



Talking to Children about Race

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“Mommy I’m not black, I’m brown,” said [Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's](#) son as they talked about being the “black” kid in class. This dialogue was familiar to me as I remembered having an identical conversation with my mother as a child. We playfully bantered back and forth as my mom insisted I was black, and I insisted I was brown. It’s a fond memory for me filled with laughter and comfort. Of course, there is a more serious dialogue to be had about what it truly means to be black in America, but at that time my mom’s warmth and attention to my curiosity was more than enough. Dr. Tatum responded to her young son in a similarly playful way. She walked around the grocery store holding a white piece of paper and asked her son to compare the paper to white-appearing individuals, thus illustrating that white and black characterizations aren’t as simple as colored crayons.

Parents have a challenging job in attending to the curiosity about race that young children may bring up at seemingly random times. I’m amazed by the parents who are open and seem so quickly prepared to creatively attend to their child’s curiosity and engage them in a way that’s relatable and informative. Sometimes it may seem that parents downplay or even ignore the severity of certain conversations their child may bring up. I encourage parents to be courageous and motivated to help their child navigate some of the more complex issues we face such as racism, sexism, and inclusion among many others.

In a virtual presentation for the Discovery Museum Speaker Series, Dr. Tatum shared some tips for talking to children about race. The full link is below, but here are some highlights:

- Children notice differences and will be curious. Listen to your children – they will likely bring up race, allowing you to have an opportunity to respond in a way that is appropriate for their age.
- Try to be natural and monitor your own anxiety so they copy your behavior.
- There are ways to expose children to other races, including books, media, and more.
- Explain situations in words that children will understand. As some topics might be upsetting, you want to be honest without being anxiety-provoking. For example, Dr. Tatum explained slavery to her 4-year-old son in a particularly impressive and relatable way. She shared that Europeans wanted to get strong and smart workers from Africa to help them build the United States but did not want to pay them, so they

kidnapped them. This example, although simplistic, remains authentic to the gross injustice of slavery. Dr. Tatum emphasizes being intentional and thoughtful in framing conversations about race to help guide your child to a more empowering place.

- Reading books to children about our history can both teach them and help them examine current inequities. Dr. Tatum emphasizes that these conversations can be hard, but we can talk to children about change and how to address situations they perceive as unfair.

Additional Resources

You can view Dr. Tatum's full presentation for the Discovery Museum Speaker Series at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqRicGbxug&feature=youtu.be>

Dr. Tatum's advice for talking to toddlers about race: <https://www.babylist.com/hello-baby/talkingabout-race-toddler>

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.