



Talking to Children about Race: Recommendations from Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum at the Discovery Museum Speaker Series

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“Mommy I’m not black, I’m brown,” said Dr. Daniel Tatum’s son as he shared with her a conversation she had in school 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 as 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, underlining a more serious dialogue 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. Daniel Tatum responded to her young son in a similar way as she turned his curiosity into a fun activity as she took a white piece of paper and walked around the grocery store and asked her son to compare the white sheet of paper to white appearing individuals—illustrating that white and black characterizations aren’t as concrete as colored crayons.

Parents have a challenging job in attending to the curiosity and harder concepts that young children may bring up at seemingly random times and want immediate answers too. 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.

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum recently gave a virtual presentation for the Discovery Museum Speaker Series. While I recommend watching the full video (link below), what follows are some of her tips for talking to children about race.

- 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. Daniel 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. Daniel 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. Daniel Tatum emphasizes that these conversations can be hard, but we can talk to them about change and how to address situations they perceive as unfair.

You can view Dr. Daniel Tatum's full conversation at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-sqRicGbxug&feature=youtu.be>

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

Dr. Daniel Tatum recommends this resource for finding helpful books for children: www.socialchangebooks.org