Race is a complicated subject for adults, let alone children. Children are inundated with all sorts of information and misinformation regarding race which can distort their views and lead to bigoted and racist feelings later in life. As teachers, we believe you can have an immense impact on the feelings of children which can benefit them for their whole lives. Here, we will outline how you can implement lessons in existing curriculum to influence children’s thoughts on race, images of right and wrong, stereotypes, etc, while also providing some tips on how best to discuss race when the topic arises.
KIDS ARE NOT COLORBLIND, DO NOT TEACH THEM TO BE COLORSILENT

As early as 6 months old, children begin to notice differences between themselves and others. Without guidance, or if they receive incorrect information, negative stereotypes may develop. Teaching children to be colorblind is a popular but ineffective method to avoid racial discrimination and some studies show that children who are taught to be colorblind end up developing more racist thoughts and feelings than other children.

● An effective method to avoid the results of “colorblindness” is just tell children the facts. For example, just tell children with darker skin have more melanin (which everyone has) if the discussion comes up. This can help avoid the belief that there are differences in ability, reasoning, intelligence, etc., between people of different ethnicities.
● It is also advisable to not wait for children to bring up race to discuss it.

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HOW STEREOTYPES CAN AFFECT CHILDREN

In everyday society, children are inundated with images and concepts of what is “right” and “wrong”. They are like sponges, and absorb what they hear and see from those around them, as well as on television or popular media. It is important to start teaching children from a young age about different cultures and people in order to broaden their worldview, and help prevent feelings of cultural and racial superiority. Children can very easily develop negative stereotypical views on the world around them; for example, after seeing Disney princesses, children can start to believe that only white people can be princesses because of that lack of representation that Disney provides. Seeing images of white people as the vast majority of powerful and successful people from an early age can instil the belief that people of color cannot occupy those positions as well. Without a guiding hand, these beliefs can stay with children throughout their lives and can eventually evolve into overtly racist and bigoted beliefs.

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WHAT CAN SEND CHILDREN A POSITIVE MESSAGE?

When making lessons, the best available research tells us that a diverse course of study incorporating aspects of different cultures and racial groups is the most effective way to educate children about race. When done organically, these lessons can inform children about the diverse cultures, experiences, and experiences of people of color (POC). It is also suggested and advisable that this be done in a way that some of the lessons do not just focus on the fact that the person is a POC. In other words, the lessons should not lead children to think that being a POC is their single, defining trait.5

YOU DO NOT FEEL LIKE YOU NEED TO AVOID HEAVY SUBJECTS.

While some subjects should be avoided because they are not appropriate, the groundwork for future lessons should be taught to children. Studies have shown that without this early groundwork, children become more susceptible to beliefs like holocaust denial. This early exposure provides children with the knowledge to recognize and avoid bigoted beliefs that they may be exposed to. In short, children need a strong foundation to be built in which they can continue to grow and learn about various heavy topics. When talking about these subjects, it is very important to emphasize the agency and resistance of persecuted people and the allies they had. This helps prevent the feelings of helplessness developing in children of historically persecuted communities and feelings of guilt for those who come from communities that historically may have persecuted other people.⁶

WALK THE WALK

Do not be afraid to talk about what racism does to people and the effects it has on society. It’s helpful to use examples of your own experiences with racism, whether experiencing it or being compliant and learning from it. Racist is a description of actions, not an incurable condition:

people do not need to be racist. It may be a good idea to start talking about subjects of gender or class before stepping into racism.

Encourage kids to talk about or at least think about what they can do to make a difference. Encourage children not to be bystanders if they hear other children or their friends using discriminatory language. Or find an adult to handle it if the child does not feel comfortable speaking up, children should learn to never be complacent.

CHILDREN WILL BE EXPOSED TO RACIST LANGUAGE

With the rise of social media, gaming, and the internet as a whole, children are being exposed to racist, homophobic, and sexist language. Children who hear this language without the knowledge of its real meaning are prone to repeat it which creates major
issues later in life. This is why it is so important that educators teach children why this language is bad, because if they do not than often no one will. The rhetoric children hear is not always clear which is why it is important that children have the necessary background knowledge to avoid using it. So how can you do this?

- Do not get angry if you hear a student use a racial slur.
- Take them aside to avoid embarrassment (it is not a good idea to lecture students in front of the class).
- Talk to them calmly and explain to them why it is inappropriate to use certain phrases. For example, just tell the truth and say that the words they used or whatever they said is offensive. However, is a good idea to not make the child feel bad, just use it is a lesson.
- Talk to the child who they directed their language toward and reassure them so they know that the language they heard will not be tolerated in class.
HOW TO INCORPORATE ANTI-RACIST LESSONS IN CLASS.

There is a wealth of topics and figures that can be taught in class that help instill anti-racist beliefs in children. What are some examples?

- Great Zimbabwe can be discussed as an example of African architecture that is so often overlooked. This can teach children that pre-colonial Africa had a great tradition of arts and architecture.

- The Zulu Culture can be talked about as a rich African culture that is still alive and well with a very well documented history of resistance to subjugation.

- Alexandre Dumas is very well known French writer who was also part black. There is a tendency to assume that every famous writer of the classics was white and this can help dispel that myth.

- Certain people of color such as Darrell Kipp, Neil Degrasse Tyson, Wole Soyinka, Maya Angelou, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., I.M. Pei, Yasanuri Kawabata, Ferdowsi, Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, and more can be subjects of lesson plans for many different classes. All of these figures had and have had a huge and influential effect on the world.

- When talking about certain people, it is advisable to do so in a way that emphasizes that they are a person of color and how they made their mark on the world despite living in a racist society (MLK, Gandhi, etc.). For others, discuss them in a way that does not emphasize that they are or were a person of color at all. This balance can instill the belief that being a person of color does not need to be the sole defining feature of a person.