



From the book *Something Happened in Our Town* by Marianne Celano, Ph.D., Marietta Collins, Ph.D., & Ann Hazzard, Ph.D

It is likely that after watching the WCCO special and /or reading *Something Happened in Our Town*, it may prompt further discussions with your family.

This section includes sample responses to possible questions or statements from your child, as well as some conversation-starting ideas for parents. Try not to lecture, but ask follow-up questions and offer ideas as a way to start talking about these issues.

“Shana’s skin is brown and dirty. Why doesn’t she take a bath?”

Note: preschool children are concrete thinkers and may confuse dark skin with dirt.

Her skin is not dirty. It is just a different color than yours. People have all sorts of skin colors, just like they have all sorts of hair colors.

“Why do Black boys always act out in class?”

Note: when a child expresses a negative racial stereotype, it is important to ask “What makes you say that?” Often the answer will provide an opportunity to counter unfair generalizations.

What makes you say that?

“Lamar got in trouble twice yesterday.”

Twice isn’t the same as always. Are there some White boys who don’t follow rules sometimes? It’s not fair to think that all Black boys behave badly just because Lamar made several bad choices. It is not fair to think that all people with a certain skin color are going to act a certain way. All of us make some good and some bad choices.

“I don’t want to play with Jada because she is Black.”

Note: If your child expresses a prejudiced belief, stress that those beliefs are not acceptable. You might question your child to try to determine if he or she is frustrated with someone for reasons other than skin color. In that case, you can help your child solve that problem adaptively. Another alternative is to highlight that people have many different characteristics beyond the color of their skin.

In our family we don't reject people based on their skin color. We choose friends based on what we like or don't like about how they act. Can you think of some ways that you and Jada are alike? What about the games you like to play, the foods you like, and what you think is funny? How do each of you feel when you succeed at something? How do each of you feel when you are left out by other children? Is it possible you are frustrated with Jada for reasons other than the fact that she is Black?

Your child tells a racist joke.

I know you are telling jokes to figure out what's funny and what's not. But it's not a good choice to tell jokes that make fun of someone who is different than you. You have red hair, so how would you feel if someone told a joke that all people with red hair are silly clowns? That's what it's like to tell a joke that makes fun of people's skin color. Did you tell this joke to other kids? It would be a good idea to apologize for telling a mean joke.

"Why do Jamal's parents have different skin colors from each other? You and Dad look the same."

Note: Your child asks about a biracial family.

Jamal's mother's ancestors came from Africa many years ago, so she is an African American with darker skin. His father is White and his ancestors came from Europe or Russia or some other place. Most people in our country came from somewhere else—people in our family did too. Jamal's skin color is a blend of his parents' skin colors. We are all blended from people from different places. I think that's pretty cool and interesting. But I understand why you might have been confused, since the people in our family have very similar skin color.

"Why did that man shoot those police officers?"

Note: This book focuses on the aftermath of a police officer shooting a Black man in the community. Children may also hear about police officers being shot. The reasons that police officers are shot vary and may not be known in some instances.

We are still trying to understand why. He might have been a criminal who was trying to keep the police from arresting him and putting him in jail. He might have been angry because he believed police were treating Black people unfairly. Or he might have a brain problem that made him confused about what was really happening so that he felt like he was in danger or on a mission. This is called a psychological problem. However, most people with psychological problems are not violent, just confused and scared. Shooting police is never right, no matter how confused you feel or how unfairly someone acted towards you.

You can prompt other discussions with your own questions. Here are some examples of questions that can facilitate helpful discussions related to diversity and racial justice:

- “What do you think the world would be like if everyone was exactly the same?” *A box of multicolored crayons can be a helpful analogy for the benefits of diversity.*
- “Do kids in your class ever get teased about being different in some way?”
- “How do you think you would feel if you were Black and read this book (or watched this TV show, or saw this movie)?” This is a good question to ask when you confront stereotypes in media materials.
- “What is the same about you and (this story character)? What is different?”
- “Who are the people in your life who help to keep you safe?”



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The following are some questions that African American children, in particular, might have, and some sample responses in child-friendly language.

“Why do White people hate us?”

When we are treated unfairly by White people because we are Black, it feels really bad and can make us believe that all White people hate us. This is surely not the case! Some White people may dislike Black people and treat them badly based on their race. This type of bad treatment may stem from slavery when White people were allowed to own Black people, and laws allowed Black people to be mistreated. Treating Black people badly may have become a habit that is hard for some White people to break. This is a habit that may have been taught to some White people by their parents and grandparents. There are other White people who do not act like they hate Black people. These White people believe that all races should be treated fairly, which is a good habit. These White people may have been taught this good habit by their parents and grandparents. Treating all races fairly and being open to differences is a good habit for our family to have and share with others.

“Sometimes I wish that I was White.”

Other Black people have felt like this, so you are not alone. Perhaps you feel this way because the discrimination and prejudice against Black people makes you feel it would be easier to live here if you were White. This is understandable, but if you were White, you wouldn't be you. All of the things that you and I love about you would be different if you were not you. While it's hard at times to be Black, it's also great to be a part of such a wonderful race of people. Some White people want to be more like us because they like our dark skin and even try to tan to darken their skin. They like many things about our culture, such as our music, our dance, our art, our hair, and our skin color! They like our family life, how smart we are, and our determination to be a part of this country even though it's hard when some people treat you unfairly or call you racist names. What's important is accepting and loving ourselves while learning to understand and accept the differences between ourselves and other races. These differences really make the world a great place.

“A White boy in my class called me a (racial slur). If he says that again, I’m going to beat him up.”

I can see that you are pretty upset about this, which is certainly understandable! Calling people bad names is never good, and is especially hurtful if the name says mean things about you and your race. But, punching or beating him up is not a good solution. It may even convince the boy and others who are watching that the boy was right to call you the name, because fighting will show you behaving in an out-of-control way. Although it would be quite hard, a better solution would be to calmly state that you don’t like being called that name, that it offends you, and that it does not describe who you are. You show the person that you are very strong when you stay calm and stand up for yourself this way. Think of yourself as a superhero surrounded by a force field that makes racist remarks bounce off of you because you have the power of loving and standing up for yourself. If you feel that you cannot remain calm or if it is too hard for you to say these things, ignore the person and walk away. Then it is helpful to talk about what happened with an adult you trust, just like you are doing now.

“Why is Keisha’s skin so much lighter than mine? She says she is prettier.”

Within the Black community, there are many different shades of skin color, from the darkest of dark to the lightest of light. Some Black people think that lighter skin is better than darker skin and some Black people like darker skin tones more than lighter skin tones. Neither is better than the other. Judging a person based on whether they have light skin or dark skin is wrong. The type of person they are on the inside is what is most important. Does this person treat others fairly? Would this person be a good friend to me because I know that I can trust and depend on him or her? Is this person honest? These questions are more important than making a decision about a person based on whether they are light skinned or dark skinned.

“What should I do if a police officer stops me?”

Note: Two excellent videos about this topic are “How to Raise A Black Son in America” (Ted Talk by Clint Smith) and “How to Deal with The Police/Parents Explain” (YouTube video). Links to these videos as well as other resources are available in the “Additional Resources” found online at www.apa.org/pubs/magination/441B228.aspx.

As you become older, there may be times when a police officer stops you. Being stopped by the police is not a reason to panic or run. It is a time to stop what you are doing, to listen carefully to what the policeman or woman is saying, and then to do what he or she says to do. Speak to the police in a respectful way and be truthful when you answer their questions. It would be okay to say you are nervous and to ask if you can call your parents. If the police stop you, it is

important to keep your hands where the police can see them and to not move about quickly. Tell the police if you are planning to look for something in your pocket, on the floor, or on the ground. If the police officer is not treating you fairly, we will figure out how to make things right in the future, but it is safer for you to stay calm and obey the police at that moment.

“Could I get shot by the police?”

Because you are a child and not an adult, there probably won't be situations where you are alone and the police would stop you or show you their gun. If you are with an adult whom you trust and the police stop the adult, listen carefully and follow the instructions from the adult. Also, remember that most police officers never fire their guns during their whole careers because they try to solve problems without violence. There are many police officers who work hard and want to help people.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marianne Celano, PhD, ABPP, Marietta Collins, PhD, and Ann Hazzard, PhD, ABPP worked together for over two decades as Emory University School of Medicine faculty members serving children and families in Atlanta. All three psychologists have been involved in community advocacy efforts focused on children's behavioral health and social justice. Dr. Celano and Dr. Hazzard have developed and utilized therapeutic stories in individual and group therapy with children and teens. All three authors valued story-time with their children, who taught them important lessons about what children need from adults. This is their first picture book for children.

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