

Preparing our Children for Racism

Part 1: Laying the Groundwork

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I always knew that this day would come and have been preparing my children for it since they were two or three. I read books and articles, hoping to it off as long as possible. I secretly gave them tools to fight with, without actually telling them what the fight was all about. I did not want to taint their innocence, but I knew they had to be ready.

Still, I was unprepared for how sad I would feel when my kindergartener told me about her first brush with a racist slur.

I say "brush" because the comment made by one of her classmates was not really directed at her. Uttered in innocence, it was not meant to be insulting or malicious, but it hurt her nevertheless.

At lunch one day, my daughter used her hands to make a funny face, about which her classmate observed, "Those are Japanese eyes."

My heart sank at my daughter's report, but I tried to control my expression as memories of my own classmates' chanting came flooding back.

My daughter said to the girl, "No it's not."

"Yes it is."

"No it's not."

A student teacher happened to overhear the conversation and stepped in to say, "My eyes are a little bit slanted, but I'm not Japanese."

I asked my daughter how she felt and she said, "Bad," although she says she felt better after the teacher stuck up for her.

When I asked why she felt bad, she said, "Because Andy is Japanese!" Andy is her best friend, but he is Chinese, not Japanese.

Then she said, "I saw a Japanese person once and his eyes weren't like that."

She points to the Mulan plate in front of her and explains to me what Mulan's eyes, my eyes, her sisters' eyes, and her eyes look like. "Nobody has eyes like that."

She is indignant, but does not understand why. She does not know the rest of that dreaded rhyme, that it slurs Chinese eyes, too. She does not know that some people confuse Chinese and Japanese and other Asian people. She certainly does not know that there are those who do not like Asian people, or who think we are not as good and do not belong here. Still, she feels it in the pit of her stomach. I am heartbroken for my six-year-old, and feel that because I already fought this battle for myself, she should be spared.

I rehearse what I am going to say to the other child's mother, because you have to be careful how to say these things. First, I will pseudo-apologize: "Well, it's just hard on her because it's her first time." But immediately, I am the one who feels indignant. *They* never have to worry about their child's first time facing racism, I think. They don't dread the day when it will hit. Besides, I know that it is not going to be any easier the second, third, or fourth time.

So how do we prepare our children for racism? Here's what I learned from other parents, experts, and my own life: Start early, remember and examine our own experiences, practice coping methods ahead of time, build self-esteem and a strong sense of identity, teach them to tell an adult, and show them how to take action.

Start Early

Racist comments can come as early as preschool. Often preschoolers do not understand the connotations of what they are saying, but they are beginning to notice differences among them. Just as you would not want to wait until after your child has been molested by the neighborhood pedophile to teach her that her private parts are private and not to go off with a stranger, you should not wait until after her first encounter with racism to teach her about it. (As an aside, experts say that one of the best defenses against child molesters is simply teaching your child the correct names for their private parts because then she has the words to tell someone else exactly what happened. I think a similar case can be made for anti-racism education.)

You do not have to tell her all the gory details about racism, but you can still give her generalized rules and ideas about tolerance like "Do not exclude people" and "Everybody is different and difference is cool." Correct her when you hear her making incorrect, stereotypical statements like, "Boys do not have eyelashes" or "This brown doll is dirty," so that she learns to look past stereotypes and to examine differences for herself.

Remember

Remember your own childhood experiences with racism, how you felt, what you did, and how you wish it could have gone instead. Read about other people's experiences and reactions. Talk to other parents and teachers to get ideas about how to handle it. Examine your own prejudices about Caucasian Americans, African Americans, multiracial Asian Americans, and others. If you have girls, you will also have to think about sexism in both your Asian culture and in mainstream American culture.

If you have not had personal experiences with racism, think about other instances of bullying or discrimination such as ageism, religious and gender discrimination, etc. Or, before going on to *Part 2: From Understanding to Action*, try my Scarlet Letter experiment.

The Scarlet Letter: An Exercise in Exploring Visible Differences

In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is forced to wear a Scarlet A on her chest because she was caught committing adultery during Puritan times. Imagine

an A on your blouse; or to update it, a D for Divorced, G for Gay, or S for Sex. You may not think there is anything wrong with being divorced or having premarital sex any more, but some people still do. And because of the A or S on your chest, they know who you are. But you do not know who they are, their behavior, assumptions, background, feelings, or other personal attributes.

When you go to a club and ten people ask you to dance: is it because you are beautiful today, or because they think you're easy? When the club's bartender gives you prompt service, is it because they are really busy or because they are afraid to catch AIDS (and everyone knows divorcees all have AIDS)? When you go to rent a house and do not get it is it really because they rented it to someone else, or are they afraid of the wild drunken orgies they know divorcees have? When you meet someone new, do they expect you to know and teach them everything you know about the experience of being divorced? When the topic of divorce comes up, does the whole room turn around and look at you for the definitive answer? In the grocery store check out line ask you, "How long have you been divorced?" "Did you catch him in bed with another woman?" "Did you divorce him or did he divorce you?" "Are you going to wear white in your next wedding?" "Do you use condoms?" or other too-personal questions. Do your friends who are liberal and accepting surprise you with comments like, "She's gotten divorced, no wonder he divorced her...Oh, well I don't mean you. You're big bones."

It does not take long before you start double guessing people's motives or simply get tired of the same dumb question over and over again. These are minor compared to getting beaten up or killed by illiterate skinheads who are a D from a G from an S, but they still chafe like a burr under the saddle of supposed equality.

Remembering and recognizing stereotypes, and rehearsing strategies for dealing with them, is a necessary and important step in helping your child. There comes a time, however, to put the lessons into practice.

Preparing our Children for Racism

Part 2: From Understanding to Action

After my six-year-old's first brush with racism, I had to act. How do we prepare our children for racism? Start early, remember and examine our own experiences, practice coping methods ahead of time, build self-esteem and a strong sense of identity, teach them to tell an adult, and show them how to take action.

Practice

Always be on the lookout for "teachable moments"—situations that parallel an experience of racial stereotyping or slurs but are not so loaded. These help your child practice how to deal with unfairness, preferably with her occasionally on the offending side, too, so that she is not always the victim. For us, a moment presented itself one day during Chinese summer camp when all the girls ganged up on the one boy and made fun of him on the monkey bars. All the children were Chinese-American and all the offenders were girls, so the lesson was not directly about racism or discrimination against women, but a more general lesson against torturing people who are different from you.

Give your child the words to use so that when that moment comes she will know what to say. For example, when one sibling tortures another sibling, let her practice using her words, "I feel hurt/angry/sad when you say that, please stop," or "No, that's not true."

Teach your child how to say that she is American and her family originally came from China or Thailand or Vietnam so that when the dreaded "Where are you from" question inevitably arises, she can answer quickly without fumbling for words and without embarrassment.

Self-esteem and Identity

Building up your child's self-esteem is the best defense. Give her a strong sense of self and her ethnic heritage. Allow her to define herself, rather than letting racist comments and stereotypes do it for her. How?

Surround her with other children like herself so that she will have allies and not be the only one. (Also expose her to children of diverse backgrounds so that she, too, will learn about diversity.) Help her make connections to other Asians and other people of color. Buy multicultural books and videos, dolls and action figures, and watch Asian television and movies so that she will see her image reflected around her.

It's not very Asian, but tell her she is beautiful or he is handsome, as well as smart and nice. Take her to places where she will see other Asians and people of color, like Asia, California, New York, the Asian grocery store, Chinese School. Teach her about your family's culture and all the incredible things that Asians and Asian Americans have invented and accomplished (*also see, [Asian Pacific American Heritage Month for Kids](#)*). Give presentations at school and educate her peers. Keep an eye on her posture and teach her to stand tall and walk briskly. If a bully cannot get your child react, then there will be no fun in it.

Did you tell your parents or teacher when kids taunted you on the playground? Neither did I. But conflicts among kids are more dangerous – even deadly – today.

Tell an Adult

When the kids taunted you on the playground, did you ever tell your parents or teacher? Neither did I. If I had, they probably would have told me to turn the other cheek and ignore it. These days, however, adults are more aware of bullying and racial taunting. Even if people dismiss our specific sensitivities as "Political Correctness" or fail to understand them, they know that racial hostility is a sensitive issue. Conflicts among children have become more dangerous – even deadly – since we were kids, so responsible adults are less apt to just shrug off school-yard racism saying, "kids will be kids."

We should teach our children to tell a teacher, tell an adult, and most importantly, tell us their parents. Take a deep breath and ask open-ended questions to find out what really happened. Listen. Let her talk about how she feels. Let her express her anger and hurt. Let her know that you understand, that it happened to you, too; that it happens to a lot of people and it is not fair. Tell her stories about how people she knows faced and dealt with similar situations. Give her tools and ideas with which to cope, such as may be found by consulting some of the resources listed in this article's sidebar. Help her strategize what else she could have said or done. Let her know that it has less to do with her than with the bully's own insecurities and shortcomings. Assure her that home will always be a safe haven where she is loved unconditionally. Kiss and hug her.

If the teacher is the problem, pull out the big guns, rally other parents of color, and make waves. Worst-case: Move.

Take Action

And then we need to take action. If we say nothing, our silence gives our assent and allows racist incidents to be perpetuated. Our children also need to see us stand up for them so that they can learn to stand up for themselves.

We need to work together with our children's teachers and schools to bring multiculturalism and tolerance into the curriculum. Getting your child involved in the process is especially empowering. There are many resources available online, and many organizations that specialize in racial sensitivity training for schools.

If the teacher is the problem, or if the teacher does not acknowledge that there is a racial problem, then you need to pull out the big guns and talk to the principal and to the School Board. If you are worried that you might be making a big fuss over nothing, ask other Asian-American parents (especially those who have grown up in America) and other parents of color what they think. Get them to rally with you. Make waves. Worst-case scenario, move (to California), or get your child out of that classroom and into a more multicultural and tolerant environment.

Chinese Eyes

My daughter's first brush with racism was relatively benign, as these things go. Everything that should have happened (like the teacher intervening at just the right moment) did happen, and it really could not have gone any easier. It happened at her hip and liberal multicultural school, which is 30% Asian. The slur was not really directed at her and was not intended with malice. She had the words and the self-confidence to say, "No, it's not like that." A vigilant teacher overheard the exchange and intervened immediately. My daughter told me about it within two days. I talked to her teacher about it the next day. I know the other child and her family—they are not racist; I plan to talk with them about this tonight. My daughter is happy at school, popular and social, and she has bounced back with no problems. She still signs her name in Chinese and still likes to sing her Chinese poems to the class at circle time.

The only difference is that she has suddenly started drawing Japanese ladies with the big elaborate hairdos, chopsticks in their hair, and little squinty slanty eyes. When I ask her about it, she is embarrassed and will not tell me about it. I suppose that despite all my efforts and preparation, this is still something that she has to work out for herself.

Also of Interest on the Village

A National Tragedy: Promoting Tolerance and Peace in Children - Tips for Parents and Schools

By the National
Association of School
Psychologists

While anger is a normal response to the 9-11 attacks, we must not compound an already great tragedy with vengeful intolerance

Resources for Teaching Tolerance

Part 3: Supplement for Parents and Teachers

Defining Diversity, Prejudice, and Respect

<http://kidshealth.org/kid/feeling/emotion/diversity.html>

This is a great article that talks directly to kids by KidsHealth, created by The Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media. It asks: Where Do I Find Diversity? What Is Prejudice? What Is Respect? Another section offers suggestions under the heading Practicing Respect.

Scholastic Magazine on Diversity

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/teachdive/>

Scholastic Magazine offers lesson plans, activities, and professional resources to help teachers develop a diversity curriculum. An incredible resource.

Teaching Tolerance Magazine

<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/index.jsp>

Teaching Tolerance is an award-winning project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which collects, produces, and distributes information to support the efforts of K-12 teachers and other educators to promote respect for differences and appreciation of diversity.

Writing for Change

Raising Awareness of Difference, Power, and Discrimination—50 free downloadable activities to expose bias in language

Parenting for Tolerance at Tolerance.org

Resources for parents

10 Ways to Nurture Tolerance

Ten ways for developing the tolerance in your child.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Education Page

http://www.adl.org/main_education.asp

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) develops training programs and resources for schools and communities to promote racial and religious tolerance.

Talking to Your Child About Hatred & Prejudice

How do we teach our children not to hate – and stand up to hate? How do we help our children when they are victims of hate?

What to Tell Your Children about Prejudice and Discrimination

Suggestions to help your child get along with people of varied backgrounds and abilities in the United States today.
en Espanol

Discussing Hate & Violence with Your Children

What can we say or do to help our children and grandchildren feel safe?

Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice

Materials and lesson plans for educators and others interested in teaching children and teens about diversity, equality, religious freedom and other basic American values.

American Jewish Committee

Hands Across the Campus

A program developed by the American Jewish Committee that promotes tolerance and combats prejudice in secondary schools across the country

California Tomorrow

www.californiatomorrow.org

California Tomorrow is a nonprofit organization dedicated to contributing to the building of a strong and fair multiracial, multicultural, multilingual society that is equitable for everyone.

Helping Children Develop a Sense of Identity

How children of different ethnic groups develop a sense of group identity as well as personal identity, why it is important, and how you can help.

Teaching Diversity: A Place to Begin

How we can raise children to celebrate and value diversity and to be proud of themselves and their family traditions.

How we can teach children to respect and value people regardless of the color of their skin, their physical abilities, or the language they speak.

Preparing Children for a Multicultural World

http://www.4children.org/news/999divrs.htm

A great article from Children's Advocate magazine, published by Action Alliance for Children, in which diversity leaders share strategies for weaving the value of difference into early childhood.

Parenting Magazine

http://www.parenting.com/

A Question of Color--Racial awareness comes early — through preschool, TV, relatives — so parents must be aware of the signals that are sent

Teaching Tolerance--Kids notice people's differences early on, but they're not prejudiced. How to encourage them to stay that way.

Dr. Spock

Dr. Spock stays current with these articles on bullying and bully-proofing your child.

Bully Proofing Your Child

Effective Anti-Bullying Programs in Schools

Teaching Your Children Tolerance in the Face of Violence

African-American Village

Battling Bias

From our sister publication, African-American Village, five steps for helping children effectively cope with prejudice.

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