

Building Empathy in Our Children

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The past week has been agonizing for Americans. After bearing witness to the tragic killing of George Floyd, and evoking a sense of anger and outrage, our country is not where it should be in terms of racial division and equality. Peaceful protests and demonstrations nationwide followed, exercising our freedom of speech, and characterizing one of the privileges of being an American citizen. While the majority of protesters expressed their understandable anger and despair in a peaceful manner, others chose destruction and theft, leaving parts of our cities destroyed and George Floyd's family and many civic, religious and community leaders saying this is not the way to achieve justice, and not what George Floyd would have wanted.

Our children have been watching or experiencing the narrative of racism, social inequality, injustice, and personal safety unfold, and as if parents did not feel enough anxiety already, they are now searching for ways to talk to their children about these recent events. How do parents create a safe space for discussions about race, privilege, and injustice with the goal of educating our kids, helping them reflect on their world and cultivate empathy for others, and embrace anti-racist values, standing up to hate?

I remember when my kids were growing up, our most significant conversations took place in the car when I was driving, and they were in the backseat and did not have to make eye contact with me. Now in the pandemic, families are with each other 24/7 with little personal space and a lot of stress. Having these conversations now is critical and finding the optimal location and time is a challenge indeed.

If parents were to think of moments like the ones over the past week, when people are scared, confused, uncomfortable, and angry, as opportunities for tremendous growth and learning then perhaps the intense feelings of despair and anxiety can be redirected towards self-reflection, awareness, and change for both the adult and the child.

To begin conversations with kids it is imperative to know yourself and your own feelings about some big topics. Self-Awareness is a must! What are the values that you live by, how do you feel about your own ethnicity and heritage, and how does your own life experience inform your beliefs about social justice, social action, inequality, discrimination, diversity, and inclusion? If you have a partner or spouse, talking to each other about your feelings and creating a loving and encouraging

space where these difficult conversations can take place and will benefit children in the long run. Engendering a comfort level between partners enables healthy discussion with kids where self-expression is honored.

Finding the appropriate language by which you express your values and beliefs based on kids' ages and developmental stages can help to engage your children in meaningful conversations. Looking for cues that they bring forth to start a discussion will also show your ability to be responsive when they want to talk. When you are asked questions about events such as last week's, respond thoughtfully and honestly. Use "I" messages in explaining your feelings, like "I feel sad that George Floyd died;" "I feel like it is not fair;" "I know some very caring police;" or "I feel like people should be free to express themselves peacefully."

You can also frame a conversation about protests in front of the White House, or at the Philadelphia Art Museum as an important way to express oneself when a person doesn't agree with something that has happened or the way that someone has behaved. When talking with teenagers it may be more appropriate to hear what they think and why, as opposed to finding opportunities to share your own views. Asking questions about their ideas or what they think is needed (even if it isn't well thought-out) might get them thinking and open the door for future conversations. No one needs to have all the answers—everyone just needs to care.

The relationship between the parent and child is key for discussions that tap into kids' sense of belonging, safety, and responsibility for themselves and others. If the parent is overly anxious and stressed, kids most likely will be too. If the parent can listen and acknowledge all feelings, more and more discussion will naturally occur.

It seems that all roads in talking to kids about the unrest in our country lead to the cultivation of empathy and this is something that a parent must first model themselves. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. We want our children to experience deep empathy in times like these so that they evolve and lead the next generation with a sense of hope, compassion, and responsibility. Now is the time. Developing empathy in children is the most hopeful way to cope with the cruelty and chaos our country is now experiencing, with the goal of changing the future.

