Talking about the Unrest in our Midst: Helping Parents Help Their Children

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As we slowly start to move forward from the impact of COVID-19 in our lives, the world around us has imploded with outrage and sadness because of racism and injustice. It is impossible for children not to know something is going on given adult expressions over protests and violence, the news everywhere, and especially, from social media. Parents possess a powerful instinctive drive to keep their children safe at all costs, especially when they have a history of maltreatment. And, they do need our protection at this point-not from the reality of what is happening, but through our guidance in how to make sense of it all.

As parents who are fostering or who have adopted, you know the importance of talking about adoption and painful pasts. Children need information. Talking about difficult parts of their story doesn't make it worse. It validates what they are already thinking about. Talking about challenges is not only helpful to the child, it strengthens the parent-child relationship, and creates opportunities for understanding and growth.

As with the sensitive information about your child's birth story, it may be difficult for you to know how to begin conversations about violence, police brutality and racism. This may feel even more challenging to you if you are a white parent raising a child of color. You may be scared and confused yourself. You may feel that it is too hard for you or them to discuss painful things like rage, racism, or trauma. The reality is, *this* is their reality. And, our vulnerable and resilient children will very much be part of the solution.

There's no "one way" to dive into these topics, they are complex and can be heavy. As always, the role of parents who are fostering or who have adopted is to open communication and see how the child is doing with the information. In conversations about race, parents have the additional task of educating about racism and show clearly where the family stands on these issues. Each parent will have to decide for themselves what details make the most sense for them, their child and their family. Know that this conversation is not solely about color, it is about experiences that affect us all, so we encourage *all* parents to be talking about what is going on, no matter your background or experience and no matter the race or ethnicity of your child. This will be particularly critical for people who are parenting children of color who are working to figure out an identity for themselves in real time.

Know that historical events are often pivotal moments that define people of color, individually and as a people. You may not have all the answers, and that is ok, there is no better time to start the conversation than today.

Ways to make conversations with children user friendly

➤ Center yourself. You will have your own biases, thoughts and feelings; you can share, but be sure you're feeling calm enough to be a good listener to the child during these discussions

➤ Limit everyone's news exposure to avoid secondary trauma

➤ Be thoughtful about who is present- if you are parenting children of different ages they may need separate conversations, or consider if there are people present you don't want involved

➤ Try opening conversations with an attitude of compassionate curiosity-you're wanting to check in on what they're thinking about all that they've seen and heard that is going on in the world- feel free to start by asking them what they already know

➤ Use age appropriate language

➤ As with adoption, this is an on-going, developmentally evolving conversation. Know that all children are ready to understand and begin conversations about race, yet the younger the child, the less time we should probably spend talking (about anything!)

➤ If you have not begun conversations about race with your child, feel free to acknowledge it and share why you have not

➤ If you're really struggling, reach out to others for support (i.e., therapist, advocacy organization, friend of color, etc.)

➤ Connect the dots for children-do not assume they get it by stating facts, help them understand the "why"

➤ Use many examples to help them both understand and relate, such as a situation with a child they know at school, or characters or scenarios in a movie or book

➤ Model your values around racism and discrimination in your attitude and behavior-if you SAY something, show it with your actions to make clear it's true and you mean it

➤ Let the child ask any questions or express any emotions they want to (anger, sadness, numbness, confusion, etc.) Explore and acknowledge their feelings whether you agree or not-all are ok

➤ Watch the signs if they're ready to end the conversation-this does not mean they are done forever, just for now

➤ Use organic moments to initiate or further discussions, like after watching a movie or reading a book about the topics. Here are lists to be sure you have them available: **https://thebrownbookshelf.com/** and **https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/black-history-movies-that-tackle-racism**

➤ Always prioritize your child's sense of safety-be sensitive in all conversations about their personal histories, check in as you are talking with them about how they're feeling and if it seems too much, acknowledge that out loud and suggest picking back up a little later

Special considerations for teenagers

While younger children will look to their parents about how to think and feel, tweens and teens will be developing their own thoughts and feelings about these serious considerations. They may be drawn to watching footage of the violence on social media or exhibit anger, fear or anxiety. These are all signs that a teenager may need parental support. Choose a time when they seem a little more relaxed to check in. Realize that especially for children of color, they may be seeing themselves in the people they are watching get hurt, killed, or commit crimes. Acknowledge their fears that they too may be defined by these acts or perceptions.

Encourage them to be empowered to take action against inequity and be a part of the solution, which could include posting on-line or attending protests. If you are a white parent of a child of color, be honest that you cannot provide all that they will need to walk a journey that includes racism and oppression; provide mentors and peers of color, especially at times like these. Show your love by finding ways to support their growing sense of identity that go beyond listening to taking actions, like researching and/or going with them to visit places and people the child may feel like they need to at a time like this.

Also, understand that adolescence is a peak period to make sense of why their birth parents were not able to parent them, so as they digest injustice and racism, they may wonder if this was also part of their birth parents' experience. Allow for this conversation as it may well have been.

That does not take away from the reality that the child needed to be safe at that time. They are meant to be with your family now, growing into the healthy, strong person of color that the world needs them to be.

Helpful links for talking with children about race

- ➢ **Ways to talk with all children at different ages**
- ➢ **Resource for expressing emotions with children of color**
- ➢ **Raising race conscious children**
- ➢ **Your kids are not too young to talk about race**

Links to resources for discussing protests and racism at home

- ➢ **How to talk to kids about violence, crime and war**
- ➢ **Explaining the news to our kids**

Children's books that talk about the history of protesting

- ➢ **Talking to Kids About Protesting: 5 Things I Want My Kids to Know**
- ➢ **Children's Books About Protesting**

www.adoptionsupport.org

Additional Resources

With and for all children

- **How to Talk About Race – Kids**
- **How to Talk to Kids About Race and Racism**
- **Movies That Inspire Kids to Change the World**

For parents

Recognizing that for parents who are fostering or adopting children in racially and culturally diverse families, there is much more to know about these topics and raising children of diverse backgrounds.

- **Library Resources**
- **Resources specific to white parents**

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