

10 Tips for Raising “Woke” Children

By: Tatiana M. F. Cruz, Ph.D.



“Most children are amazing critical thinkers before we silence them.” – bell hooks

I. Begin with yourself. It’s not enough to be open-minded and accepting, though that’s a good start. Familiarize yourself with social justice issues and try to get comfortable openly discussing intersectional systems of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, colonialism, etc. Children will take cues on how to discuss these issues from you. If a child hears “it’s not polite to talk about skin color!” they might not ever ask important questions that will help them understand how race operates. If you openly discuss social justice issues with people of all ages, your children will feel that they, too, can discuss these things. It is also important to be open and honest about your own limitations. You might not feel equipped to handle every question or lead every discussion and that’s ok. Sometimes you need to say, “I’m actually not sure about that. Let’s do some research and figure it out together.” It is both humanizing and empowering to make children feel like it is ok to ask questions, to not have all the answers, and to work together to learn more. It is also great to find other people or resources that can help you have these conversations.

II. Start early. Research shows that children begin noticing difference and systemic/structural patterns and inequalities as early as three years of age. That is how early you can begin talking to your children about social justice issues. Challenge colorblind or other universalist rhetoric. Promoting the idea that “we are all the same” or “we are all human beings” can actually be counterproductive and reinforce prejudice. Begin by personalizing issues and discussing smaller things like difference in one’s family (skin color, hair, gender, etc). Discuss your family’s background(s), your various intersecting identities, and how you might be privileged. Children should learn how they fit in the world around them. Explore how people in your family, school, and community might be different and celebrate these differences. Build to have age-appropriate conversations about social justice issues and, as often as possible, try to connect difficult, abstract ideas to children’s everyday lives.

- Example: Your 3-year-old child is drawing a picture of your family. You ask them what colors they will choose for the skin tones/hair colors of their family members. You use this as an opportunity to discuss variance in your own family and then branch out to discuss other people in their lives (friends, teachers, etc). You read books together about racial/ethnic diversity and draw pictures using different crayons to illustrate the differences they begin to notice and highlight the beauty in each of them. As they get older, you might help them find language to represent these differences and descriptors for their own racial/ethnic background(s).

- Example: You point out to your 8-year-old child that there is a gender-neutral bathroom. That could spark an impromptu discussion on transgender rights by asking questions like: "What do you think about that? Do you think there should be separate bathrooms for boys and girls? What if you don't fit into those categories or you identify differently than how other people may see you? How would you feel if you could not use the bathroom you felt most comfortable in? How do you think transgender people feel when laws make it so they cannot use the bathroom they feel safest and most comfortable in?"

III. **Encourage curiosity and critical thinking.** Children ask a lot of questions. Encourage this and try not to silence children even if they say things that may sound prejudiced or might embarrass you. Always ask follow-up questions to help them explain themselves a bit more. Questions like: "What makes you think that?" or "Can you explain your thought a little bit more?" can help children feel they are valued and their questions (or at times ignorance) are ok. They can also help spark important dialogues.

- Example: Your child screams excitedly about a service dog and runs to pet it before you can stop them. You apologize to the owner and when your child asks why they cannot pet the dog, you do not shush or silence them by saying things like "because I said so." Instead, you tell them that the owner might have a disability and the dog is working to help them. You explain what service dogs are and that people need to respect their space. The next time your child sees a dog with a service vest, they might tell you "that dog is working."

IV. **Start with what's "fair," then move to understand difference and foster empathy.** Early on, children latch onto the idea of "fairness" and you can use this to help facilitate age-appropriate explanations about social justice issues. Once you have had enough of these kinds of conversations, you'd be amazed at what children will notice on their own about "fairness." You can then encourage children to empathize with others and speak out when they see "unfair" things.

- Example: You point out to your child that there haven't been any "girl" (women) presidents or in many leadership positions. They might say, "that's not fair!" and you can begin a dialogue on feminism by telling them: "No it's not." You follow up with questions like: "Do you think girls should be able to do all the same things as boys?" If you feel they are ready for more complexity, you might push further and tell your child, "Daddy [or enter any male-identifying person] can be a feminist too because he thinks girls and boys should have the same choices and be able to be whatever they want." This will help them realize that feminism isn't about girls "winning" or being "better" and that anybody can be a feminist.
- Example: Your child realizes that the other boys in their gym class never pass the basketball to girls and they think this is "unfair." You ask them: "What can you do to help this situation?" Your child decides to always try to pass the ball to girls and to encourage their friends to do the same. Together, you can watch some women's basketball highlights on YouTube to illustrate how girls/women can be great basketball players.

V. **Model behaviors and expose children to diverse peoples/spaces as often as possible.** Model that you value diversity, varied perspectives, and equity/ equality by living what you preach. If you surround yourself and your family with a homogenous group of people, children will not know anything else or be exposed to difference or diversity. Thus, be intentional about who you surround yourself with and try to push to create an inclusive, heterogeneous community for you and your children. Be conscious about surrounding them with people of different races, ethnicities, cultures, backgrounds, religions, sexualities etc. in your day-to-day life. This can take on many forms but think carefully about the smaller choices in your life (what you do, where you go, etc). Any ordinary event in any space can be used as a teachable moment and to reinforce socially conscious ideals. You

should also prepare them for dealing with opposing views and practice how they might respond should they find themselves in conversations with people who think differently than they do.

- Example: Think about challenging white supremacist ideals and dominant stereotypes in your own community. Consider sending your child to schools or extracurricular programming in diverse neighborhoods despite what others might say about them being “bad” or “dangerous” (read: poor black/brown) and openly promote these schools/programs in your city/town.
- Example: Think carefully about NOT sending your children to institutions such as schools, afterschool programs, or camps that might be problematic or enforcing white supremacy/oppressive practices. If an institution promotes cultural appropriation, for example, think about how you can work to address this with administrators or consider withdrawing children all together.
- Example: Actively patronize diverse businesses (restaurants, barbershops/hair salons, etc) even if you might be a minority there, be pushed out of your comfort zone, or need to travel outside your immediate neighborhood to do so.
- Example: Expose your children to diverse art and culture in your home and community, go to museums and shows, attend cultural events, etc.
- Example: Use everyday moments to discuss difference and promote tolerance. For example if your child tells you their classmate “only has a mom, not a dad,” use it as an opportunity to explore diverse families. Ask them how else families can be different and try to think of same-sex couples that they know. Read books about the topic together and discuss how families vary but are all united by love.

VI. **Representation matters so surround children with diverse images.** Be conscious about exposing your children to diverse images, media, literature, and toys.

- Example: Expose your children to diverse images in all sorts of positions, particularly in leadership roles by selecting pediatricians/ dentists of color or from marginalized groups.
- Example: Read books with diverse characters and storylines and with social justice themes.
- Example: Be intentional when selecting toys (consider buying diverse dolls, toys that challenge gender norms, etc).
- Example: Consume diverse media – shows/movies like Doc McStuffins, Sesame Street, Handy Manny, Elena of Avalor, Ni Hao Kai-Lan, Dora the Explorer, Home, Haunted Hathaways, Moana, Princess and the Frog, Watsons go to Birmingham, Remember the Titans, etc.
- Example: Openly discuss bias and the problematic nature of books, shows, movies, games such as how princesses can be strong and do not “need” princes to “save them.”
- Example: Encourage children to challenge stereotypes in the world around them. For example, you or a man in your life can proudly proclaim: “I love playing with pink princesses! All colors are for everyone! Boys and girls can play with whatever toys they like.”

VII. **Don’t be afraid to keep children informed and discuss issues as they arise.** Many parents try to shelter children from the world around them, yet this can be a disservice in the long-run. There are always age-appropriate ways to discuss contemporary sociopolitical issues and events with children of all ages. Find ways to connect history and present day issues as well as link what’s going on to their personal lives and community for it to seem more relevant. Remember, you know what’s best for your children and how they react to situations, so you should judge what they are “ready” for and should prioritize their mental health, feelings of safety, and childhood innocence/joy as you see fit.

- Example: You decide to tell your 9-year-old child about the protests in Charlottesville. You show them photos/videos of the protest online. You explain the context for how the protest emerged and that future protests would likely continue, answering all their questions.

Conversely, your 5-year-old child has enjoyed an epic birthday party on that same day and you decide you want to preserve their happiness. Since you feel that they aren't ready to understand the situation, you decide not to tell them.

VIII. **Create ongoing dialogues with educators in your children's lives.** Be proactive in learning about your child's school/childcare center's curriculum and culture/climate. Work to develop relationships with teachers and spend time discussing social justice issues with them. Work to support diversity initiatives and the creation and maintenance of social justice programming. Speak out when you feel your child's school/center is not actively working towards social justice or is promoting harmful/oppressive messages and practices.

- Example: Your child comes home discussing Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks after they learned about it in school for Black History Month. While it's a great start to understanding African American history, you realize the school might have presented a limited/narrow perspective on civil rights movements. Together, you and your child research and discuss other civil rights leaders and explore other racial/ethnic groups involved in the movements of that era. You encourage your child to volunteer to present the information they learned to their class.
- Example: Your child comes home with a Native American headdress art project they created to celebrate Thanksgiving. You begin by speaking with your child about why this might be problematic or offensive. You unpack some of the myths of Thanksgiving and then speak with their teachers/administrators to address cultural appropriation and ensure that they come up with more respectful art projects in the future.

IX. **Empower children to take a stand, get involved, and give back to their community.** Children can be activists too. While you might have some safety concerns about taking children to mass protests, there are many other ways they can be involved in social justice movements.

- Example: Encourage your children to be leaders in their school and community and speak up for other children, especially if they see someone being marginalized or mistreated.
- Example: Help your child join or organize a social justice group at school or a book club at the library.
- Example: Attend community events that promote racial justice such as "Books and Breakfast" held by a local chapter of Black Lives Matter.
- Example: Help your child to take a leading role in organizing community service projects such as canned food drives, making care packages for the homeless, and donating gently used clothes and toys.

X. **Model self-love and promote healthy lifestyles and creative outlets.** Model and promote positivity and self-love within your family and community. Encourage healthy lifestyles that help children develop confidence and feel good in their own bodies/skin every day. Give them choices about when they want to participate in deep social justice conversations and when they might want to do something else or be alone to process. Provide them with numerous spaces for healing, creative expression, and opportunities to embody differences and social justice beliefs.

- Example: Discuss body positivity with your children and incorporate it into every day life. "Your body is so strong!" "Your hair is so beautiful just the way it grows out of your head." "Look at all the beautiful skin colors in your classroom- you are all different and that's amazing!"
- Example: Sign your child up for an art, dance, or music class to express themselves and to explore diverse artistic practices from around the world.
- Example: Teach your child mindfulness and meditation practices so they can find ways to manage stress and find peace within themselves.

Additional Resources

Raising Race-Conscious Children:

Kristen Howerton, "resources for Talking to Kids About Race and Racism":

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kristen-howerton/talking-to-kids-race-racism-books_b_2618305.html

Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich, "How to Talk To Kids About Race: Books and Resources That Can Help":

<http://www.readbrightly.com/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-race-books-and-resources-that-can-help/>

Showing Up for Racial Justice Mother's Day Action Toolkit:

<http://www.raceconscious.org/2015/05/surj-mothers-day-action-toolkit/>

Jinnie Spiegler, "Teaching Young Children About Bias, Diversity, and Social Justice":

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/teaching-young-children-social-justice-jinnie-spiegler>

Teaching for Change, "Teaching Young Children about Race: A Guide for Parents and Teachers":

<http://www.teachingforchange.org/teaching-about-race>

Anne Theriault, "Talking to small children about race":

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2014/09/04/talking-to-small-children-about-race/?utm_term=.e4dc56e2f7f3

Lorien Van Ness, "60+ Resources for Talking to Kids About Racism":

<https://bouncebackparenting.com/resources-for-talking-to-kids-about-race-and-racism/>

Erin Winkler, "Children Are Not Colorblind: How Young Children Learn Race":

https://www.academia.edu/3094721/Children_Are_Not_Colorblind_How_Young_Children_Learn_Race

Erin Winkler, "Here's How to Raise Race-Conscious Children":

https://www.buzzfeed.com/erinwinkler/tips-for-talking-to-children-about-race-and-racism?utm_term=.mkz7OaLEd#.vLXnMdWN

For Families and/or Children of Color:

Hilary Beard, "The Dos and Don'ts of Talking to Kids of Color About White Supremacy":

<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/dos-and-donts-talking-kids-color-about-white-supremacy>

Cecilia Caballero, "10 Radical Parenting Resources for Folks of Color":

<https://www.chicanamotherwork.com/single-post/2017/07/12/10-Radical-Parenting-Resources-for-Folks-of-Color-Part-1>

EmbraceRace, "Supporting kids of color mid racialized violence":

<https://medium.com/embrace-race/how-to-support-kids-of-color-amid-racialized-violence-8bfe17cfboco>

Melissa Harris-Perry and Janice Johnson, "What Does it Mean to Raise a Black Kid Now":

<http://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a37659/how-to-raise-black-children-police-violence/>

For White Families and/or Children:

Bree Ervin, "6 Things White Parents Can Do to Raise Racially Conscious Children":

<https://everydayfeminism.com/2014/08/raising-racially-conscious-kids/>

Shannon Cofrin Gaggero, "My White Children Know Black Lives Matter. Do Yours?":
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/my-white-children-know-black-lives-matter-do-yours_us_591a1001e4b03e1c81b007f9

Gayle Kirshenbaum, "It's time for White Parents of White Kids to Bring the Resistance Home":
<https://medium.com/embrace-race/its-time-for-white-parents-of-white-kids-to-bring-the-resistance-home-f9a1b5de3bf1>

Melinda Wenner Moyer, "Teaching Tolerance: How white parents should talk to their your kids about race":
http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/the_kids/2014/03/teaching_tolerance_how_white_parents_should_talk_to_their_kids_about_race.html

Book Lists:

"26 Children's Books to Support Conversations on Race, Racism, & Resistance":
<https://medium.com/embrace-race/26-childrens-books-to-support-conversations-on-race-racism-resistance-15b189c1bab9>

Alexandra Alter, "New Crop of Young Adult Novels Explores Race and Police Brutality":
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/19/books/review/black-lives-matter-teenage-books.html?mcubz=3>

"Diversity Book Lists & Activities for Teachers and Parents":
<http://multiculturalchildrensbookday.com/multicultural-reading-resources/diversity-book-lists-for-kids/>

Common Sense Media's Racism & Social Justice Book List:
<https://www.commonensemedia.org/lists/books-about-racism-and-social-justice>

EmbraceRace, "Where to find 'diverse' children's books":
<https://medium.com/embrace-race/where-to-find-diverse-childrens-books-5bc8c8bc971b>

Raising Race Conscious Children Children's Books List:
<http://www.raceconscious.org/childrens-books/>

Kayla Lattimore, "Summer Reading For Your Woke Kid":
<http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/07/06/534443123/summer-reading-for-your-woke-kid>

We Need Diverse Books:
<http://weneeddiversebooks.org/where-to-find-diverse-books/>

Miscellaneous:

Sabrina Joy Stevens, "9 Signs You're Raising a Progressive Kid":
<https://www.romper.com/p/9-signs-youre-raising-a-progressive-kid-16711>

Contact Information:
Tatiana M. F. Cruz
Asst. Prof. of History
Lesley University
tcruz4@lesley.edu