Photograph of the **Zayas family** by Kylene Cleaver

WHY—AND HOW—TO TALK TO YOUR KIDS ABOUT race

by **Gwyneth K. Shaw**

It's a delicate topic that many parents try to avoid, but it's too important to ignore. We asked experts, and local parents, for advice about guiding your kids (and yourself) through these conversations.

Lori Tharps has been thinking, and writing, about race for a long time. Yet like so many of us, she shied away from talking about it with her kids: 15- and 12-year-old boys and a girl who's 5.

Tharps is African-American, her husband Spanish. Their children, she said, have decidedly different skin tones. She's wrestled for years with the way the world sees them—and how it sees her, as their mother.

"I should have been primed for this conversation, and yet when it comes to your own family, it's different," said Tharps, a journalism professor at Temple University whose most recent book, *Same Family, Different Colors: Confronting Colorism in America's Diverse Families,* directly addresses race, color, and kids.

"At the end of the day, any conversation about race should be had early and often," she said. "Whatever your family makeup is, talking about race should not be avoided."

As parents, we make many choices about our families: where to live, where to send our kids to school, which books to read, and what we talk about at the dinner table and in the car. These choices may not be explicitly about race, but they have an impact on what children think and do when it comes to understanding race, color, ethnicity, and their world.

It's common for parents to avoid talking about race, perhaps out of fear, or concern that drawing attention to it will somehow hurt their kids.

But that sends its own message to children: this is scary. So how *should* you start, and continue, a conversation? There's no one answer, since it depends on your family, the age of your kids, and your own perspective. But experts and local parents from a broad range of backgrounds agree that it's an essential discussion.

Photograph of **Lori Tharps** by John Barone

"Race is ever-occurring, and so there's not an option to jump in or out—it's happening. You can be better skilled at talking about it, but even in not talking about it, you are socializing," said Riana Anderson, a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the developer and director of EMBRace, or Engaging, Managing, and Bonding Through Race. It's a multi-session program that helps families work through racial trauma and understand one another's experiences.

"When you have parents who may shush a child who's asking a question or saying something 'improper' around race, that is socializing them to think that race is not something that I can talk about," she said. "The door's already open, so it's really just about how we can manage these conversations better as a family."

EMBRace is part of the Racial Empowerment Collaborative at Penn, a training and research program that's working to promote racial literacy and health. Howard Stevenson, a psychologist and a professor at Penn's Graduate School of Education, has been studying the psychology of racial conflict resolution for decades and is the collaborative's director.

Parents tend to think about race as a moral issue. It's lumped into conversations about values, and what kind of person you are, and want your children to be. "We've defined race for more than 60 years as a sense of morality," Stevenson said. That thinking needs to shift, he said, toward behavior, rather than values.

Photograph of **Shawn Jones, Riana Anderson,** and **Howard Stevenson** by Casey Kallen

Nobody thinks you're not a good person if you can't do algebra, he said. It takes work, and so does this. "The shift would be, not what do I believe about racial justice, but how do I act out that belief? What do I do if a moment shows up where I have to be just around racial matters?" he said. "And that's where people get stressed, and that anxiety is where we think we can help people reduce that stress if they practice skills to master particular moments."

But this is also about emotional and physical health, Stevenson said. Racial stress and discrimination is traumatizing, and it can affect sleep habits and mental health.

Studies show that racial socialization—at its core, being taught about race and its impact on one's life—can be protective for kids, affecting everything from academic achievement to anger management.

"If you thought talking about race could improve your child's sleeping habits, and what sleep is connected to for the rest of their life, would you then reconsider it?" Stevenson asked. Racial socialization in families tends to focus on four messages, Anderson said:

- **Pride and cultural understanding, which could be anything from wearing clothing (think Kente cloth) to going to a museum to learn more.**
- **Preparation for bias: for example, where you should put your hands when you're pulled over.**
- **The promotion of mistrust—if one person of this race or that ethnicity does something to you, do you generalize, or treat people as individuals?**
- **Egalitarianism and color-blindness, or the idea that we're all equal, and that all lives matter.**

For parents who have had a traumatic experience based on their race, talking to their kids can be especially difficult. Anderson said a parent who hasn't processed that experience might pass along especially negative feelings to a child, creating fear and hostility.

That's one of the reasons that the first EMBRace session separates parents and a child, so that parents can check in with themselves before moving into discussions with a kid.

EMBRace is, at least for now, just working with black families with children between the ages of 10 and 14. But Anderson said any family would benefit from a couple of activities that are used in the EMBRace sessions.

The first is creating a "cultural family tree." Sit down and really think about the history of your family's culture—the ethnic and racial makeup, and the history of all of it.

The point is to promote pride in who you are, Anderson said, but also to understand some of the places where your ancestors might have struggled.

That's about "figuring out for yourself who you are, rather than what the world tells you you are," Anderson said.

The second is in trying a style of debate that's highly structured, and designed to promote listening, rather than domination. Person A speaks for one minute, and then person B has one minute to summarize what they said, then another minute to speak themselves.

The fifth minute is about discussing what each of you actually said, not who won the argument. (This format might really help at holiday dinners.)

The most important thing, Stevenson said, is for parents to have the conversation, and recognize that kids need practical advice for how to handle a situation.

Talk to your kids, he said, about when they might need to be brave and speak up when something unjust is happening. Walk them through how to handle name-calling, and even physical fighting.

Photograph courtesy of the **Canary family**

"It's better to be more explicit than less," Stevenson said. "To be proud to be black, to be proud to be Jewish, to be proud to be Irish is good, but it doesn't really prepare you for when somebody comes up on you in less than a minute … Children need to know what to do. They don't need a lofty understanding of civil rights. That's not going to work when Joey is calling me every name."

If your child plays a sport or an instrument, you take them to practice and encourage them, right? This is the same type of preparation.

"If people are so afraid to broach these topics because they think that that's going to somehow magically prepare their kid to deal with that, then they're missing the science behind what practice is all about," Anderson said. "And acting as if race is somehow this one unique variable that can't be dealt with that way."

Of course, the message should be developmentally appropriate, said Shawn Jones, another psychologist and postdoctoral fellow who works with Anderson and Stevenson. And parents should "check in" occasionally with kids, to make sure they really heard what the parent was saying.

But even if your kids are young, Tharps said, you're not fooling anybody if you dodge the discussion.

Kids are seeing differences by about age 2, and understand that everyone isn't the same.

But parents don't have to talk about race and culture in a negative way, especially with younger kids, she said.

"You don't have to tell your 3-year-old, your 5-year-old, your 7-year-old, about police brutality and that Martin Luther King was assassinated," Tharps said. "Why don't you talk about the wonderful things about black culture?"

It's about context, she said. Help your kids understand immigration using food, from a Mexican restaurant to Philly's Italian Market. That's a less loaded way to help them grasp that this country's success comes from all sorts of different people.

That's where Vivi Zayas is coming from. For Zayas, language and culture are the key to creating a community full of kids who understand, appreciate, and accept differences.

She and her husband are from South America, and have two daughters, who are 9 months and 2 years old.

Zayas opened Lulu's Casita, a play space in Ardmore, almost four years ago. She knew she wanted to work with kids, and she also knew she wanted to create a space where speaking Spanish, and immersion in both the language and a variety of cultures, was a cornerstone.

"I thought, I want this for my child," Zayas said. "Since there isn't a lot, especially on the Main Line, I thought if I want it, I kind of have to go for it … We have families from everywhere."

Lulu's attracts families from France, South America, Japan, and beyond.

"Especially the way the country is now, they feel very safe coming to Lulu's and talking their language," she said.

Lulu's offers bilingual storytimes, and the instructor chooses books from all over the world, and talks about different cultures, too. The children really respond to it, she said.

Photograph of the **Lee-Kim family** by Linette Kielinski

"We open the conversation, especially during storytime," Zayas said. "Hopefully, that gives the parents and the kids that bridge, that conversation starter to start the talking."

Parents need to look inward as well, to understand their own sense of who they are, and how the world sees them.

"Having mixed-race kids has really made me think about racial identity, and what it even means," Tharps said. "Before I had kids, I just assumed they would be black."

Lucy Baber, a photographer who lives in Mount Airy with her husband and two children, grew up in northeast Philadelphia and Lancaster County. She's half Puerto Rican, but said she always identified as "white" until she was an adult.

She was taught colorblindness as a child, she said, but "at the same time, I would overhear racist comments and jokes at family gatherings and it made me feel uncomfortable."

When she began working with urban kids as a social worker and a therapist, Baber said she started to understand the implications of racism and the importance of speaking up. She's talking to her 6-year-old son, who attends a diverse city public school, to ensure he understands that, too.

"Now that he's in first grade, I am starting conversations about staying with his friends and standing up for them if he ever finds himself in a situation where an authority figure thinks they've done something wrong," she said.

"I know he's not likely to be confronted by these situations right now, but I'm afraid that if I wait too long to start having these conversations with him, it will be too late." Baber joked that her message might not be getting through to a Pokemon-obsessed kid, but that it will pay dividends someday.

"I hope that with practice, these conversations will be absorbed enough that he'll be able to think back on them when he really needs it later," she said.

For Amy Canary, it was a Teach for America training program that caused her to start actively thinking about race. She was born in China, and grew up in Indiana and Maryland. When she arrived in Philadelphia after college to join the teaching program, she had something of an awakening.

"I remember barely having my own racial identity when I was in these learning sessions," she said.

That training, and the experience of working in city schools, changed her thinking—especially about herself.

"In the years since then, I've just been really fascinated by racial issues and the experiences trying to talk across lines of difference, and how do you get others to see your own experience," Canary said. "So naturally I want to pass that on to my child and future children."

Photographs of the Baber family by Elaina Borchelt

Canary is now the assistant principal of instruction for kindergarten through second grade at Frederick Douglass Mastery Charter School, and has a 3-year-old son. She and her husband, whose family is of Irish descent, live in the city. They want to make sure race isn't a loaded topic in their household, even though their son's experience will inevitably be different than either of theirs.

"My son is biracial, and that's something that I can't relate to, nor can my husband, so I also want him to grow up understanding that about himself," she said. "In particular, knowing that the Chinese half makes him look different from everyone else."

Tiffany Kim and John Lee are both of Korean descent, and had different experiences growing up in the Washington, DC, suburbs: Lee was born there, to Korean immigrants, while Kim immigrated as a child.

Kim's adolescence involved culture shock, too, but both said they experienced name-calling and other negative behavior when they were young. But they don't want to assume that their kids will. They live in Chestnut Hill with their three kids, who are 8, 5, and 4.

"I guess we're trying to let their experiences play out without trying to impose too much of our own," Lee said. "We come from a different era."

They had mostly talked to their children about people being people, even if their hair is a different texture or their skin a different color. But they delved more deeply

into the subject about a year ago, Kim said, when their older son was asked, "what are you?" at school.

"He was confused. He said, 'I'm an American' and he walked away," Kim said. "We had a whole conversation about what it means to be Korean-American, so that was our very first conversation about race."

For the couple's younger children, it's still about concepts, and universal respect. "I don't want to teach them to grow up saying 'that person is white' because it's a lot more complicated than that," Lee said. "We try not to emphasize that aspect of it because it's easy to pigeonhole people."

A part of the conversation, Tharps said, has to be about the environment where you're raising your kids. They won't be as comfortable with different races, colors, and classes if they're raised in a community where everyone looks the same.

"If it's important to you, move," she said. "People move for much dumber reasons. Be intentional."

If you can't or won't move, try to find another way to expose your child to a more diverse environment. Consider a class, a camp, or a church in a different neighborhood (or in the city, if you live the suburbs).

If you're afraid of frightening your kids by being honest about racism and its implications, Stevenson said, don't be. You've taught them to avoid strangers and be careful crossing the street.

Why not talk to them about this?

And when you do, listen. Your kids understand more than you think—maybe they can teach you something. "Parents not only socialize children, but children also socialize parents," Stevenson said.