

Anti-Racism for Kids: An Age-by-Age Guide to Fighting Hate

In an era rife with division, bias incidents darken our news feeds and escalate our anxiety. We asked leading experts how parents can shield their children from—and shepherd them through—a world that seems hell-bent on hate.

By Katie Arnold-Ratliff

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Unfortunately, Americans are seeing all types of hate—racism, misogyny, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia—enjoying a grotesque golden age. Parents worry that their children will be exposed from early childhood, warping their views about diversity and inclusion. But here's some hopeful news: You can counter hate's insidious reach before it's too late. We asked experts in child psychology and the fight against bigotry for guidance about putting malevolent events and beliefs into context, dispelling little ones' misapprehensions, and empowering your kids to be forces for good.

Ages 0 to 6

In these early years, your task is to lay positive groundwork, addressing hate by cultivating its opposite—compassion and tolerance. Luckily, your child has a head start: an innocent indifference to what sets people apart. “Kids are very aware of ways we differ, but they aren't born identifying people with a particular race, gender, or ethnicity,” says David Schonfeld, M.D., professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California and Children's Hospital Los Angeles and director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement. “They don't naturally discriminate.”

The hope is that kids who grow up in communities that are ethnically, socioeconomically, or otherwise diverse will have acceptance baked into their worldview. That's not guaranteed, but studies show it does help. If your child has little exposure to people who don't look or live like her, though, experts advise bringing the world home: Study other cultures together by eating their foods and watching their films. Urge your child's teacher to build multiculturalism into her curriculum. Speak your mother tongue if you are bilingual, or encourage your child to study another language. A 2014 University of Chicago study revealed that children who hear multiple languages in daily life are more accepting of people whose language differs from their own—which is a stepping-stone toward a broader spirit of acceptance.

You don't need to preemptively lecture a kid this age on the evils of bigotry. (“I don't know that I'd sit down with a 3-year-old and say, ‘Let's talk about racism,’” says Dr. Schonfeld.) But if the need for a conversation arises, have it. “In 2017 we were seeing a wave of bomb threats at Jewish community centers,” says Jinnie Spiegler, director of curriculum and training at the Anti-Defamation League. “On the news you'd see very small kids evacuating from these facilities. Surely, they knew something was wrong and were afraid. So of course you'd want to talk about it with them.”



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This may seem impossible, but the key is keeping the scope and language manageable to encourage anti-racism in kids. “You’d say something like, ‘The person doing this must be very angry,’” Dr. Schonfeld says. “But we use our words to solve problems.” However odd the conversation feels, silence is worse. “Imagine you’re a 4-year-old and you notice Dad is looking at his phone, that he’s upset and people seem worried, and no one is telling you why,” says Spiegler. “Think how scary that would be.”

Ages 6 to 8

Discussing hate explicitly becomes easier at this age, but don’t think it has to be a super formal talk. “Families talk about these issues all the time without realizing it,” says Allison Briscoe-Smith, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Berkeley, California, who specializes in addressing trauma in children and the study of how children understand race. “Little kids are very attuned to what’s fair and not fair. That’s a strong basis for discussing injustice.”

Let your child be your guide. Kids this age can articulate their feelings, so the onus to direct the conversation needn’t—and shouldn’t—be entirely on you. “Ask her how she understands what she’s hearing,” says Dr. Briscoe-Smith. What are people saying on the playground? What has she seen on TV? You’ll be able to keep the conversation at the right level—of reassurance, honesty, and detail.

Also key: Don’t overdo it. “Be simple, brief, and as honest as you can be,” says Spiegler. If you feel a reflexive urge to downplay—“What happened at the garlic festival could never happen here”—avoid it. An empty promise sounds a lot like dismissiveness, and if she has fears about these events, she’ll feel you’re not taking them seriously. Instead, says Dr. Briscoe-Smith, “tell her what you do know for sure: that you love her, and that there are adults working to keep her safe.”

Kids can have a quirky, literal view of the world, and they may ask something seemingly bizarre but crucial to their understanding. “When I told my then 8-year-old daughter that Osama bin Laden had been killed, she asked me, ‘Where’s his body?’” says Spiegler. “It was an odd question, but you can’t trivialize what they genuinely want to know.”

You may also learn that your child has misunderstood part of what’s occurred, perhaps anxiously inflating the event to outsize proportions. But for every worry like “We can’t go to Walmart; people get shot there,” there is a calming response. You could say, “I understand why you’d think that, but that was a particularly unusual event, and it’s really unlikely to happen again.”

Ages 9 to 11

Child psychologists say that helping kids process scary events has become a very different task in recent years. The ubiquity of technology gives kids unprecedented exposure to information they don’t possess the maturity to make sense of. “The advice used to be: Turn off the TV; don’t



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allow kids access to images of death,” says Dr. Briscoe-Smith. “But by 9 or 10, they have phones. They’ll see it there and on the dozens of other screens they encounter. So we have to help them understand what they see and hear.”

Even with safety settings, upsetting news—and abhorrent views—will reach your child. Says Dr. Briscoe-Smith, “My kids tell me that students at their school tease Latino kids about ICE: ‘You better run, ICE is gonna get you.’ Research shows that in recent years there’s been an uptick in racialized bullying. So I ask, ‘What are people talking about at school, what’s your phone saying?’

This sort of inquiry is necessary, particularly if you have a child who isn’t naturally forthcoming. “You can’t count on your kids to bring up troubling things with you,” says Spiegler. “You need to ask. Rumors spread like wildfire at school and online. So help them fill in the gaps. ‘I’m not sure it happened that way in Minnesota,’ you can say, before explaining how it did happen.”

At this age, your child may also start to pick up on biased views among those he knows and loves. Grandma posts a homophobic meme; your neighbor goes off at the barbecue about the need for a border wall. Your child may rightly be confused: He cares for this person, but her beliefs differ from his family’s. Address these disparities. “Keep your language neutral,” says Dr. Briscoe-Smith. “‘We love Grandma, and we think differently from her. She’s come to her conclusions, but we’ve come to different ones.’

Tweens and Teens

As kids prepare to exit childhood, they cement their sense of identity, laying a foundation for who they will become. As we’ve seen in the news, this age can be a tipping point. Many kids, even most, will choose a life of acceptance, compassion, and respect for fellow human beings. Others will travel a darker path.

If you witness your child engaging in biased thinking or hate speech, whether online or in life—and yes, even kids of socially aware, justiceminded parents do so—speak up. “Adolescents are trying to develop their own values,” says Dr. Briscoe-Smith. “You say, ‘We’re not on the same page on this—so what do you believe?’ ” Remember that teenagers often fail to see things in their full complexity. “Stereotypes are oversimplifications,” says Spiegler. “If your child is buying into them, it’s your job to help him complicate his thinking, to see nuances he’s not appreciating.” She has a few pointers: “It’s a tightrope walk. You want to keep the conversation open but make it clear you don’t condone bias or stereotypes: ‘I don’t think that way, and I don’t think what you’re saying is respectful.’ Or: ‘I used to think that way, but then I read X or learned Y.’ Even if he doesn’t seem to, he’s hearing what you say.”

Other kids may, when confronting these vexing issues, feel compelled to act. This is a powerful impulse, and parents should support it. “It doesn’t have to mean starting a foundation,” says Dr. Briscoe-Smith. “It can be, ‘I’m going to do one kind thing today,’ or even, ‘I haven’t been sleeping well because I’m upset, so I’m going to make sure I get some sleep.’” Taking action



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also offers a sense of control. “Activism gives you agency,” says Spiegler. “It’s scary to see terribleness in the world, and if you feel you’re contributing and connecting with people who feel as you do, you’re reassured.”

None of this is easy, of course. You may stumble—after all, these issues are as complex as they are troubling. But in this as in all things, your best tool is your instincts. Says Spiegler, “Every parent, child, and situation is different. But we know our kids and what they can handle.” It’s okay to let your child see that you, too, are reacting to these scary times. “If we don’t show that we’re upset, our kids will feel abnormal for being upset,” says Dr. Schonfeld. “We can’t teach coping skills if we pretend we never need to cope.”

These conversations may not be comfortable, but they will be necessary. As Dr. Schonfeld says, “We can’t just teach our kids what’s easy—we need to teach them what’s important.”

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