

American Academy of Pediatrics Condemns Racism, Offers Advice for Families for How to talk to their Children

Itasca, Ill.—The killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests across the country have laid bare the nation’s legacy of racism and discrimination and the ways it harms all members of our communities. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) condemns racism of all forms, and notes that even vicarious racism – witnessed through social media, conversations with friends or family, or media images – harms children’s health.

“Racism harms children’s health, starting from before they are born,” said AAP President Sally Goza, MD, FAAP. “A growing body of research supports this, and we cannot ignore the impact.”

The AAP recommends parents proactively engage their children around these traumatic events, taking into account their age and development.

“As a parent, you have to assume children of almost any age are hearing about what is happening in our nation today,” said Nia Heard-Garris, MD, MSc, FAAP, chair of the AAP Section on Minority Health, Equity and Inclusion. “Ideally you can talk with your child first before they hear the news from other sources, and help to frame the events in an age-appropriate way. Parents should be having these conversations now.”

Children may hear adult conversations, see a video on social media platforms, or watch news coverage of violent protests. Children may be fearful about their own safety or their family’s safety, or have questions about what the protests mean, or why people have been killed by police.

Dr. Heard-Garris and Jacqueline Dougé, MD, MPH, FAAP, co-author of the AAP [policy statement](#) on racism, recommend:

- Check in with your child. Ask what they know, what they've seen, and how they are feeling. Validate their feelings and reassure them it’s normal to feel emotions. You know your child best and what information they can handle. For younger children, you can tell them what you are doing to keep your family safe. For pre-teens and older children, you can ask if they’ve experienced mistreatment or racism, or witnessed this happening.
- Watch for changes in your child’s behavior – some children may become more aggressive, while others will become withdrawn. If you are concerned about your child suffering more severe anxiety, fear or distress, reach out to your pediatrician or mental health provider for additional support.
- Place limits on what your child sees in media. Do not leave the TV on in the background. With older children and teens, watch with them and discuss what you’re seeing. Listen to their observations and share your own. You can use commercial breaks, or pausing, to have brief discussions. With younger children, limit their exposure to media, including TV, smartphones or tablets, and make sure media exposure occurs in a common area where parents can check in.
- As an adult, tune into your own emotions and check that you are ok. If you are not, ask for help to deal with the trauma and emotional impact of these images.

- Create a list of your own coping strategies, and when you need to use them, tap into that list.
- For all families, this is a teachable moment, when you can discuss the history of racism and discrimination in the U.S. and equip your children to make change.
- If you struggle to find the “right” words, consider using books or other resources to share with your child. HealthyChildren.org offers some tips in [this article](#). You can share with your children that no one is perfect, talk about what you are doing to be anti-racist, what you have learned, and how you as a family can step up.

“Parents can acknowledge that people are treated differently based on the color of their skin and where they live, and share examples of this happening,” said Dr. Douge. “Parents can also model how to make a positive difference. For example, perhaps your family can call your city council person or superintendent to advocate for issues faced by communities of color. Adults can also confront their own bias and model how they want their children to respond to others who may be different than them.”

The AAP holds that racism harms everyone, including children of all races and ethnicities. It is not a conversation that can be avoided, said Joseph Wright, MD, MPH, FAAP, a member of the AAP Board of Directors and past chair of the AAP Task Force on Addressing Bias and Discrimination.

“These are conversations African-American families have had to have for generations,” said Dr. Wright. “But if this is not something other families have discussed yet, what is happening right now is an essential and unavoidable, teachable moment. If we are to progress in this country, it’s going to be because we help our children, adolescents and young adults learn not just that racism exists, but that it is something all of us can work together to dismantle. Racism is not inexorable.”

In 2019, AAP published the policy statement, ["Racism and Its Impact on Child and Adolescent Health."](#) In it the AAP lays out an agenda calling for equitable policies at the local, state and federal level to reduce disparities and advance social justice.

“Failure to address racism will undermine our progress toward health equity. As an organization dedicated to the health and well-being of children, adolescents and young adults, it is in our mission as the American Academy of Pediatrics to fight all forms of racism,” Dr. Goza said. “We must dismantle racism at every level, from individual to institutional to systemic. Our nation did not get here overnight, and the road to progress and healing will be long and difficult, but the work we have before us is essential. Our children’s future will be built on these moments of reckoning.”

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