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Talking to Kids about Race: Against the Grain

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Talking to Kids about Race: Against the Grain

Abstract

"The stories of race are bound up in the story of America and in all of our identities, so directly addressing it with our children is an approach we have no choice but to take."

Posting about teaching children about racial struggles in our society from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/talking-to-kids-about-race-against-the-grain/>

Keywords

In All Things, children, identity, ethnic barriers, culture

Disciplines

Christianity | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Talking to Kids about Race: Against the Grain

 [all in allthings.org/talking-to-kids-about-race-against-the-grain/](https://allthings.org/talking-to-kids-about-race-against-the-grain/)

Howard Schaap

I'm tempted to say that it's easy to talk to my kids about race, that our family has an unfair advantage because our kids are biracial. When they look in the mirror, their mixed Lao-White heritage looks back at them and so the conversation begins.

On the one hand, that's true. I remember clearly the time our youngest son pulled his eyes into slits and said, "Look, I'm Chinese." It was sort of ironic, I suppose, since he actually is an eighth Chinese. The path we took then, led by my wife, was firm, even no-nonsense. She calmly explained both that he was mocking himself and that we didn't do that sort of thing. The conversation ended with him in tears. Considering how young he was, maybe 1st grade, and that he was at the very beginning of self-understanding in relation to a world of complex racial and ethnic tangles, you might say that the approach we took was somewhat direct, even harsh.

On the other hand, we face the same difficulties in teaching our kids about race as anyone else: it's difficult to teach children living history and living literature because it's so complex—and because it goes against the grain of our lives.

For example, the most shaping racial story of the place where we live has to do with Native Americans. A race war spilled blood between natives and whites only forty miles from my house, a place called [Slaughter Slough](#). Less than twenty miles away is one of the most sacred sites of many upper Midwest tribal people, [Pipestone National Monument](#). Yet, my daughter, a freshman in high school, knows only two people with native blood—and she doesn't even realize they are native, doesn't know that a senior in her school takes part in a [Dakota memorial horseback ride](#) each December to commemorate the largest mass execution in U.S. history. They're just her friends. In short, it's easy to let the story be subsumed into American teen culture, to not want to single out her friends for their race and so to not mention the stories at all, to let bygones be bygones. On the surface, this might seem like a nice sentiment; however, as the struggle for native rights, recognition, and identity continues, ignorance and naivety like this is a barrier.

The stories of race are bound up in the story of America and in all of our identities, so directly addressing it with our children is an approach we have no choice but to take. This is especially true because of the tremendous paradox of talking about race in America. On one hand, our kids can Google the violent deaths of black men at the hands of police; on the other hand, black actors [boycott](#) the Academy Awards because so many structures remain unchanged. Somehow, the last thing we seem to want to give our children is the historical context to "black lives matter": that black men die—have always died, are killed—at a higher rate than white men. Even simple truths—such as the fact that before he was a national hero, Martin Luther King, Jr. was deeply feared by most of white America and officially harassed as a matter of government policy—become selective cultural memory.

The direct, confrontational approach to talking about race is the only one to take because the grain of culture pushes us in another, easier, lying direction. "They'll learn from TV how to be American," my wife said to me early on in our parenting. "We'll have to be conscious about teaching them to be Lao." While this is true of biracial children, we have to consciously teach about race, history, and identity to all of our children.

But where do we begin? As with many topics, literature and film can be a great help in this regard. We recently watched [42](#) with our children after our 4th grader did a book report on Jackie Robinson. It's a relatively safe film, perhaps presenting Robinson as a palatable black athlete, but it's an important introduction to the use of language and power and fear that have been central to one racial story in America. It's a gateway film—a gateway to conversation and to more and more complex conversations about race and identity. And it's complexity that should

be our aim.

Then there's the daily headlines. Almost every day, newspaper headlines emphasize how racial stories continue in the U.S. Black lives matter. Build a wall. What do these things mean? Headlines like these can seem distant in northwest Iowa, but they're not. Bring them close to home. Apply them to people you know. A self-identified brown friend of mine thinks differently about traffic stops than I do; Latino people at church potlucks hear "build a wall" differently than I do. Talk about these things with your children; wrestle with them; pray about them.

And pay attention to local headlines. In a local newspaper recently, several people's mug shots appeared in relation to drug arrests. The pictures and names beneath the pictures caught my attention because they told a racial story. The names and faces were Lao and Latino. As is true with arrest stories, there was no context. The easy interpretation would have been to connect race and crime. The harder story is to go beyond the headlines to the complex stories behind this situation. Who were these people? What forces drew them together? Were they second generation, third, fourth? What were their school experiences? What jobs did they have? How are they slipping through the cracks of our community, seeking refuge in petty crime and drug culture rather than in our local institutions? What's the grain of our local culture that can be so hard to go against?

Of course, there's no replacement for getting to know people. People who look different than you. People who talk and eat and vote differently than you. People whose homes you visit in. People you have in your home. As someone else has said, it's impossible to love your neighbor in the abstract; we must always love *this* neighbor, close at hand.

In this we can all do better. Two doors down from us live neighbors to whom we have never spoken. They're Latino, and the grain of our lives—the jobs we hold, the schedules we keep, the ages of our children—keeps us from meeting. This is inexcusable. This distance between us is a more impenetrable wall than any politician can build because it teaches my children that they don't have to cross these barriers.

What are the barriers of race in each of our communities, in our lives? How can we cross these barriers and cut against the grain of culture when it comes to talking about race with our kids?