

Talking with children about race and racism

This resource aims to support adults such as educators and parents to talk to children about racism. The British Red Cross stands for humanity. We reject racism and support communities to become more empathetic and resilient through kindness and mutual respect. In light of current events, we as an organisation and a society are looking at ways that we can contribute to building an anti-racist community.

This document includes some introductory guidance on how to talk about racism with children and presents some activity ideas to support discussions. It is everyone's responsibility to have these conversations and to learn about these issues.

It will focus on developing confidence to address challenging subjects, how to create a diverse and anti-racist environment, how to respond to comments and questions and how to discuss the topic with children.

How to prepare yourself

If you have never experienced talking about racism or have not experienced racism yourself, you may be uncertain about how to talk about it. In order to give yourself the confidence to talk about this topic with children, we would recommend exploring the issue yourself first.

The [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) recommends adults start by reflecting on our own experiences when we were a child. You could put yourself in the shoes of a child by thinking about these questions:

- > When did you first notice race as a child?
- > How did you make sense of differences between people? What confused you?
- > What childhood experiences did you have with people who were different from you in some way?
- > How, if ever, did an adult support you in thinking about racial differences?

Understanding racism is a learning journey for adults and children alike. You are not expected to know all the answers. Reflection and eagerness to learn are key to examining preconceptions. It is important to speak openly and positively about race, have regular discussions about racism and to acknowledge how race and racism impact different people's experiences of life.

It is important to recognise that systemic racism exists. Racism is more than name calling. It can be seen all around us, from beauty standards to the visibility and depiction of people in everyday society. It also affects the way people live, from the jobs they can get to their personal wellbeing and sense of safety. If you wish to learn more about racism and how it affects people in British society look at the [Runnymede Trust online research](#).

You can also understand more about racism by listening to stories of lived experiences. Use [the Black Lives Matter: resources for young people resource](#) which contains stories and experiences as well as reflective activities to explore the effects of racism on individual wellbeing. Listening to the voices of those who experience racism is vital to understanding it. However, it is important to remember that these experiences are distressing. Be mindful and empathetic of the mental and emotional impact of these issues on those who experience it.

Creating a diverse and anti-racist environment

Ideas about race and identity are reinforced by our surroundings and influenced by what we see and hear every day. Being mindful of the amount of diversity and positive messages

children are being surrounded by can help them develop healthy positive attitudes to differences between people.

It is important to add diverse voices and influences in all areas of people's lives in order to reflect the contributions diverse communities make to society. You can diversify your book and film collection to introduce different voices. Remember that you should add diverse voices, films and books to your collection when they are not talking specifically about race too.

Some books for children that talk specifically about race and difference are:

- > Sulwe by Lupita Nyong'o
- > Hair Love by Matthew Cherry (also a short, animated film)
- > M is for Melanin by Tiffany Rose
- > The AntiRacist Baby by Ibram X. Kendi
- > The Sneetches by Dr. Seuss
- > Not Like the Others by Jana Broecker

Being anti-racist is about being active in challenging racism within all areas of society. There are many things adults can do to create an anti-racist environment for children. You can present positive role models from diverse backgrounds in all areas of your life. You can champion a more diverse curriculum for your children and students by emailing curriculum setters. You can support friends, family and colleagues through their experiences of racism and amplify diverse voices.

Think about your long-term plan of action. What can you do to create an anti-racist environment over the next year? You can make this plan of action with the children and work on it together.

You can also empower children to take simple actions in their everyday life to be anti-racist.

Children can practice anti-racism by:

- > Supporting their friends who say they have experienced racism or bullying
- > Actively listening to their experiences
- > Telling a teacher or adult when they witness or experience racism
- > Accepting that they might not understand what it feels like, but can try to imagine and build empathy
- > Using their own voice to make other people listen to their friend
- > Not speaking for them or making the situation about themselves
- > Think about how their friend might feel and supporting their wellbeing

Turn this into a discussion by asking children to answer the question: How would I like other people to support me if I was being treated unfairly?

How to respond to questions and comments from children

Children may have lots of questions about race and racism. Racism may be something they have personally experienced and might be a difficult subject to talk about. For guidance on creating a safe space for discussion [look at this guidance on creating a safe, inclusive and supportive learning environment](#). Some tips on how to respond to questions and comments about race and racism are:

- > Positively acknowledge questions about race and racism. Even if the question is a difficult one to address, encouraging them to be confident enough to ask questions is important.
- > If the comment is negative, it is important to investigate it. Ask them why they think this. Encourage them to think about how they might feel if someone said this about them.
- > It's ok not to know the answer. Be honest about your own knowledge and understanding. If the question requires a definitive answer, you can use trusted sources on the internet to research the answer to the question together or you can offer to come back to it after you have researched further. Keep a note of the question. You could start an anonymous question box and set time aside to review and answer them.
- > Open up the question to discuss together if they are comfortable to do so. Ask why they asked the question or what they or others in that space think about the topic – encourage them to unpack their own ideas and thoughts.
- > Be willing to listen and encourage an environment of active listening where people can share safely, and others listen and reflect on what others say.

How to bring up the topic with children

You can incorporate the topic of race and racism into different situations but don't be afraid to talk about the topic of race and racism directly. Children as young as three recognise race and racial differences, so you can never start talking about race and racism too early. Talking about racism regularly is the first step towards making a positive social change.

Below you will find a selection of activity ideas for bringing up this topic with children. These activities can be adapted to suit the abilities and situations of the children. Ideally take a minimum of 20 minutes on each activity. For more activities to encourage critical thinking and empathy building you can [explore our kindness resources](#).

Before starting a discussion, you can create an agreement to establish ground rules for mutual respect and safety. Allow the children to collectively create these rules. You can start by asking them "how do you want to be treated by others?". For more guidance around class agreements you can look at the guidance on creating a safe, inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Activities

Active listening activity

Learners will:

- reflect on the importance of actively listening to people in order to better understand them and show kindness.

Put the children into small groups. If possible, have the participants looking at each other so they can see their eyes and body language. Give each person a 2-5 minutes to speak. Talk about a topic, for example, tell a story about a cultural holiday they recently celebrated or an activity they did with their family. The other people must listen to them talk.

Whilst they are listening, tell them to remember or write down the following:

- > What is the other person talking about?
- > What are the main points of the story – what do they emphasise?

- > What do they want you to hear – why might they be telling you this? How might they feel?

After that person has finished speaking, feedback the answers to these questions back to the person. Switch around so everyone has their time to share and listen. At the end give them space to ask any further questions they have or responses they wish to share.

Come together as a group and think about how listening helped them to understand the feelings, experiences and opinions of others better. For further resources about active listening [look at the living together with kindness resource](#).

Post activity reflection:

You can ask children to create a picture about why listening is important to consolidate learning. For example, you can create a mural of an ear on a wall or virtually and have learners write or stick notes on it explaining why active listening is important to them.

Challenging stereotypes activity

Learners will:

- Discuss and reflect on stereotypes, how they are formed and how they might affect people.

First ask what is a stereotype? Ask everyone to write down their idea on a whiteboard or a bit of paper and then read them out. The dictionary definition of a stereotype is: “a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing.” Does everyone agree with this definition? Is there anything they would add?

Present them with an example of a something that has negative stereotypes, like a hyena or a wolf.

- > What stereotypes have they heard about hyenas?
- > Did you know that hyena scientists say that many of these stereotypes aren't true and they are smart and successful animals?

[Look at this article in National Geographic](#) for the truth about hyenas. If they wish to discuss stereotypes relevant to them, they can, but presenting something neutral can create a safe distance between them personally and the discussion.

Now encourage them to reflect on where stereotypes come from. They may say things such as the media, films, friends and family, everyday phrases and language, etc.

Finish by asking how they feel about stereotypes and stereotyping. How do they make people feel and affect their lives?

Post activity reflection:

You could ask children to create something to remember what they have learned, such as an alternative news article challenging a common stereotype about hyenas, or something more personal or currently in the media if they want to do so. Ask children to think about how they can actively help challenge stereotypes in everyday life, from changing their own language to challenging others who use stereotypes.

Video activity: D is for diversity

Learners will:

- Think about skin, bodies and race positively.

You can use many videos which consider diversity that are made by Sesame Street in their D is for Diversity YouTube playlist. Take the video "[Lupita Nyong'o loves her skin](#)" as a good example. Ask the children about the video:

- > What colour is Lupita's skin?
- > What colour is Elmo's skin?
- > What colour is your skin?
- > Why is skin important - what does it do?
- > How can we take care of our skin better?
- > Does it matter what colour our skin is? Why?

Post activity reflection:

Ask children to create a poem or drawing about their own skin and why they love their skin

Celebrating similarities and differences activity

Learners will:

- Think positively about similarities and differences between people.

One way to address race and identity more generally is to celebrate our similarities and differences. Ask everyone to get into small groups and discuss the answers to the following questions:

- > What month is your birthday?
- > Do you like having friends?
- > What is your favourite food?
- > Are you part of a family?
- > What colour is your hair?
- > Do you have a favourite singer or song?
- > What languages do you speak?

You can ask pairs of children and young people to draw two circles which overlap in the middle with titles "Me" and "You" and "Us" to show the similarities and differences they have. If children wish to add more similarities or differences that they think are important, encourage them to do so.

Compare all the answers and discuss the following questions with the young people:

- > How many similarities and differences do you have?
- > Is there a 'right' or 'wrong' answer to these questions?
- > Does it matter if people have the same or different answers? Why?

Post activity reflection:

Ask learners to create a mural about similarities and differences. They could create a rainbow containing all the answers to the above questions, to build a rainbow of diversity.