

# It's never too early to talk with children about race

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Left to right: Dr. Amalia Londono Tobon, Dr. Wanjiku Njoroge, Yarrow Dunham. Credit: Yale University

Infants as young as six months old can recognize differences in skin color. By age two and a half, research has shown, children prefer playmates who are similar in race and gender. And as early as age three, they are forming judgments about people based on racial differences.

What children learn, hear, and witness from [family members](#), friends, and others in their communities about race plays a major role in how they view people who are different from them, according to Yale experts.

Children "identify all kinds of differences quite readily," said Yarrow Dunham, assistant professor of psychology at Yale and director of the Social Cognitive Development Lab. "The critical question is: Which of those differences do they come to think of as important determinants of social identity and social outcomes? They make those decisions by observing the world around them. And here—unfortunately—the world presents them with abundant evidence that race matters."

As a result, it's imperative that parents recognize and talk about [racial differences](#) with kids from an early age to prevent racism from taking root, said Yale experts.

"It's important that we tell children about their environment and what's going on in the world," said Dr. Wanjiku Njoroge, a board-certified child psychiatrist and adjunct professor of psychiatry at Yale, whose research focuses on the impact of culture on early infant and childhood development. "Or they will make up their own stories."

This requires that parents who are uncomfortable talking about race confront and overcome that feeling, Dunham said.

"Many white parents are very uncomfortable talking about race," Dunham said. "As a consequence, they do not put in the work to support the emergence of a structural or justice-minded understanding of racial disparities and of racism more generally. As [white parents](#), we have an obligation to put in this work."

## **Silence is a message**

Avoiding conversations about race sends a message that there's something off-limits, and even bad, about racial differences, said Njoroge, who completed four fellowships at Yale and is also an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine and program director of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

She recalls a young patient who asked if her skin was so dark because she didn't take baths.

"If you are in communities that are not diverse, you can introduce race through books and through play," she said. "Talk about how there are different genders, different races, languages, and cultures. Tie their questions to education—get out the globe or the map and tell stories."

In the absence of these conversations, she said, silence is powerful: "If they hear nothing about race, they figure out that there's something different about that topic. And that difference can become imbued with negativity."

## **Start with self-reflection**

Dr. Amalia Londono Tobon, a board-certified psychiatrist and clinical fellow in the Yale Child Study Center, who collaborates with Njoroge on projects related to race, culture and young children, said different conversations are possible at every stage of a child's development. "Be comfortable with the fact that you don't know everything," she said. "The words are important, but what's more important is that you are open to talk about this. It's not one conversation, it is many conversations. And as kids grow, they have more complex questions."

White parents need to critically examine their own upbringing, she said, to think about how they learned about race, and how they may have acted in ways that revealed bias against [black people](#)—crossing the street to avoid a black person, or treating them with distrust. "Think about where you are right now," she said. "What are you reading? What TV shows are you watching? Who are your friends?" All of that, she said, affects the way a child perceives the world.

## **Avoiding race conversations is privilege**

The ability to avoid talking about race is a form of white privilege, the researchers said.

In black families, racial differences, and the history of race relations in America, are conversations that happen organically, at all ages, said Njoroge. "For many African American families, there is that history of segregation, of 'separate but equal,' woven into the fabric of our experiences."

Njoroge, whose father is Kenyan and mother is African American, recalls growing up in Missouri and taking trips in the summer to visit her maternal grandparents' house in the tiny town of Glenmora, Louisiana. The town had one main road, one movie theater, and two gas stations. At the local movie theater, she said, black people had to sit in a balcony, use a separate entrance, and had separate access to concessions. For children growing up in black families, she said, this experience "leads to questions: Why couldn't you go to the movies? Why couldn't you go to the school in town?"

Njoroge was taught by her mother to always get a receipt when she bought something from a store, no matter how small, in case she was questioned. It's something she does to this day.

The ongoing nationwide protests in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd is an opportunity to have conversations with kids about racial differences, white privilege, and systemic racism, Njoroge said.

"This is a moment where you can't ignore the history of the U.S.," she said.

She recommends that parents talk honestly with their children about their own moments of racism—and how they have learned to be better.

"Describe the inequities built into our country," she said.

The following resources were recommended by Dr. Amalia Londono Tobon, clinical fellow of the Yale Child Study Center, and Dr. Wanjiku Njoroge, an adjunct professor at Yale and program director of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, for parents who want to have conversations with their kids about race and racism.

## **Video**

[How to talk to kids about racism, protests & injustice](#): article and video with journalist Sheinelle Jones from the "Today" show.

## **Audio**

[How white parents can talk about race](#): NPR's Michel Martin talks to Jennifer Harvey, author of "Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America," about how to talk with white kids about racially charged events.

## **Articles**

- [Racism and violence: how to help kids handle the news](#): A guide on supporting your kids during scary times from the Child Mind Institute, a nonprofit focused on [children's](#) mental health.
- [Talking to children about racial bias](#): steps parents can take to confront their own racial bias and talk about racial differences from the American Academy of Pediatrics.
- [How to talk to kids about race and racism](#): a comprehensive Parent Toolkit on talking to kids about race and racism from NBC News.

## Books

- [Where to find diverse children's books](#): a guide to blogs and sites where parents can find books featuring diverse characters and highlighting social justice from EmbraceRace, a parent-founded organization to fight systemic racism.
- [Anti-racism books for kids](#): books for kids of different ages that celebrate [racial diversity](#) and explain how diversity makes us stronger from Books for Littles, an organization that uses picture books to help parents have important conversations about social issues.
- [Social justice books for teens](#): a compilation of books for teens exploring how [race](#), class, gender, size, and sexuality affect our lives from the Chicago Public Library.

Provided by Yale University

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