

A message from our founder, Dr. Charlie Brown

It is over a week now that the world has reverberated with protests and outcry against social injustice and in recognition that Black Lives Matter. This universal outcry has been triggered by the brutal murder of George Floyd by a police officer using a knee to his neck while four other police officers stood by and did not intervene. I have learned it is important to *say their names*; that we must not forget the killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and the countless other Black Americans who have suffered and died because of institutionalized racism. I have learned that *silence is violence*, and by not recognizing my own prejudices, that I and other people who have benefited from this social injustice are part of the problem.

This system cannot change unless we recognize that it exists – and is supported by – our silence. Children are always smarter, more perceptive and more honest than we give them credit for. It is difficult to have conversations with our children about ugly facts and painful truths but the alternative is to perpetuate a world of injustice. To begin with, I think we have a responsibility to not look away. Children always do better with the truth. We have a responsibility to look within ourselves, our roots and our present actions and seek the truth. We have a responsibility to recognize injustice, to stop violence, to correct unfair and discriminatory practices in our everyday lives. The murder of George Floyd and countless other Black Americans is a direct result of a two tiered justice system.

As a doctor and proud member of the Newton Wellesley Family Pediatric team, I pledge to treat all children equally and to welcome families without regard to the color of their skin, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, or political or religious beliefs. I pledge to try to listen to the children of our practice and encourage them to speak so we can discover the stressors, injustices in their lives, the barriers that they face to grow and achieve their potential, and to encourage them to reveal mistreatment or violence in their lives so we might help to correct those. I also pledge to try to be open to hear about how I may be missing the mark or perpetuating injustice in my own actions or communications.

With this in mind, here are a few thoughts about how to start to address these difficult conversations with our children:

1. Tell the truth. “The truth will set you free.” I think it is important to explain in ways that are developmentally appropriate that there are some things in life that “are not fair.”
2. “It’s not fair.” Kids have an innate sense of fairness. They know when their sibling gets something they don’t and when they are punished and their sibling is not. I think we should address fairness with all of our children at their developmental level. I think it is fair to tell children that as parents we try to treat our children fairly, that we want to be treated fairly and we expect children to be treated fairly in school. We should expect our children to treat everyone equally and we should explicitly say that we should not treat each other differently because of the color of one’s skin, or how much money they have or where they come from or who they love. I think it is important to say this out loud and give your children examples from your own childhood or current lives.

3. Talk about race. Every parent should have “THE TALK.” Just like we talk to our kids about growing and changing or the dangers of drugs and alcohol or stranger danger, we should also – no matter the color of our skin – sit our children down and talk about race. We should explain to them that some families have to unfairly sit their children down and tell them how to act so that they don’t get arrested or risk being singled out by the police. We should empower them to notice when someone is being bullied or shut out or hurt and stand up for their friends. If they do it now, they are more likely to do it when they grow up.
4. Ask them. Ask them what they know about racism and what it means to be unfair. They may surprise you in what they already know or what thoughts they have. They may be thinking about it even more than they show you, and this can spark a conversation. Answer their questions. Be honest. Showing them your frustrations with the system allows them to be frustrated, but also gives you the opportunity to show them how to handle that frustration or confusion in a mature and respectful way.
5. We ask children “have you ever been bullied?” We should also ask: “have you ever bullied?”
6. We should ask: “has anyone been unfair to you because of the color of your skin or where you live or how you look or dress?”
7. We should ask: “do you know about slavery?”
8. The list of questions does not end here. Let us know how you address social justice in your family.

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that,” Martin Luther King Jr. It is human nature sadly to fight for what you want, to take what you want, to hit, to push, even to hurt. It is a learned skill to negotiate, to compromise, to delay satisfaction. We should model empathetic behavior to our children. We should actively stop hurtful behaviors and reward empathetic, constructive and cooperative problem solving. If we can’t do it when we’re little, heaven help us when we have much greater power as adults. Help us help our community. While we may not be able to fully understand the depth of other people’s experiences, we *will* make a commitment to listen, to be open to the concerns of our families and to pledge to treat all members of our community equally.

Be safe in these difficult times.

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