

Talking to Your Kids about Racism and Violence

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The recent images from [Charlottesville, VA](#)—marches by torchlight, Nazi salutes, armed militia, angry mobs engaged in violent confrontation—are scary for adults to encounter, let alone children. These are not scenes from a movie but very real events unfolding right before our eyes.

The chaos in Charlottesville was fueled by a particularly insidious and evil form of racism known as white supremacy. It was the same in Charleston, South Carolina when a white supremacist murdered nine people during a church service in 2015, and in Overland Park, Kansas when a KKK sympathizer murdered three people near a Jewish community center in 2014. Your kids will inevitably be confronted with the reality of new stories like these. How do you, as a parent, even begin to help them process it?

Start with Scripture

Sadly, many who embrace the notion of white supremacy do so under a guise of “traditional values” and even Scripture. We need to teach our kids, from the earliest possible age, that the idea of racial superiority is opposed to everything the Bible teaches and an affront to the Gospel itself.

If your kids are young, you can start with perhaps the most familiar verse of all, John 3:16—“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Help them understand that “world” in this verse means *everyone*—people of every nation and skin color. And “whoever” means *whoever*—God’s offer of salvation is not limited to certain ethnic groups or racial backgrounds. God does not discriminate based on race, and neither should we. We are all made in His image.

Older kids need to hear a more robust biblical response to racism. [Tim Keller offered just that](#) in a recent article following the events in Charlottesville:

This is a time to present the Bible’s strong and clear teachings about the sin of racism and of the idolatry of blood and country—again, full stop. In [Acts 17:26](#), in the midst of an evangelistic lecture to secular, pagan philosophers, Paul makes the case that God created all the races “from one man.” Paul’s Greek listeners saw other races as barbarian, but against such views of racial superiority Paul makes the case that all races have the same Creator and are of one stock. Since all are made in God’s image, every human life is of infinite and equal value ([Gen. 9:5–6](#)). When Jonah puts the national interests of Israel ahead of the spiritual good of the racially “other” pagan city of Nineveh, he is roundly condemned by God ([Jonah 4:1–11](#)). One main effect of the gospel is to shatter the racial barriers that separate people ([Gal. 3:28](#); [Eph. 2:14–18](#)), so it is an egregious sin to do anything to support those barriers. When Peter sought to do so, Paul reprimanded him for losing his grasp on the gospel ([Gal. 2:14](#)).

Be Age Appropriate

We can’t shield our kids from the ugly realities of the world. Sometimes even when we’re closely monitoring their TV time, young children will catch a glimpse of a disturbing news story. And if your kids are old enough to be on social media, they likely saw the ugly realities of Charlottesville—and similarly troubling events—played out many times through video clips and images.

But there are steps parents can take to help their children navigate disturbing news when it breaks. That will look different depending on their age and maturity level. In general, kids 8 and older are more likely to be able to have meaningful conversations about painful life events or difficult news. Kids 3 and under can’t develop a conceptual framework to process the information, and will instead absorb adult emotions.

For kids aged 4 to 7, exposure to a disturbing news story can open an opportunity to pray for the situation and the people involved. Don’t feel like you need to provide a scholarly treatise on racism—or whatever the issue might be—

at this point. Kids will typically ask for the information they need and then move on from the topic fairly quickly. It's ok to answer their questions with general information.

Kids aged 8 to 12 are better equipped to have discussions regarding their worries and overall emotional response to difficult world events. This stage offers great opportunities for prayer, discussions about possible solutions, and highlighting individuals or groups that represent positive examples of pursuing racial reconciliation. Your kids might have lots of questions or move on quickly, depending on their personality. Follow their lead. Once they reach the teen years, kids can have a more philosophical discussion regarding racism and what it means within their life, beliefs, and perceptions. At this stage, do not be afraid to discuss some of the gruesome details seen in the news, but make sure you have an understanding of what is happening in the news story before discussing it with your teens.

As terrible and disturbing as they are, these events are teachable moments. But remember that teaching is not a one-way conversation. Even as you're talking with your kids and helping them unpack what's happening, make sure to give them the opportunity to respond back. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Pray as a family for the events unfolding in our nation, but also for your own hearts. Ask the Lord to reveal where areas of insensitivity or prejudice may be residing in your own lives.

Turn Off the News

One final piece of advice: know when to turn off the TV (or put away your phone, etc.). We can't ignore the issue of racial injustice, but watching endless coverage of violent confrontations and hatred can be harmful to both kids and adults. This is one of several helpful tips offered in [an article from the LA Times](#) following the events in Charlottesville:

1. Talk to your kids, but educate yourself first
2. Treat children according to their age
3. Turn the TV off
4. Ask them questions, and answer theirs
5. Show them they have agency in the world
6. Take a historical view
7. Avoid "We don't see color"
8. Teach them where to get the news
9. Take a break and give them some love

That third point is critical. If you're going to have a meaningful conversation with your kids about race, it needs to happen away from the TV. News footage might be a good conversation-starter, but immersing your kids (or yourself) in an endless barrage of horrific footage can be traumatizing and ultimately desensitizing. Again, depending on your kids' age and maturity level, try broaching the subject over dinner, or while they are engaged in another activity they enjoy, such as coloring. Or consider working a biblical discussion about race into your regular family devotion time.

The issue of racism in America isn't going away any time soon—and if current trends are any indication, it's only going to become more volatile in the coming months. The white supremacist groups in Charlottesville have already vowed to return. Our kids *need* us to come alongside them during these difficult moments to help calm their fears, answer their questions, and present them with a biblical perspective on race. As moms and dads, we have the privilege and responsibility of pointing them to the One in whom "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 ESV).