

Talking to Your Toddler About Race: When and How to Begin

A Developmental Understanding of Race and Difference

Many families wonder how to talk to young children about race, or even if they should. How soon is too soon to start that conversation? The answer is that it is never too soon — even infants notice differences between people and how they look. Adults can help lay a positive foundation for this learning process by acknowledging and talking positively with toddlers about differences.

Here are some strategies for getting started based on your child's developmental stage.



Birth to 1 Year

At birth, babies look equally at faces of all races. This changes quickly within the first few months. By 3 months old, a baby's brain can notice race-based differences and show preference for faces similar to their caregiver's. By 9 months, babies exhibit "stranger anxiety" around people with unfamiliar features. So what can you do to lay the right foundation at this age?

Surround your baby with a diverse environment. Your baby's preferences at this age are not indicative of racial bias, but rather familiarity. Examine everything in your environment to make sure that diversity is well-represented (e.g., Do your child's toys and entertainment represent racial diversity? Does your family interact often with friends and professionals from different racial groups?).



1 to 2 Years

By this point, children can easily categorize people based on skin color and will begin to develop ideas and values about people as they watch and listen to adults for racial cues. As such, you will want to be very mindful of your own words and actions.

Model the behavior you want to see in your toddler. Young children see color and learn to become silent about it or attribute negative connotations to it when the adults in their lives are reluctant to acknowledge or explicitly discuss it. Talk openly and positively about racial differences as you would with other physical differences, like gender or hair color.



2 to 3 Years

By the time children are 2 years old, they are able to stereotype along racial lines and internalize racial bias. By 3, these internalized biases can show up in your child's choice of playmates and how they treat others who are different from them. Because very young children lack the reasoning skills to recognize and make sense of implicit biases, parents have an important role here.

Actively discuss race and difference with your child. This requires more than one conversation; it should be a series of ongoing discussions that become more complex as your child grows. Storytime is a great opportunity to talk with your child about race. The Milwaukee County Birth to 3 Program recommends these 5 books as a starting place.