learning about the world around them. But they also notice our reaction to difference. Michiko Hikida spent years in the classroom teaching primarily Latinx children. Latinx herself, she is now is a literacy researcher and associate professor of teaching and learning.

Michiko Hikida: Any time that that there are different demographics of any sort, children are going to notice that and are going to be curious about it or drawing conclusions about it.

Robin Chenoweth: What are some examples of how teachers and maybe parents might trip up when talking about difference?

Michiko Hikida: Parents will trip up if they are avoiding it. ~~Um~~ Or if they ~~um~~ like panic. (Laughs.) We all panic a little bit because we're not ready to talk about it all the time. ~~Um~~ But if kids see on your face or in your actions that you don't want to engage with it, they think that it is then a taboo topic. And, so, then they won't bring it to you.

Robin Chenoweth: Tip #1. Don’t worry. You’ve got this! Take a deep breath and do what Hikida did for years when a child brought up an uncomfortable topic.

Michiko Hikida: In my own practice, when a kid caught me off guard with a question about race or a question about class, what I learned to do was to ask questions. And what that allowed was for me to take a moment to get myself together and prepare myself to have the conversation that might be hard for me. Also, to get a better sense of what it is that they're asking and trying to understand.

Robin Chenoweth: That's great advice. It's a stall tactic, isn’t it? (Laughs.)

Michiko Hikida: Exactly. When I just need a minute to be like, okay, we're talking about this now. You know, tell me more about that. Where did you see that? Or, what else do you know about that? Those are the kinds of questions that just give you a second to collect yourself before you lean in and have a conversation that might be hard.

Robin Chenoweth: Do you teach pre-service teachers?

Michiko Hikida: I do.

Robin Chenoweth: What is some of the advice that you give to them?

Michiko Hikida: Ask questions, to give that stall technique. I tell them a story about a pre-service teacher that I watched just masterfully do that one time. She was working with a young Latinx boy, and she brought out a book for them to read. And he said, I don't want to read that book, because it has Black people in it. And the first thing she did was, like, gasp and sort of lean back because it caught her so off guard. And then she leaned in. And then she said, Tell me about that. And he went on to explain that his stepdad was Black, and he hated his stepdad. And, so, he didn't want to read a book about Black families. And, so, she sort of said, let's see what this ~~back~~ Black family is like, because maybe not all Black families are the same. And then she sort of had some conversations with him about some of his Black friends and whether or not she felt like their families were nice people, and then they read a book together.

Robin Chenoweth: Wow. I think your first response would be to try to call the kid out without even figuring out why. But when you hear his story, you start to understand the why.

Michiko Hikida: These are hard conversations, and we're never ready for them. So just trying to let pre-service teachers know that you're never going to be ready for it, it's always going to catch you off guard, and you're going to make mistakes. So, you asked me earlier about tripping up. And we're always going to trip up. The wonderful thing about being a classroom teacher or being a parent, is that you see kids a lot. So, if you screw up one day, you can always go back to them the next day and be like, "Hey, you guys, I don't think I did a good job on that yesterday. And I just wanted to apologize and try again." And I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

Robin Chenoweth: It's good modeling, too, for them, right? Because they're going to trip up as well.

Robin Chenoweth: And that's Tip #2. Owning where we are. Not all of us are starting at the same place. Black, Latinx and Native families begin having these conversations with kids when they are 2. Not so for most White families. The discussions Hikida had with Latinx kids about fear of their parents' deportation are not the same as discussions in Midwestern suburban schools. For parents, the conversation will be different depending on your background and the preconceived notions that you might unintentionally bring. Erin Parsons-Christian, a doctoral student in Ohio State's Counselor Education program, has worked for 15 years as a licensed family therapist.

Erin Christian: You know your child, how to relate to them. So be honest and open with them, and transparent about, where you're at. And if you don't always understand how to talk about certain things, it's okay to admit that with them.

Robin Chenoweth: Parsons-Christian is a research fellow at the Center for Discourse Analysis and Video Ethnography, which is directed by Stephanie Power-Carter. The center this fall will begin hosting community teach-ins. The first topic: How to talk to kids about race.

Erin Christian: How do we empower them to be open about where they're at with these topics, because they can be uncomfortable and they can spark some controversy and conflict. And, so, starting the conversation about talking about how it's okay if we don't know how to talk about race with our children. It doesn't mean that we're doing something wrong. It can hopefully make people feel supported in that conversation.

Robin Chenoweth: Teaching tolerance is not always easy, says Power-Carter. When she led teach-ins at Indiana University, many of her students were struggling with issues surrounding race. So, she discussed the importance of being self-reflective.

Stephanie Power-Carter: Being vulnerable, and being willing to learn something different. And, fight through your fear and your inclination to withdraw and to be fragile. Because it's going to happen, right? And that's a natural response, I think. But you have to keep moving through it.

Robin Chenoweth: Tip #3. The way we respond to kids about difference matters. Here, White parents can take some cues from Black and brown parents.

Stephanie Power-Carter: When kids see somebody different, you know, they might be like, "Oh, what's wrong with their skin?"…How we're languaging beauty, right? Because we a lot of times as adults haven't come to terms and grappled with these kinds of constructs; we react.

Robin Chenoweth: Instead of telling them not to stare, which teaches them to fear, or, “Don’t say that,” which teaches them that difference is taboo, try saying what a brown or Black parent says to their own child, Power Carter says.

Stephanie Power-Carter: Oh, her skin is brown. It's beautiful, isn't it?

Robin Chenoweth: That’s a conversation that Power-Carter and others have a lot with their children.

Stephanie Power-Carter, 35:56: No, it's nothing wrong with your hair. You're beautiful. It's nothing wrong with the way your nose is shaped, or your eyes’ color or the shape of your body. You're beautiful, and you're brilliant. You just have to constantly reinforce that. And for White parents, you could say the same. Oh, no, they're beautiful and they're brilliant.” And you can model that.

Robin Chenoweth: Erin Parsons-Christian.

Erin Christian: Using analogies children can easily understand will be really important. So for instance, discussing race with a three year old: a parent who is a Black woman said, “I can talk in terms of ice cream. We talk about all the people God made as being vanilla, chocolate, butterscotch, all different flavors, but all equally good.”

Robin Chenoweth: Especially for young children, these analogies and affirming dialogues about difference are ingeniously woven into the storylines and illustrations of books. And that’s Tip #4. Listen to Jonda McNair, Ohio State’s Charlotte S. Huck Endowed Professor of Teaching and Learning, as she reads from *Crown: An Ode to the Fresh Cut*, by Derreck Barnes. It’s an illustrated book about a boy getting a haircut.

Jonda McNair: “When it's your turn in the chair, you stand at attention and forget about who you were when you walk through that door. You came in as a lump of clay, a blank canvas, a slab of marble. But when my man has done with you, they want to post you up in a museum. That's my word. He'll drape you like royalty with that cape to keep the fine hairs off of your neck and your princely robes. It's amazing what a tight fade, high-low bald, does for your confidence, dark Caesar.”

Jonda McNair: So even to me that the idea of calling a Black boy royalty… And at one point in the story, he talks about being so smart. It says, “You're a star, a brilliant blazing star, not the kind that you'll find on the sidewalk in Hollywood. Nope, they're gonna have to wear shades when they look up to catch your shine. Who knows, you might just smash that geography exam tomorrow, and rearrange the entire principal’s honor roll. A fresh cut does something to your brain, right? It hooks up your intellectual.” So, for me, there's certain stereotypes about the Black boy or the Black man that this story kind of pushes back on, but not in a didactic way, in a really kind of thoughtful and nuanced way. He's intelligent. He ~~like~~ descends from royalty. And this, to me is also an example of the kind of book that I think parents can use. Maybe they don't pick up on with all of the things that the author is trying to say in the book. But I think the beauty of books is that there can be something in the story ~~for both~~ for people across various racial boundaries.

Robin Chenoweth: I was going to ask you that. Is a book that is affirming like that one is for Black kids, is it also good for White children?

Jonda McNair: I think so. There are some African American authors who have said, I'm writing for Black children. But I don't think that excludes children who are not Black. For example, there's a book called *I Love My Hair* by Natasha Tarpley. And it's about a little girl who celebrates her hair, how beautiful it is. She loves her hair, and her mother tells her there's so many different ways you can wear your hair. Now, clearly, I do believe that Natasha Tarpley when she wrote this story, she's probably speaking to Black girls. But I think there's something in that story that can resonate with children who are not Black. And if anything, I think it might be good for, for example, a White girl to read this story and to recognize that there are other types of hair that can be beautiful, besides blonde, long hair. That your hair can be dark, and it can be kinky, or crinkly and curly and still be beautiful.

Robin Chenoweth: Being a bibliophile, McNair came to our recording studio with a sizable stack of books. They tell and reflect stories of all kinds of diverse characters: A Latinx book of poems that knits together English and Spanish language. A book about a Japanese American boy in an internment camp during World War II. And a bestseller called *Box: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom*, about a man who escapes slavery by shipping himself to Philadelphia. McNair helped choose *Box* as a 2021 Newbery Honor Book when she served on the selection committee.

Jonda McNair: One of the things that I believe makes books so valuable is that I think there's power in the word; words have power. And talented writers, to me, are able to use words to allow readers to just gain insights about the experience.

Robin Chenoweth: McNair reads these books and others to her college students, like her doctoral advisor, Rudine Sims Bishop, did for her students at Ohio State. Bishop reset the expectations for children’s literature when she wrote that books can be a mirror to Black and brown children, reflecting their lives as part of the larger human experience. These books affirm children who identify with Black and brown characters, while at the same time introducing the beauty of difference to readers who don’t resemble the characters. The number of books written by diverse authors is increasing and books like Box are winning more awards, McNair says, while hitting best-seller lists. Which brings us to Tip 5. On topics centering the history of race, don’t short-sell kids’ ability to learn and grow through their empathy, a powerful character asset.

Robin Chenoweth: Well, going back to *Box*, we've sort of politicized the classroom now, haven't we? And I wanted to ask you: I know people are talking a lot about the whole guilt thing. Would a book passage like that make a child feel guilt? Or is it just empathy? Our kids as fragile as we might think they are when it comes to talking about difference?

Jonda McNair: No, I actually think kids are a lot more resilient than we give them credit for, I think back to my time in the elementary classroom, and some of the difficult things that children experienced. Life is bitter and sweet. So children experience the sweet things that happen in life, but they also experience the bitter things that happen in life. And I think books can be a place where they can deal with some of that trauma or recognize that I'm not the only person that has gone through that. It could be that for some children reading about things like slavery might invoke guilt, but also think children deserve the truth. And I think they have to learn to work through the guilt, and to recognize that there are some things that I can do, perhaps to make the world a better place. As opposed to focusing on the guilt, thinking about how we should treat others, and what kind of world would be a better place so that these kinds of things don't ever happen again.

Robin Chenoweth: But don’t put the onus on your child’s school to teach them inclusivity, educators say. Erin Parsons-Christian.

Erin Christian: If I asked a fifth grader right now, do you know Harriet Tubman is? I believe the answer would be yes. If I asked that same fifth grader, do you know who Sojourner Truth is, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin? I don't know if I would get a lot of yeses. So, it's knowing your history. And it's telling the stories that aren't being told to your children, because we have to create a new level of empathy for what has happened and what continues to happen. And we can't do that through just reading books. We can't do that just taking a child once to a place that has diversity. It's a lifestyle. So it has to be consistent.

Robin Chenoweth: So, #6. Don’t stop at books. For this point, we turn to a 1947 study by Kenneth and Mamie Clark.

Erin Christian: Two psychologists who did a study with dolls and toddler and elementary kids of color. And so what they did is they showed them dolls, white and black dolls.

Robin Chenoweth: The Black children chose white dolls over black ones.

Erin Christian: And it showed the devastating impacts of internalized racism on children of color …. This is a really important and compelling example that parents need to understand when starting that journey of how do I talk to my children about race? And what are some examples that they can use? And so, exposing your children to different toys: If you're going to buy the white doll, buy the doll of color. Have your children, playing with different toys, different dolls that have all different colors …. If you live in a homogeneous community, and your child is not exposed to diversity with race or socio-economic status, then bring culture, bring diversity into the home …. For me, it's experiential, because kids, they learn based on not just what they hear but based on what they see and what they what they're immersed in.

Robin Chenoweth: And that can control a lot of things, like which school you choose to place your child in, or which church you attend …. But, but also the people that you are in community with, right?

Erin Christian: That's where we're the role models. How we can expect to raise anti-racist children if we aren't living an anti-racist life. Every day, every decision that we make, drives what we do. So if I tell my child, “You need to be inclusive, and you need to have diversity,” but I don't have diversity in my life, how can I possibly expect them to?

Robin Chenoweth: #7. In some ways, teenage kids are in a category unto themselves when it’s time to talk about race. Parsons-Christian’s son is now 18. I asked about her conversations with him as a teenager.

Erin Christian: I talked about the term white gaze; and white gaze is a lens that White people look through, because it's our view of the world, right. I talked to him about how, because we have this view of the world, we're not really ever going to be able to have the experience of a person of color. And so because of that, we have to make a concerted effort to immerse ourselves into diverse experiences, having diverse friends, eating ethnic foods, immersing ourselves and reading poetry, and the scholars of color. And so, you know, it's just as important what we say is, is what we do …. I also talked to him about social justice failures, and that we all have them. And it's important to admit when we make mistakes. And that's really key, because I think that that's something that I see so often. If someone makes a mistake, they feel so bad about it, that they don't want to admit it. But then that perpetuates the problem. And so just, really explaining to him about taking responsibility if he does have a misstep, if he does say something or do something that he knows is outside of his values and what he believes to be right.

Robin Chenoweth: But teenagers these days seem to have figured out a lot of things that I think they might even be teaching their parents.

Erin Christian: I learn something all the time from my kid, so yeah. They're being exposed to diversity, I believe in a different way, even though we have so much work to do. And teenagers have a way of holding up the mirror to parents in ways that can be really hard, right? And I think that they're willing to go there and have the conversations, and they're willing to be more direct with their parents than previous generations. And I applaud that. I think that that's why it's important more now than ever, that parents are prepared for those conversations, and prepared to take responsibility when the mirror is, held up.

Robin Chenoweth: Stephanie Power-Carter.

Stephanie Power Carter: Some groups are socialized to talk about race, because they have to; they embody it …. I look at my son. And now I'm speaking as a mother …. I really have to talk to him about it, I don't have the luxury, because if I don't talk to him about it, and I'm not languaging these things, he could really do something that's quite innocent to me, but it's not innocent to someone else …. What I really want people to understand with this whole-"How to talk to your kid about race," is that when you don't, it can be consequential to their lives and the lives of Black and brown children. And so it's really important that we see each other; that we see each other and that we, regardless of what your race is, that we see each other, and we acknowledge the challenges, culturally or historically that people have had, and try to be a part of the solution. Right? Try to use our privilege and whatever resources we have to support people's humanity …. Look at your kid and want a better world for them. I want a better world for my son than what I had. Every day, I get a little more stressed about it, but I do. I remember the King speech.

Martin Luther King Jr. I Have a Dream Speech: I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today! I have a dream that one day, *do*wn in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" — one day right there in Alabama, little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little White boys and White girls as sisters and brothers.

Stephanie Power Carter: I want to see them doing more than holding hands. I do. I want….I want to see them celebrating and honoring each other's humanity. And I want to see them using words in powerful ways that do that.

Robin Chenoweth: An interesting side note: In a 1970 follow-up to the Clark Doll Study, this time, more Black children chose black dolls when presented with a choice. Maybe by 2030, more White children will also choose black and brown dolls, in addition to white ones.

To register for a teach-in on how to talk to kids about race, visit the Center for Discourse Analysis and Video Ethnography website, cdave.ehe.osu.edu, or hit the link in this episode description.

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