

Talking with Youth about Anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander Hate



As a caregiver, you have multiple conversations with youth each day, especially if they are your own children. You might ask, “*How was your day?*” “*Did you do your homework?*” “*How was practice?*”. So how do you ask the tough questions about things like race, violence, and discrimination? Discussing these topics with another adult is hard enough, but to have them with youth may seem daunting.

AAPI is a vast diaspora with over 50 distinct ethnic groups

Although having these conversations may be hard, they are important. These conversations let youth know that if they, or a peer, are experiencing discrimination it is okay and safe for them to talk about it with a trusted adult. Having these conversations also creates a space where youth can understand, respect, and appreciate the differences between themselves and their peers, while also growing their capacity for empathy and compassion for others.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, acts of hatred, prejudice, and violence targeting the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community have become more prevalent globally. The pandemic worsened a problem that has persisted for centuries - anti-AAPI hate. These reports of racism and discrimination may be unnerving and confusing for many. More importantly, these reports and the increase in violence may cause fear and confusion for a child who has not developed the capacity to process – or think through and make meaning for – such violent acts. It may leave older youth wondering who they can talk to about such things or confused about what they are feeling.

This resource provides an understanding of why it is important to talk to children about race-based hate, how to recognize signs of traumatic stress and its impact, how to begin a conversation with youth about anti-AAPI hate, and what can be done in response.

Why is it so important to talk about race-based hate?

When taught about race, diversity, and culture at an early age, youth grow with the understanding that it is okay to talk and ask about these complex topics. It is important to have these conversations early as youth begin to form ideas and beliefs about themselves and other races and ethnicities.² Learning these concepts at an early age also helps a youth formulate an understanding of race-based hate and discrimination.

For more information about the historical trauma AAPI communities have endured please see [Rise of Anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander Hate: Brief on Historical Trauma in AAPI Communities and How We Got Here](#).

Although tough, youth have the capability to process their emotions that stem from race-based hate. This is especially important when events affect themselves or their peers.

Children begin to develop a sense of racial identity by the age of 3 or 4. When they enter elementary school, they start to hear about race and racism from their peers and media (including social media) they consume.¹ By middle school (12-14 years), youth develop a greater association of self to their sociocultural identities, such as ethnicity and race, as well as develop heightened sensitivity to both positive and negative opinions and biases from their peers. During high school (15-18 years), youth are increasingly exposed to racism, especially from peers, which may be particularly detrimental to their self-esteem during such a critical time for identity development.¹²

Before talking to children or teens about this topic, take time to reflect on your own reactions. Be mindful or aware of your own implicit or unspoken thoughts, messages, and behaviors about race, and how those impact your messages and behaviors towards others. If you are unsure what your implicit biases are, consider reflecting on the attitudes about race that were held in your family. How have those attitudes impacted you and those around you? You may have had overtly racist verbal or physical interactions; or have experienced systemic racism (e.g., more difficult to find housing due to your race; differences in requirements for jobs or schools; teachers not picking you as the leader; other kids not picking you for their team, etc.). Being mindful of how these things impact your thoughts and feelings about others is helping when supporting youth with their own feelings. Seek support for yourself and offer support or resources to other adults interacting with youth who may need to manage their own reactions when speaking about race-based hate.



How do I recognize if a youth has been impacted by race-based violence and/or discrimination?

If you notice a change in behavior after a youth has witnessed or experienced discrimination, this is a critical moment to talk to them about racism and its relationship to trauma. It is important to do this in a developmentally appropriate way, checking for their understanding of racism, discrimination, and hate-based violence and how their experience(s) may be affecting them now.

Reactions to trauma may differ depending on the severity of the traumatic event, age or developmental level of the child, and each child's personal circumstances. Common reactions range from a mild behavior change to strong emotional and physical problems that can persist long after the event.



Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses, such as:

- Intense and ongoing emotional upset.
- Depressive symptoms or anxiety.
- Difficulties with self-regulation.
- Problems relating to others or forming attachments.
- Regression or loss of previously acquired skills.
- Attention and academic difficulties.
- Nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating.
- Physical symptoms, such as aches and pains.

Children are not immune to the effects of traumatic experiences. Even infants and toddlers can experience traumatic stress. Younger children may not want to go to school without being able to say or explain why. They may complain of having a tummy ache, have a temper tantrum for no apparent reason, and/or have some repetitive behavior (e.g. thumbsucking, rubbing hands). Older children may use drugs or alcohol, behave in risky ways, or engage in unhealthy sexual activity as a possible reaction to prolonged exposure to experiences of discrimination.⁷ They may also appear distracted or unable to pay attention, and may lose interest in activities they enjoy.



Youth who suffer from traumatic stress may experience these same reactions when reminded of a traumatic event. These reminders could be people, smells, sounds, or places that they associate or connect to the event in some way. Most people experience reactions to stress from time to time, but when a child is experiencing traumatic stress these reactions interfere with the child's daily life and ability to function and interact with others.

You may need to assess whether a child needs more immediate support from a mental health professional or therapist following a stressful or traumatic event, as these may interfere with their everyday life. It may be challenging if parents or family members' primary language is not English or have limited English language skills. This may unintentionally cause the child or teen to act as an interpreter. Asking for help may also be challenging if parents or family members have certain feelings about mental health or talking about one's feelings, especially to anyone outside of the home.

How can anti-AAPI race-based hate impact youth?

COVID-19 has exacerbated anti-AAPI racism and its harmful impacts have been felt throughout the AAPI community, including AAPI youth. As a result of COVID-19-related misinformation, there has been an increase in anti-AAPI bullying in schools around the country. For example, an Asian American middle school student in Los Angeles was physically attacked for being falsely accused of carrying the virus.^{13,14}

Stigma around mental health in the AAPI community creates a barrier to accessing mental health services that could otherwise help with processing and healing from anti-AAPI hate and trauma. The 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that of all racial groups, AAPI populations receive the fewest services, and yet report the lowest perceived unmet need.¹⁵ In addition, the CDC's 2017 National Vital Statistics System report showed suicide as the leading cause of death among Asian American young adults ages 15-24. This is true of no other racial group in this age range in the United States.^{16,17} It is important to work together to overturn mental health stigma by raising awareness about issues like anti-AAPI hate and racial trauma among AAPI communities, as well as encourage and offer resources to engage in important conversations about race and ethnicity with youth and their families.

Even though having these conversations are difficult, not having them can negatively impact children and teens. For children, experiencing racism and discrimination can lead to feeling less connected and worthwhile, causing them to withdraw from activities they would usually enjoy doing. During the developmental stage of adolescence, youth are in the process of identity formation. Experiencing racism and discrimination during this life stage may lead them to internalize the negative messages they are hearing and seeing. Overall, children and teens targeted by racism are more likely to suffer from lowered self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and behavior problems.

When you avoid conversations about race and ethnicity:¹⁵

- Children are more likely to incorrectly judge other groups.
- Children are more likely to have little to no connection to their heritage.
- Children are more vulnerable to developing a negative self-concept.
- Children may not know how to respond to racially-charged experiences.

When you address conversations about race and ethnicity:

- Children are more respectful of other groups.
- Children will have a better understanding and appreciation for their own race, ethnicity, and overall identity.
- Children will have higher self-esteem.
- Children can recognize and respond more appropriately to racially-charged situations.





How do I talk to a youth who has experienced racism and/or discrimination?

It is crucial to have conversations about race, ethnic identity, racism, and discrimination.⁴ Without intervention, a youth's reactions may persist and affect their daily functioning for an extended period of time. This is one of the reasons that it is so important to talk to youth about these topics.

Ways to start the conversation and make youth feel heard:

- Be mindful of your own implicit or unspoken thoughts, messages, and behaviors about race before you begin.
- Be open—these conversations are an ongoing process. Children might not know what to say when the conversation begins. Be patient and give them time to process and think.
- Create daily opportunities to talk during everyday activities (e.g, in the car, playing, laundry time, making dinner, etc.) to make these topics less intimidating or frightening. Let youth express any hurt, fear, or worries they might be feeling. *(Example: “I saw ___ on the news yesterday. Have you ever heard/seen any similar incidents? How do you feel about it?”, etc.)*
- Be curious and respectful. Be mindful of your tone and try not to show any strong reactions. *(Example: “Could you tell me more about it/how you are feeling?”)*
- Validate feelings and experiences. *(Example: “I hear you are feeling sad, which is a natural reaction”, “I feel the same, too.” etc.)*
- Do not tell children or teens what they should or should not feel.
- Encourage their voice and express gratitude to them for sharing with you. *(Example: “Thank you for sharing your feelings”, “Thanks for letting me know how you feel”, etc.)*

Age-Specific Guidelines

Preschoolers

As young children begin to develop curiosity about their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, they benefit from learning to feel positively about their identity groups. A challenge for some children is to develop positive feelings about themselves and being able to manage and heal when treated unfairly by others. One way to help children to develop positive feelings about who they are is to have open communication with them.

So start the conversations early! Here are some ideas:

- Let children know that noticing differences in physical appearance (e.g., skin, hair, or eye color) and race should be celebrated.
- Celebrate traditional cultural festivals with stories and food.
- Use children's games, books, toys, or songs as opportunities to introduce children to different races and identities.
- Encourage them to ask questions, share observations and experiences, and be respectfully curious about race while also sharing stories and experiences with them about their own racial, ethnic, or cultural groups.
- Make sure a child understands that different racial and ethnic groups have different beliefs and ways that they show up in the world.
- Help children make sense of patterns and acknowledge that different racial groups experience different levels of racism and struggles.⁵



Consider these examples for starting conversations:

“What makes you different from them?”
(e.g., skin color, hair texture, language, etc.)

“I see. How about similarities or things that are alike between you and them?” (e.g., enjoy playing outside, wanting ice cream when it’s hot, celebrating birthdays, etc.)

“We all look different, but we are so much alike.”

There are many age-appropriate resources designed to support and engage young children in healthy racial learning, such as racially conscious children’s television shows and books. Expressive art like drawing, sand play, or a doll house can also support children in releasing emotions by retelling a story without having to explicitly talk about it.

School-Age Children

By kindergarten, children start to show signs of the same implicit racial attitudes that are seen in adults, often picked up from family members. This includes associating some groups with higher status or more positive value than others. Once children enter grade school, they begin to hear about race and racism from peers and the media.⁶

It is important to explore helpful ways to engage children about harmful biases and address emerging racial attitudes.⁵ With school-age children it can be helpful to read books, watch movies, and consume media with racially diverse characters. When children ask questions during these activities, follow their curiosities as you respond to their questions and continue the conversations during everyday moments (e.g., over meals, on a walk, on the way back home from the store, etc.).

Be proactive in bringing up conversations about race with children by asking them what they have been hearing and experiencing in school. Depending on their level of exposure, it can also be helpful to have discussions about what they have seen or heard about certain anti-AAPI hate incidents. Keep in mind, if there is high media coverage about an incident, limit the child’s exposure to news and other media as much as possible while also using the incident as a way to teach and hear more about the child’s thoughts.

Consider these examples for starting conversations:

- *“What have you heard at school?”*
- *“What do you worry about?”*
- *“What’s school like for you and your friends?”*
- *“What do your friends say about [situation]?”*
- *“Has anything like this ever happened to you or someone you know?”*

Once you start a conversation, help youth find the words for their experience. Children are still learning about the feelings they are having and can be overwhelmed by them.⁶ Sometimes they will need help expressing themselves.

- You can say: *“How did you feel when they said that?”* If the child is unsure, help them with prompts about potential feelings such as: *“Maybe sad, embarrassed, small, hurt, confused?”* For younger children, images can help. It may be easier for them to point to an emoji versus saying what they mean.

Validate children by labeling these hateful behaviors as both racist and wrong, such as, *“There are some people who will not like us because of our skin color or how we look. That is called racism and it is NOT okay.”* This is an important teaching moment. Let children know that what others say about their race should not be taken as truth, but instead are the result of the other person’s biases.

Role-play

If you have the capacity to do so, another technique to engage children in thinking and talking about race and anti-AAPI hate is role-playing. Role-play helps children review how to respond when they are faced with anti-AAPI sentiment. It can be an opportunity to let children know that racism towards AAPI individuals can take many forms, such as calling someone a racial slur, making unkind remarks about someone’s skin tone, making fun of certain facial features like eye shape, or mocking the way AAPI languages are spoken.¹¹ Asking children for their ideas about how to respond to these different situations can give you insight into their inner thoughts, help them develop problem-solving skills, and prepare them for other situations of racial bias & discrimination in the future.



Consider these examples of role-play scenarios:

- A classmate making fun of you, an Asian classmate's eye shape, or imitating an Asian "accent."
- A classmate making a general statement like, *"All Asians are good at math."*
- Someone asking you or your classmate, *"But where are you REALLY from?"*
- A classmate saying you or your classmate's *"Home-cooked lunch smells weird."*
- Someone tells you or a classmate to *"Go back to where you came from."*
- Someone asking you or a classmate, *"Why are you so quiet? Speak up more."*

If children have difficulty thinking of responses, guide the conversation and transition with suggestions such as, *"Those are good thoughts, and what about this?"* Providing a range of ideas can help children feel they have more options to choose from, which helps them feel more in control.⁶



Examples of different responses can include:

- *"That hurts my feelings when you say that."*
- *"Not all Asians are good at math, we are not all the same."*
- *"I was born in America, and I am from America."*
- *"Just because my lunch smells different than yours, doesn't make it weird."* Or if someone is saying something like this to your classmate you may say, *"I don't feel that way, I tried their food and I liked it."*

Teenagers (Ages 13+)

Consider sharing some of your own experiences with anti-AAPI hate and discrimination. Beginning a conversation with vulnerability may create space for your teen to share difficult conversations. Addressing teens' questions about racism is an ongoing process and discussion. Give yourself the grace and permission to take time to think about and research certain topics. Familiarize yourself with certain terms that come up often when talking about race, such as: ally, marginalization, cultural appropriation, microaggressions, or white privilege.¹⁰

Emphasize compassion and empathy, both for others and yourself. The process of reflecting on your own implicit biases, discrimination that you have faced, and the impact of racism on your life can be difficult. Invite teens to reflect on how current events related to anti-AAPI discrimination and their own experiences with race-based hate may be affecting their sense of ethnic and cultural identity. For example, youth may be dealing with the differences in their family values or expectations versus pressure from their peers. Teens may be expected to be more responsible such as having to work part-time to support their family financially, take care of younger siblings or elders, or go to community or religious events often while experiencing pressure from their peers to be more independent or individualistic. This can be an opportunity to check in on how these pressures and their feelings may be impacting their mental health.

To address the effects of racism on their sense of identity and mental health, consider asking open ended questions beginning with "how" or "what" to prompt more honest discussions.



Consider these examples for starting conversations:

- *"What have you been seeing in the media about anti-AAPI hate/discrimination & how do you feel about it?"*
- *"What are some fears & worries you have about anti-AAPI discrimination?"*
- *"How do you feel about your ethnic/cultural identity?"*
- *"How are you feeling connected to or want to connect with your identity?"*
- *"After seeing the news about [situation], how are you feeling?"*
- *"Any feelings of isolation, loneliness, or anxiety, etc.?"*
- *"What type of support and resources do you have to take care of yourself and your overall wellbeing?"*
- *"What support do you need? What would help you feel more supported? How have you been taking care of your mental wellbeing?"*

Find ways to empower teens and instill agency when having these conversations. Share books, resources, and other media that explore AAPI history, culture, identity, and experiences with racism and discrimination. Invite them to think of concrete ways in which they can speak out against anti-AAPI hate and positively create change in their schools and communities.

A couple of examples include:

- *“What would an ideal diverse community look like for you?”*
- *“As part of the future generation, what do you think is one step we can take in order to build a more inclusive community?”*

These conversations can be a source of empowerment for youth in embracing their racial identity and addressing racism in ways they feel comfortable. After exploring with them what they have seen and heard and how they feel, it can be empowering to learn that they don't have to feel like victims of a situation or incident. Instead, they can be part of the solution.



Youth can take action in different ways, such as speaking up when they see someone being treated unfairly, sharing their own experiences with race and discrimination, and advocating for more awareness and change around these issues.³

What can be done?

Understanding the impact of race-based hate and discrimination is important, but knowing what to do with that knowledge is key. Specifically in the case of anti-AAPI hate, talking with youth about their experiences and how to navigate their feelings about discrimination and race-based hate fosters trust, creates a safe space for future conversations, and empowers them to stand with others and effect change.

Starting these conversations may seem daunting or may seem as though it could negatively impact youth. However, children and teens need to have these conversations and need a safe place to do so. Learn what you can, be aware of your own beliefs and attitudes about race, and use tools to open the door and keep it open for more conversations in the future. If you do this, youth will feel more comfortable with who they are and where they can go for help.



RESOURCES

- How Are You and Your Children Talking about Racism? (Available in 5 languages)
<https://www.williamjames.edu/centers-and-services/multicultural-and-global-mental-health/upload/English-Parent-Guide.pdf>
- Guide for Parents of Asian/Asian American Adolescents (Available in 5 languages)
<https://www.williamjames.edu/centers-and-services/multicultural-and-global-mental-health/resources-and-events/guide-for-parents-of-asian-american-adolescents.html>
- Stop AAPI Hate Resources
<https://stopaapihate.org/resources/>
- 15 Asian American Children's Books to Read As a Family
<https://www.parents.com/fun/entertainment/books/asian-american-books-for-kids/>
- Resources List: Talking with Children and Teens about Anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander Hate
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fTcThMuHB7N7WQI7eW62Ssb04BPXLgf90nGrp6cARB8/edit>
- Children's Books Focused on Asian American Families and Cultures
https://www.amazon.com/stores/Yobe-Qiu/author/B08CMSV4YJ?ref=ap_rdr&store_ref=ap_rdr&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true
- Eyes That Speak to the Stars Children's Book
https://www.amazon.com/Audible-Eyes-That-Speak-Stars/dp/B096WC24KX?ref=ast_author_dp
- Supporting Cross-Racial Friendships Between Kids: The Lessons of “Prejudice Mindsets” Webinar
<https://www.embracerace.org/resources/prejudice-mindsets-and-supporting-cross-racial-friendships>

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