

**A guide for parents from the
Middle East and North
Africa for approaching
topics of racism and
discrimination with children**

**You are the role
model for your child**



**Do you talk to your
children about racism?
Why or why not?**



**WILLIAM JAMES
COLLEGE**

**Center for Multicultural &
Global Mental Health**

Introduction

The topic of racism and discrimination is an important issue that parents must understand and teach their children about. Children sense and recognize racial differences from a young age, usually around age 4, and may have questions about what they see, hear, and experience. Educating families about such issues contributes to raising a next generation that is understanding and tolerant. In this guide, we will explain how you can talk to your children about the issue of racism and discrimination.

What is racism?

Racism is the belief that there are people who are treated better or worse based on their race or origin. Racism includes discriminatory thoughts and behaviors against people because of their skin color or origin.

Why must we fight racism?

Racism leads to people being mistreated and criminalized based on characteristics they cannot control. We must all work to end this type of discrimination and build an equal and just society.

Have you ever been told or had the following happen to you?

“Go back where you came from”?

Been concerned about your physical safety in public places?

Been worried about someone harassing you because you wear the hijab or traditional dress from your home country?

Heard comments about being a terrorist?

Ever hesitated to speak Arabic in public places?

Ever had indirect racist comments directed towards you?

If you have experienced any of these situations, your children likely have too!

There is a long history of discrimination against Arabs in the United States

1914

A Syrian man named George Dow petitioned in court to be racially classified as white in order to be considered for citizenship, a status which only whites or blacks were considered eligible for until 1965.

1924

The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 limited immigration from the Middle East and North Africa, and those admitted had to claim white ethnicity.

1967

Arab Americans were labeled as non-white "others." Israelis were treated as heroes in the media during the Arab-Israeli War and Arabs were portrayed as savages.

1991

Hundreds of anti-Arab acts occurred across the United States during the Gulf War.

1993

Arabs experienced increased targeting and discrimination after the first World Trade Center bombings.

2001

After the September 11 attacks in the United States, many Arab and Muslim individuals and communities were subjected to discrimination and racism in the United States and Europe, including accusations of terrorism.

2017

The Muslim travel ban restricted travel from seven Muslim-majority countries to the United States.

2020

The Middle Eastern and North African category was dropped from the US Census, meaning Arab Americans will need to wait until at least 2030 to gain recognition, federal funding and representation in Congress.

2023-2024

Record high instances of anti-Arab hate and sentiment reported across the U.S. after October 7th and amidst Israel's ongoing war in Gaza.

But there is also a long history of Arab American representation and organizing in the U.S.

1527

Estebanico Azemmori, a Moroccan man, and Antonio Bechealani, a Lebanese man, came to the United States and became the first members of a community known today as “Arab Americans.”

1915

The Pen League was founded, the first Arabic-language literary association in North America. The group included Kahlil Gibran and promoted Arab-American literature and scholarship.

1967

The Association of Arab American University Alumni (AAUG) was founded in response to the 1967 war with the goal of promoting scholarship and more accurate representation of Arabs.

1980

The Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) was founded to defend the rights of people of Arab descent and promote their cultural heritage. It is now the largest Arab-American grassroots organization in the United States.

1985

The Arab American Institute (AAI) was created with the goal of increasing Arab American participation and representation in the US political system.

2005

Opening of the Arab American National Museum (AANM), the first and only museum of its kind in the United States, dedicated to documenting and preserving the history, culture and contributions of Arab Americans.

2019

Rashida Tlaib became the first Palestinian-American woman in the US Congress and one of the first Arab American women to serve in the House of Representatives.

2021

April is recognized as National Arab American Heritage Month to celebrate Arab American culture, heritage, and contributions to American society.

Awareness and education

Let's listen and learn

How you approach the topics of racism and discrimination with your children will depend on their age. Below are tips and suggestions for different age groups.

Under the age of five

Children in this age group may begin to notice apparent differences between people around them, and point out these differences. There is an opportunity for parents here to gently establish the foundation for their children's perceptions of the world.

Use age-appropriate and easy-to-understand language.

Acknowledge and celebrate differences. If your child asks about the color of someone's skin, you can use this question as an opportunity to acknowledge that people are different, but point out what they have in common. You can say, "We are all human, but we are all unique. Isn't that amazing!"

Be open. Make it clear that you are always open to your child's questions and encourage them to ask you. If your child points out people with a different appearance, which children often do out of curiosity, avoid silencing them or they will begin to think that this topic is taboo.

Use the concept of fairness, as children in this age group often understand this concept well. Talk about racism as an unjust practice and explain why we must work together to make it better.

Awareness and education

Let's listen and learn

6-11 years old

Children in this age group are more able to talk about their feelings and are eager for answers. They also become exposed to information that they may find difficult to comprehend. Start by assessing what they know.

Be curious. The first step is to listen and ask questions. For example, you can ask your child what they hear and see at school, on television, and on social media.

Discuss with your child what's in the media; social media and the internet may be your child's main source of information.

Show interest in what they read and the conversations they engage in online.

Find opportunities to explore examples of stereotypes and racial biases in the media, such as "Why are certain people portrayed as evil and others not?"

Talk openly. Having frank and open discussions about racism, diversity, and inclusion builds your child's confidence and encourages them to approach you with their questions and ideas.

If your child views you as a trusted source of advice, they will likely be more open with you about this topic.

Awareness and education

Let's listen and learn

12 years old and above

Teenagers can understand more clearly and express their views. They may know more than you think they do, and they may have feelings they would like to express about the topic. Try to understand their feelings, what they know, and keep the conversation going.

Ask questions. Find opportunities through current events to talk to your teen about racism. Ask them what they think to better understand their thoughts and perspectives.

Encourage your teen to engage in volunteer work and social activities, especially in the field of combating racism and social service.



A reminder

**Don't
react**

**Don't
judge**

**Keep your face calm
and neutral**

**Don't tell children or teenagers
what they should or should not feel**

Just listen

Say...

**"tell me
more"**

**"that sounds
difficult"**

**"thank you
for sharing"**

"okay"

It's okay to not have all the answers

Ideas to start the conversation

Do you feel concerned because your appearance as an Arab is different from others?



Have you or someone you know ever been called a terrorist?



Have you felt angry or sad about the way Arabs are treated and did not know what to do about it?



In conclusion

Discrimination and racism must be combated in all forms whenever it arises, and mutual understanding and respect between all cultures and races must be promoted.



Teaching your children about racism and discrimination contributes to building a better society. Parents can be the driving force and inspiration for their children to become individuals who see the value in diversity and work toward a more just and inclusive world.



For more information and to learn more about the topic:

Resources for addressing racism:

- <https://universitylife.columbia.edu/content/resources-combating-anti-arab-bias>
- <https://afsc.org/bystander-intervention-toolkit>

Educational resources for parents to talk to children about racism:

- EmbraceRace: www.embracerace.org
- <https://www.gse.upenn.edu/news/talking-children-after-racial-incidents>
- Talktokids.net
- <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/talk-about-race.html>
- <https://www.pbs.org/parents/talking-about-racism>

To report hate incidents:

<https://adc.org/legal-policy/get-assistance/#scroll>

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Sarah Miller, PsyD

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