



# **How to Be an Anti-Racist Parent**

## **Real-Life Parents Share Real-Life Tips**

a New Demographic e-book

244 Fifth Avenue, Suite C250  
New York, NY 10001  
T: 917.657.3886  
[www.newdemographic.com](http://www.newdemographic.com)

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### Step outside your comfort zone

Parents need to open up their own horizons and start connecting with people. You can offer all the toys and books in the world to them, but if they never see or get to know another person who isn't like them than what good are you serving? From day one, I have tried to seek out people of other races to interact with my babies. Lifestyle of the parents is really key ... you have to *do* what you preach. Sometimes, for parents, it means leaving our own comfort zones for the sake of our children.

--Shawn Fink

### Being anti-racist is a journey, not a destination

I was thinking about what kinds of tips to suggest, and found myself struggling. I suppose I could suggest a bunch of books I found inspirational or poignant; maybe even come up with a "Top 10" list too – but being an anti-racist parent is truly a lot more challenging than any book or list can even begin to address. What I've learned comes down to just a few lessons, learned experientially in the past 13 years as a parent:

- You can't expect your children to behave better than you do. What you say is important, but it's your own actions that speak louder than words. In other words, you need to talk the talk *and* walk the walk. If you tell your children that they should accept "all kinds of people" yet they never see any diversity in your life, why would they believe your diversity talk?
- So much about race and racism intersects with other types of diversity, including class, culture, religion, gender and sexuality. Racism doesn't exist in a bubble and it isn't a problem to be "solved." Parents need to be able to address diversity in all its

#### ABOUT ANTI-RACIST PARENT

Anti-Racist Parent is a blog for parents who are committed to raising children with an anti-racist outlook.

[www.antiracistparent.com](http://www.antiracistparent.com)

#### ABOUT NEW DEMOGRAPHIC

Anti-Racist Parent is a project of New Demographic, an anti-racism training company that goes beyond diversity buzzwords to tackle the real issues behind race and racism.

[www.newdemographic.com](http://www.newdemographic.com)

#### SEMINAR TOPICS

- Racialicious! When Race and Pop Culture Collide
- Beyond Diversity Buzzwords and Oppression Olympics: A New Framework for Discussing Race and Racism
- Not Just Fetishists and Race Traitors: Challenging the Ways We Look At Interracial Relationships
- Recognizing Racial Stereotypes and Their Impact on the Workplace
- Cute But Confused: Myths and Realities of Mixed Race Identity

#### CONTACT

Carmen Van Kerckhove  
Co-Founder and President  
New Demographic

[carmen@newdemographic.com](mailto:carmen@newdemographic.com)

Tel: 917.657.3886

forms.

- You can't protect your children from racism. You need to be able to show them how ugly racism is, or they won't be able to recognize it for themselves. If your children are kids of color, they'll need to have survival skills – verbal, intellectual, and physical. And these survival skills aren't just about driving while Black or confronting skinheads – your kids will need to know how to survive the racism embedded in our educational, economic, judicial and occupational institutions.
- Children need to have the language to discuss race and racism. If you don't give them the chance to talk about it at home, they'll learn it from their classmates and from the media and much of it will be wrong information.
- Don't wait for your kids to come to you with questions about racism. In my home, discussions about race, racial representation and racism are as common as the latest episode of "American Idol." In fact, American Idol has been the starting point for some discussions! What my 8-year old contributes towards these discussions are very different than what my 13-year old contributes – but the main point is that they both contribute.
- You need to be able to recognize your own biases and privileges. Because we all have them.

To me, talking about race and racism is like talking to my kids about sex. You have to really work at it! You don't want to get too graphic when they are young so you need to figure out what is behind their questions. It will be a challenge as my kids get older

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and their questions become more abstract and harder to answer.

There are no quick and easy shortcuts to becoming anti-racist – not for myself, and not for my kids. For our family, becoming anti-racist is a journey, not a destination.

–Jae Ran Kim

### Seek out professionals of color

Can't take credit for this tip but I heard about it from a book called *40 Ways to Raise a Nonracist Child* by Mary Ann French and Barbara Mathias. One of their tips was to seek out professionals of color, i.e. your pediatrician, dentist, lawyer, contractor, piano teacher etc. When children see people of all colors in lots of different roles, they are not so quick to assume things like, "Oh black people can't be doctors. I can't be a doctor, because I have never seen one who looks like me."

–Nina Birnbaum

### Never stop dismantling your own racist beliefs

Last fall, my son Buster was a high school senior. We were doing some college visits as part of his application process. One day in early winter we drove to a highly respected little college outside of the city. It was raining and as we made our way around campus, poking our noses into empty dorm rooms, chatting with bleary-eyed students in the depths of the computer lab and lounging on the library's leather sofa. We watched the clouds through the library's cathedral windows, surrounded by towers of the canon of western civilization. Buster read the *New York Times* and I fantasized about being in college again. After a bit, our coffees were cold and we dragged ourselves out to the car.

The campus is surrounded by a lovely green park. The driveway

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is long and winding, lined with stately old trees and a scattering of manor-like houses for deans and administrators. About halfway down the drive is a duck pond on the left. As we approached the duck pond, driving slowly and still half in a stupor of academic privilege, we saw a raggedy group of people standing near the water throwing bread at the ducks. Even at a distance I could see that they were black and youngish. Without thinking I blurted out “What are those kids doing coming on campus to mess around at the duck pond?”

Buster didn’t say anything for a few beats as we drove closer. It became really obvious all of a sudden that it was actually a family group of prospective students and parents just like us, only black. They were dressed better than us, in fact, and exploring the campus on foot to enjoy its beauty. Buster laughed out loud, realizing my foolish and racist outburst at the same second that I was flooded with shame. He said, “I can’t believe you just said that. You think because they are black they don’t belong here?”

I said “You are right. I can’t believe I said it either. It just came out of my mouth. How racist and ignorant! They are just like us, visiting the campus. I am so ashamed of myself.” He just nodded and kept chuckling.

The thing about being an anti-racist parent is that you have to be brave. You have to keep pulling out the roots that are embedded in your own heart. It’s like one of those garden weeds that you can’t smother or yank or poison. You have to keep turning the soil and taking it out piece by piece with great determination, honesty and courage. With God’s grace your children will learn how to do that from watching you stumble and get up again to try to repair the damage. There is no chance they will grow up unaffected by racism.

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Our job is to teach them the tools to dismantle it, in our own fumbling, open-hearted way.

–Cloudscome

### Speak truthfully and proudly

A woman once took one look at my kids and then literally chased me around the supermarket asking "Is the father whiiiiite?". I just told her the truth (he's mixed). It was better than her asking "Do they have the same father?"

Speak truthfully about your child's ethnicity when confronted by people who don't know it's none of their beeswax. Never whisper or make excuses. Speak proudly, especially if your kids are within earshot. The people asking are the ones with the problem, not your child.

–Meera Johnson

### Make conversations about racism relaxed and frequent

For many white parents, racism is an uncomfortable subject to discuss. We may avoid it for any number of reasons - our idealistic belief in a color-blind society, or our discomfort at raising the subject, for example. But it's critical for us to point out instances of racism in the media and in real life to our children, to make sure they learn how to recognize it when they encounter it. It's equally important for us to point out instances of anti-racism, so our children learn to model those behaviors.

There are many opportunities to do this: interactions and incidents at school; the subject matter of history and social studies classes; events reported in the news; products from the stores; and more. Each discussion helps to build the store of information and

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behaviors our children will draw on as they grow up and begin to interact with the world.

The discussion doesn't need to be overly serious. Just pointing out examples of racism on television can further our children's understanding of what it is. Giving them opportunities to ask questions and to share similar incidents from their own experiences will make them aware that racism isn't an abstract concept that exists only in the media, but that it's right there in their schools and neighborhoods.

The most important thing is to make racism a topic of regular, relaxed discussion. In my experience, this has been one of the best ways to raise my children's awareness that it exists, and that we can do something about it.

–Margie Perscheid

### Lead by example

I am a family medicine doctor and see quite a few children in my practice. While I am a soon-to-be first-time parent and don't have any personal experiences yet, the main advice I can give is to be who you want your children to be. What I mean by that is your children look up to you and want to say what you say and do what you do. I see kids all the time who mimic their parents' behavior in every way. I especially see this with obesity and health. Children will often follow the same eating behaviors and styles as their parents.

If you eat a lot of junk food or fast food, your children will do the same. If you want your children to be healthy, the first step is for you to live a healthy lifestyle. If you want your children to be anti-racist, then you need to show that in the words and attitude that you say and have around the child, since their minds are like sponges and

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absorb so much. I sometimes tell parents that their child is their greatest fan, so be a great role model for them and love them. Parents need to take care of their health so that their children will follow their example.

–Mike Lee

### Don't let others decide your child's ethnicity for them

As a first time parent of a newborn, the lesson I've had reinforced at this tender age is the following: *start early and often*. Don't assume that as a parent you can wait until your child is of school age to discuss race. There are ways to talk about "same" and "different" and whether "different" means better or worse or neither that small children can understand. And as with anything, the nonverbal signals are the most effective and sometimes the hardest thing to control.

If your child is of a minority ethnic group, be prepared to assert that ethnicity as you choose, and later, as your child chooses, despite what labels others may give. If you make it matter-of-fact rather than confrontational, it can be an opportunity to teach and learn.

I asserted my daughter's ethnicity when she was 5 days old. While signing final paperwork for her hospital discharge, I noticed that a form filled out in the delivery room listed her "color or race" as "Cauc" - for Caucasian. It was a blank space, so the "check only one" scenario wasn't a factor. In a strange reversal of the one-drop-rule, the ethnicity of my mother (European-American, and therefore "Caucasian") and my spouse (Latino/Puerto Rican) was enough to "qualify" my daughter as Caucasian, despite my obviously not-white appearance.

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The form was filled out by a labor and delivery nurse, whom I'm sure meant no harm and was judging my by daughter's 5-minute-old appearance. The form may only be for the hospital records. But when the form was left on the counter, I simply crossed out "Caucasian" and wrote in "multiracial."

It doesn't begin to describe my daughter or her family ties, and it may be only a footnote on some future statistic about births and deaths in my state, my county, or maybe just my hospital. But it's a start.

--Susan Lyons-Joell

### **Have an answer prepared**

In response to the ignorant question "Is that your foster child?" I now say, "He is my son." It stops them dead. I am done being the teacher at the expense of my son's privacy.

--Cynthia Bostwick

### **Your children *will* face racism, so prepare them for it**

In the fourth grade, Doug Cohn accosted me on the school yard, yelling, "Come to me, blackie!" I was mortified, watching him beckon me with his chubby finger after hurling that insult. I told Lise Toplin, the safety guard (ooh, a big fifth grader!), who whinily told him to "stop being mean".

Later, Doug ended up in my eleventh grade sociology class. Regularly, as the teacher was explaining things like propaganda and the dishonesty of the media (what, the media - dishonest?) I felt Doug's eyes on me. He wasn't waiting for the right time to ask me to shine his shoes, he clearly wanted more than that. I doubt he even remembered what had happened in elementary school (like that was

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supposed to make me feel better). It was the good thing that sociology class was at the end of the day. That way, if I felt the urge to run home and take a shower, I could.

I think the best way to teach about racism is to approach it in a similar manner to how one might begin talking to ones child about other things that may (or may not) make a parent feel a little uncomfortable to discuss, like sex. Both topics are big issues...but simply a part of life. They are topics that will come up in a child's life, whether we want them to or not. Like the birds and the bees, I think there are some things that kids should learn from their parents before they get misinformation from somewhere else.

Not unlike the facts of life, my husband and I take each of our daughter's questions about racism as they come. Then we try to break it down to a level she can relate to, given her age (five). A preschooler might want to know things like why MLK had to fight for freedom in the first place, but the answer doesn't need to be a lecture on the atrocities of slavery or a detailed account of lynchings in the Jim Crow south. That will come later. For now, we talk about how black people weren't allowed to eat in the same restaurants as white people or drink from the same fountains. How would that make a person feel (if they weren't white)? Is that fair? Preschoolers love to talk about what is and isn't fair; discussing race at this age is really a piece of cake.

As the parents of African American children, we're also careful not to dwell on the fact that our ethnic group has been considered inferior, because we don't want them to become so self-conscious of others' biases that it limits their ability. Instead, we choose to focus less on racism and more on the accomplishments of African Americans and the aspects of our culture that have been written out

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of standard education. We know that racism will eventually rear its ugly head; we try our best to give them the ammunition to confront it head-on when it does.

Yet people of color aren't the only ones who need to understand prejudice. White children should be taught about it too, so that by the time it comes up in school, they are sensitized to the issue, not dismissive of it. And like sex, if a child has reached 9 or 10 without ever asking about it, it's probably a good idea to go ahead and have "the big talk". At that age, a fifteen minute history lesson should do the trick (I wish Doug's parents had done that). The last thing an anti-racist parent should want is find out their kid was off at college participating in a (insert minority group here) "costume party". Much like catching one's daughter on a commercial for "Girls Gone Wild", that would be proof that someone dropped the ball.

The toughest part is, most parents have the birds and the bees all figured out (or let's hope so). But many adults, of all persuasions, are ignorant about the history of race in America and how it plays into our everyday lives...from where a person decides to sit in a doctor's waiting room, to the friends they choose, to whom they elect for president. Knowing that racism will affect their children at some point in life (whether it's through white privilege or bearing the brunt of direct bigotry) should encourage any anti-racist parent to learn as much as they can about it. That way, when the time comes to discuss it, they're ready.

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