



Talking to Youth of Color about Racism

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Exposure to images and videos of racism-based violence has become increasingly prevalent in the past few years. While documentation of these acts has helped increase awareness of racial discrimination, youth of color are now exposed to both online and offline racial stressors in addition to being impacted by historical racism and trauma. Children and young people are in need of safe outlets to process these experiences, and healthcare providers, teachers, caregivers, and mental health clinicians have the opportunity to validate their reactions and discuss race and racism in a way that supports youth of color and their families.

The Effects of Racism Among Youth of Color

Prior research has shown that exposure to racial discrimination and violence can impact the well-being of youth, contributing to trauma-like symptoms and reactions. These may include increased intrusive thoughts, vigilance, depression, aggression, or substance use. Compounding these consequences of interpersonal racism, youth of color also face institutional and systemic racism, and thus continue to face ongoing violence and a range of racial disparities, including lack of access to quality education, clinical care, healthcare, and employment.

As such, it is critically important for educators, providers, and caretakers, as well as other individuals who interact with youth, to incorporate thoughtful, race-conscious practices into their work and discussions with youth, in order to best protect and provide for their mental health.

Recommendations for Talking with Youth and Families of Color

Although there is no one-size-fits-all approach to conversations discussing racism-based violence or related events, we hope that individuals interacting with youth and their families about such topics consider the following:

- **Self-reflection and preparation:** Reflect on your own racial identity, biases, and privilege. Remember that self-reflection is not something that happens once but should instead be integrated into one's routine. If you do not have experience talking about race-related topics, it is important to practice with someone beforehand.

- **Setting the foundation to talk about racism-related events:** Though discussing racism-based violence can be challenging, having these conversations regularly and early on can communicate to youth that you have created a safe space where they can share their thoughts about racism and identity. Additionally, talking about racism early on can help inform future conversations related to racism-based violence. Conversations about racism-related stressors can also vary based on the race and ethnicity of the individual initiating the conversation. Therefore, it is especially important to introduce the topic early on to provide a space for youth to share freely. Educators should develop meaningful relationships with youth of color, especially those with decreased school connectedness, and create opportunities for them to vocalize their thoughts and feelings.
- **Discussing racism-related events with youth in age-appropriate ways:** The use of open-ended questions (e.g., how are you feeling?) helps to avoid making assumptions about how youth may be processing racism-related events. It also empowers youth to share their own lived experiences. These conversations may need to be tailored based on the child's age. For example, while it may be developmentally appropriate to talk with an adolescent about racism-related events, individuals speaking with young children should first speak to caregivers and incorporate them into the conversation and discussion.
- **Allow youth to lead the discussion:** Provide youth with a space to process their thoughts and feelings using a non-judgmental stance to validate their response to the event. It can also be helpful to have feelings charts or opportunities for alternative expression readily available for youth who are having difficulty with identifying and/or verbalizing their emotions.
- **Using a strengths-based approach to promote racial healing:** After validating their feelings, it is important to identify and affirm strengths (e.g., cultural- and community-based assets) that promote resilience. For example, some youth may find healing from engaging in community action, like volunteering for an anti-racist community initiative. Incorporating the strengths of the family is also critical at this stage. Youth are likely to develop greater confidence and skills in coping with racism-based stressors when caregivers promote cultural pride (i.e., teaching children about their cultural heritage and traditions).
- **Promoting healthy social media use:** Discussing social media use (e.g., developing positive strategies, limiting time spent online, turning on app restrictions, or reducing use entirely) can be helpful, as exposure to racism online, such as pictures, videos, and news stories, can result in trauma-related symptoms.
- **Debriefing:** Always allow time for debriefing when discussing racism with youth. This can be a time to check in about how youth felt discussing racial topics with another person (and potentially one of a different race or ethnicity) and can communicate an open-door policy for continued dialogue in the future.

Using these concrete steps, clinicians and other care providers can begin to engage in the salient issue of racism and make space for youth of color to express and process their reactions and experiences—all to the end of supporting and protecting their mental health and well-being.

With questions about this brief, contact Chardée Galán.

Read more at *Combating the Conspiracy of Silence: Clinician Recommendations for Talking About Racism-Related Events With Youth of Color.*