

HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP AN ANTI-RACIST ATTITUDE

By Janet Gonzalez-Mena

What can parents do to help children think about their own racial identity and feel good about who they are? How can they also help them feel good about people who are different from themselves?

It's important that children learn early in life not to judge people by the color of their skin. It seems like the best way to do that would be to ignore skin color--and to pretend you don't see any differences. However, if you don't ever talk about race, children read meaning into your silence. They also pick up messages you don't want them to.

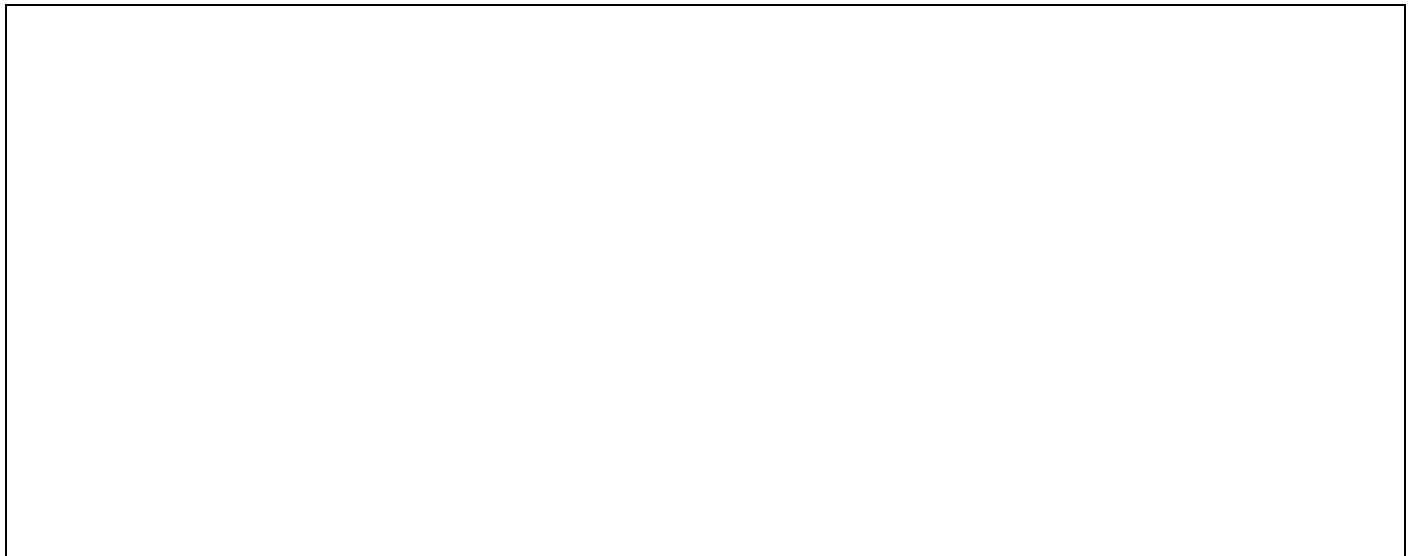
Even at age three and four children have already been influenced by racism and show signs of preprejudice attitudes. We have to counteract these early racist messages. We need to help children develop an anti-racist attitude. If we keep quiet and do nothing, it's almost like supporting racism.

We can start by helping children learn that it's okay to talk about skin color. If the subject doesn't come up, we can look for opportunities to bring it up. After all, we talk about hair color and eye color without any qualms. The fact that skin color is a taboo subject is related to the fact that racism exists. We need to change that fact.

A book by Louise Derman-Sparks called the *Antibias Curriculum* is designed for teachers, but can also give parents ideas of ways to counter racism. Louise suggests a number of ideas about how to talk about skin color and create activities related to the subject. She suggests comparing skin tones and making sure that we convey the message that all colors are beautiful.

Use a mirror to help children describe their own looks including skin and eye color, hair color and texture. Help them think about people who look different from themselves. Encourage them to see differences as positive. If they indicate negative feelings talk it out with them to see where those feelings are coming from. Help them understand the origins of those feelings and move beyond them.

Many children need to be encouraged to develop positive feelings about darker skin tones. It's especially important for dark-skinned children, who may have already received negative messages about their appearance, to replace those with positive messages. White or light-skinned children need to understand that all skin colors are okay and that no one is superior to any other.



Books can help give messages of equity. Pick stories that include children of different races. Just their very presence in a story, even if you aren't pointing out skin color, helps children see a broader view of society and the world.

Play materials can also help children appreciate differences. "People colored" crayons give children the opportunity to draw and color people like themselves and people different from themselves. Ask children to draw self portraits and match their own skin tones.

Making play dough is fun for kids and can be used as an anti-racist activity, too. Use a cup of flour, 1/2 cup of salt and enough water to make a stiff dough. Then divide the dough into three or four part and color each part a different skin tone using food colors. You have to play with the colors to make brown. Usually combining all the colors works. Experiment with the proportions of

each. Of course, to get lighter tones, you add less of the brown mixture. See if you can match your child's skin. Make darker and lighter colors and talk about how children come in darker and lighter shades and how everybody's skin color is beautiful.

We can't remain neutral about racial matters. There's too much racism that touches the lives of even the youngest children. We have to take some positive steps forward if our children are to live in a different world from the one we now live in.

Janet Gonzalez-Mena teaches early childhood education at Napa Valley College and is a freelance writer. Her books include Dragon Mom, which looks at the sometimes hilarious conflicts between parenting and being an early childhood professional.

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