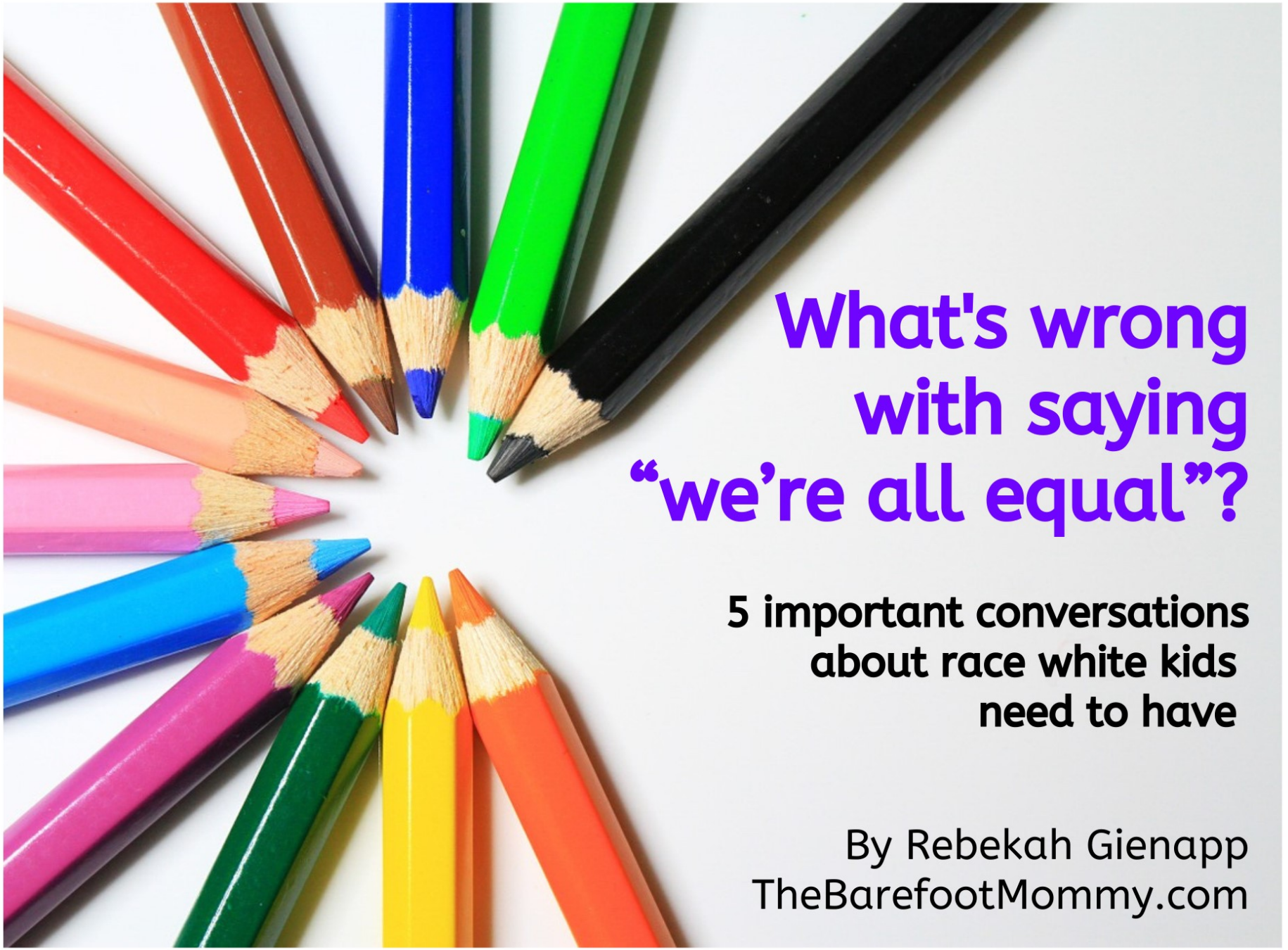

What's wrong with saying "we're all equal"?

5 important conversations about race white kids need to have

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Many well meaning parents and teachers tell children "we're all equal," trusting that this simple message will remind kids to reject racism and other forms of bias. We also hope it will teach children to treat everyone with kindness and respect, an important goal.

We think that we're being clear, but these messages are too vague for children to grasp (especially young children, who are very concrete thinkers.)

For examples, the authors of *NurtureShock* talk about a friend who told her 5 year old "remember everybody's equal" repeatedly. After 7 months of hearing this, her son looked at her and asked, "what does equal mean?"

Talking explicitly about race and racism is a far more effective strategy than telling children that "everyone is equal."

Many well-intentioned white adults say "we're all equal" because we **want** everyone to be treated equally. We hope telling our kids this message will make them **treat** others equally.

While we can tell our children that this is our hope for our community, we also need to tell them that everyone is **not yet** treated equally. If we don't, we're training children to ignore racism and prejudice when it happens.

Talking to kids explicitly about race is challenging for many adults, especially white adults. Most of us who are white grew up without any adults modeling this kind of conversation to us.

But it is possible. With practice, you'll become more comfortable having these race related conversations.

And in the process, you'll equip the kids in your life to recognize racism and take a stand against it.

In this guide, I'll share 5 key ideas we can teach kids instead of vague statements like "we're all equal." I'll start with strategies for the youngest children, and then share strategies for older elementary and middle school age kids.

Keep in mind that all of these ideas need to be discussed with our children repeatedly for them to absorb them. **These are not "one and done" conversations.**

Conversation Starter #1: People come in many different skin tones. Our community also gives these skin tones other names, which we call races.

Even as infants, children notice racial differences. As they grow into toddlers and preschoolers, they will try to make sense of these differences.

As adults, we can help them make sense of what they're noticing by welcoming their questions and observations about skin tone and race.

We can notice skin tones when we're playing, reading, and cuddling. If you're a parent, you can compare your own skin tone with your child's. For example, I've told my son, "my skin is a light peach color. I notice yours is a little darker, a shade of tan."

This should include naming white children's skin tones, hair textures, and other physical characteristics, as well as those of Black, Latinx, Asian, and indigenous peoples.

Otherwise we send children the unspoken message that "normal" skin is white, and that it therefore doesn't need to be named.

It's also important that we teach children the racial labels that society uses. Correlating race and skin tone is confusing for children at first, but it can be done.

Why does this matter? For one, race in the United States isn't just about skin tone. Race shapes our life experiences, both in positive ways (like the celebration of

culture), and in negative ways, like systemic racism. Kids can't effectively challenge racism at older ages if we teach them to ignore race at younger ages.

Second, over the long term, we don't want white children to call kids of color "dark skinned" or "yellow skinned" or "brown skinned." We want them to learn the racial labels that children of color would use for themselves.

When adults fail to teach our kids words like Black, Latino, or Asian, we're sending them a hidden message: being a person of color is shameful and shouldn't be talked about.

So, how can we teach correct names for race to young kids?

As we're naming skin tone, we can add the phrase "skin we call…" To go back to the example of my own family, as I talk about my peachy skin and my son's light tan skin, I also tell him "we both have skin we call white."

We can also tell young kids, "race is confusing!"

You might take out a piece of white construction paper and a piece of black construction paper. As you're teaching the racial names Black and white, you can say "but look, it's confusing. Black people have many different shades of skin, from tan to dark brown. But no one has skin the color of this construction paper. White people also have many different shades of skin, from very light peach to tan. But none of them have skin the color of this piece of construction paper."

Finally, as we teach kids racial labels, we can teach them that these names are often related to where our ancestors came from, either long ago or recently.

Conversation Starter #2: People of different races can be friends, even though we come from different backgrounds.

This is a tricky conversation for many adults, especially white adults, to have. That's because our discomfort in talking about race often makes it hard for us to be explicit.

But for this type of conversation to reduce kids' racial bias, it has to be explicit.

Researcher Birgitte Vittrup tested this out by asking white parents of preschool age kids to watch multicultural kids programming and have follow up conversations with their kids about race and friendship.

They were given sample conversations, such as "some people on TV or at school have a different skin color than us. White children and Black children and Mexican children often like the same things even though they come from different backgrounds. They are still good people and you can be their friend. If a child of a different skin color lived in our neighborhood, would you like to be his friend?"

Kids in the study whose parents only showed them the videos showed no improvement in their racial attitudes afterwards. The same was true of parents who reverted into vague messages about everyone being equal.

But for all of the white parents who were able to talk openly to their kids about

[1] Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children* (New York: Twelve, 2009), 47– 51.

interracial friendship, their children's racial attitudes did improve significantly.[1]

Note that we're not telling kids "we're all basically the same," or "we're the same inside." We're telling them that children of different races often have different cultures or experiences, AND that we can enjoy doing things together as friends.

Of course, this message is most compelling and believable when we model interracial friendship as adults. But even if your current friendships are with other white people, you can still start these conversations with kids while you also look for ways to diversify your own social circle.

It's quite common for young kids to exclude each other on the basis of race (we'll talk more about that in conversation starter #3.)

Developmentally, preschool age children frequently look for other people who they feel are like them. Because preschoolers don't have complex thinking processes yet, they tend to rely on what they can see, including skin color, to decide who is like them.

So, even if you think your child isn't capable of racial prejudice, it's important to have these explicit conversations.

Conversation Starter #3: It's never okay to exclude someone because of their race, or anything else that makes them who they are.

What we want kids to understand is that while we all have a few friends who we enjoy spending time with the most, it's never okay to reject or exclude someone because of their identity.

We can start these conversations as we go through daily life, and as we watch children's media and read books together.

Adults can talk about how race is one part of a person's identity, the things that make us who we are. It's also a good idea to talk about how gender, whether we have a disability or not, and who we love (or who makes up our family) are other parts of our identity.

Using real life examples will help children understand what this means, and how it feels to be rejected based on your identity. Reading books such as *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi or *Ouch Moments* by Michael Genhart can also help.

We can help kids brainstorm what they could say if they see someone else insult a person's identity. This could include teaching kids the phrase, "it's not ok to tease someone because of who they are."

Conversation Starter #4: Racism keeps everyone from being treated equally. All of us, especially white people, are responsible for stopping racism.

Racist is a word that tends to be emotional and even explosive in our society. The way that it's used in mainstream media and by most white people suggests that there are certain people who are fundamentally racist, and others who are not.

Racism is actually much more prevalent than the common usage of the word racist suggests. It affects all of us, and racist ideas are woven into every aspect of our society.

So it's important that we teach children what racism is, and that it's something other than ordinary meanness.

How do we explain what racism is in terms children can understand?

Specific examples help kids unpack this the most. For young children (under 6) examples in the present day are best, since developmentally it's hard for them to distinguish between long ago and yesterday.

For a child under 6, an adult might say something like "racism is treating someone unfairly because of their race." For example, we can point to the reality that most children's books star white characters. We can talk about how it's unfair that some people's stories get told a lot, and other people have to fight to get their stories heard.

For an elementary age child, an adult could describe racism as writer Jennifer Harvey did to her child: "all the beliefs, behaviors, and laws in our society that harm African American people, Latino people, and all people of color."[2]

I would also add to this definition that these same beliefs, behaviors, and laws give unfair advantages to white people.

For kids this age, we can give examples like the fact that studies have shown Black students are much more likely than white students to be given out of school suspensions, even when their behavior is similar.[3]

We could ask, "have you ever noticed Black (or Latino) kids getting punished at school more often for doing the same things that white kids are doing?"

For kids of all ages, parents and teachers can stress that it's not enough to be "not racist." We have to **actively** do everything we can to stop racism.

Many people refer to this as being antiracist. Antiracism includes everything from speaking up when a classmate is being bullied because of their race to advocating for laws that fight discrimination.

[2] Jennifer Harvey, *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 142.

[3] Kristen Weir, "Inequality at School: What's Behind the Racial Disparity in Our Education System?" *Monitor on Pscyhology* , November 2016, https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/11/cover-inequality-school.

Conversation Starter #5: Race isn't real biologically. But it makes a big difference in people's life experiences. That means that race is real, and we need to talk about it.

When I first started writing my book *Raising Antiracist Kids: An age by age guide for parents of white children*, I wasn't sure if we needed to talk to kids about race and biology.

Then I read research by sociologist Margaret Hagerman, who spent months talking with 36 wealthy white middle schoolers living in the Midwest. More than once, she overheard conversations where kids assumed that people of different races have bodies or brains that are fundamentally different from each other.

For example, while talking about basketball players one afternoon, one 12-year-old insisted to his friend that Black basketball players must have an extra muscle in their legs. He was sure this must be the case, because he saw how many star basketball players were Black.[4]

Wow, I thought! Clearly this is something we need to address with kids.

Children notice that physical characteristics like hair texture, skin tone, and the shape of eyes, noses, and lips often differ among people of different races.

Some children may believe that these surface level physical traits mean that

[4] Margaret A. Hagerman, *White Kids: Growing Up With Privilege in a Racially Divided America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 106-107.

people belonging to different racial groups are fundamentally different from each other in a biological sense.

We can tell them that scientists who study genetics have found that there's no genetic combination that makes a person Arab, Asian, white, Black, or Latinx. For example, they've found that there's more diversity between people who live within Africa than there is between Africa and the rest of the world.[5]

But in the same conversation that we teach children that race isn't real in the biological sense, we need to immediately follow with a second idea.

Race is a very real concept in the social sense.

Because of the way our culture and communities operate, race makes a huge difference in our life experiences.

For one, race is one of the significant ways that cultures are celebrated and passed on.

Secondly, race affects our access to resources, our experiences of discrimination or privilege, and even our mental and physical health.

Telling children that race doesn't matter lets them believe that everyone already competes on a level playing field, which is not true.

[5] Ibram X. Kendi, *How To Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 53.

Want more help talking to kids about race?

If you're a white parent who wants to have meaningful conversations with your child about race, my new book ***Raising Antiracist Kids*** is for you.

This age by age guide will not only equip you to talk about race and racism at every stage of children's development. It will also show you the many different ways families can take antiracist action in our communities.

To learn more about how the book can support you in your antiracism journey, **go here**.

About me

Hi there! I'm Rebekah Gienapp. I'm mama to a boisterous 7 year old and stepmom to a chill 21 year old. I'm also an activist, a former community organizer, and a minister.

I started The Barefoot Mommy because of my desire to help other parents and teachers raise young activists. I'm on a continual journey towards antiracist parenting, still learning and growing every day. I'm so glad to be traveling this path with you.

Questions about anything in this guide? Drop me a line at rebekah@thebarefootmommy.com.