

Guiding Young People Through Polarizing Times



When events such as ICE raids, wars, or protests occur locally or nationally, children and youth often respond with questions, fears, or misunderstandings. Young people are forming ideas about race, power, safety, and belonging. Ignoring these moments can unintentionally reinforce stress, misinformation, or othering.

This guide offers developmentally informed strategies to help you respond with honesty, care, and intention. Consider these ideas as flexible support, and adapt them based on your role, your relationship, and what you know about the young person in front of you.

What a four-year-old needs is different from what an adolescent can process. Even two young people of the same age may be in very different places emotionally, cognitively, and socially. Your position in their life, whether you are a parent, caregiver, educator, family member, coach, faith leader, or another trusted adult, will influence how the conversation unfolds. Context shapes meaning. A young person's interpretation of events is influenced by temperament, lived experience, racial identity, media exposure, stress levels, and their current sense of safety.

At the heart of these conversations is a commitment to dignity, humanity, and belonging for all people. Before beginning, take a moment to ground yourself. Young people often take their cues from the adults around them. Your presence, tone, and willingness to listen help signal safety. How we respond teaches young people what safety and belonging feel like. Our words matter, and so do our tone, facial expressions, posture, and pauses.

These conversations are rarely one-time events. They unfold over time and deepen as children grow.

Simplified Steps for All Ages

1. Prepare yourself.
2. Ask questions.
3. Respond empathically and support the development of empathy.
4. Affirm their sense of self-worth and provide comfort.
5. Provide information to answer questions without overwhelming them.
6. Avoid shaming if they say something harmful.
7. Establish non-negotiable boundaries around treating people respectfully.
8. Counter stereotypes and misinformation.
9. Explore ways they can move into action to stand up for what they believe is right.
10. Keep the conversation going and learn together.

A Developmental Progression

Children's understanding of fairness, identity, and power grows over time. This guide follows a developmental arc:

In early childhood, the focus is on **naming unfairness and affirming belonging**. Young children think concretely and rely on adults to interpret the world. They need clarity and reassurance.

In middle childhood, the work shifts toward **interrupting harmful ideas and strengthening identity or empathy**. Children begin forming more stable beliefs about race and belonging, and early myths can solidify if left unexamined.

In early adolescence, youth can hold more complexity. Conversations deepen to **connecting emotions with history, systems, and responsibility**. Identity formation intensifies, and dignity must remain central.

In later adolescence, young people are capable of abstract analysis. The focus expands to **examining power, questioning narratives, and building collective responsibility**. Honesty about systems is paired with agency and moral courage.

Across all ages, the goal remains the same: protect dignity, cultivate belonging, and interrupt narratives that diminish humanity.

Talking with Young People: In Polarizing Times

- 1 NAME**
 - What feels unfair?
 - Who might be hurt?
- 2 INTERRUPT**
 - Facts or stereotypes?
 - Strengthen identity
- 3 CONNECT**
 - Connect emotions
 - Explore history
- 4 BUILD**
 - Raise awareness
 - Empower action

Pause to listen.
Belonging is non-negotiable.
Keep talking, keep acting.

Talking with Children and Youth When they are Concerned or Upset

Being present matters. Even if you don't know what to do or say, your willingness to sit with a young person who is upset can help them feel safe and know they are not alone as they navigate fears. Children from targeted communities run the risk of internalizing fear, shame, or messages of suspicion about themselves and their families.

The Purpose of the Conversation is to:

- Provide support for them to feel safer.
- Help them navigate their concerns with more confidence.
- Protect their identity and self-worth against stereotypes.
- Build resilience against racialized stress for young people of color.
- Reinforce belonging and rightful presence.
- Center pride, history, and contribution of targeted communities, including their own.

<p>4-6 years old</p> <p>Children are developing awareness of differences but still rely on adults to help name feelings and interpret events.</p>	<p>Name unfairness clearly while reinforcing safety and belonging.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes people are treated unfairly because of unkind or untrue ideas about their skin color or who they are.” • “Our family belongs.” • “Let’s take a couple of deep breaths. You are safe with me.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How are you feeling about what you heard?”
<p>7-10 years old</p> <p>Children are forming stronger ideas about fairness and belonging, and racial attitudes can begin to solidify during these years.</p>	<p>Name stereotypes and offer empowerment without creating fear.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If someone is treated unfairly, that reflects stereotypes — not their worth or yours.” • For those targeted: “Our community has contributed so much to this country.” • “You are an important part of this country’s story.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Has anything like that ever happened to you?”
<p>11-13 years old</p> <p>Youth are forming more complex</p>	<p>Validate emotions and provide historical context while keeping the focus on dignity.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It makes sense that this feels personal.”

<p>racial identities, and experiences of exclusion can feel especially personal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Who is seen as ‘American’ has been defined differently at different times in history.” • “People who are undocumented deserve to be treated with dignity and humanity. Laws may be debated, but a person’s value as a human being is not.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What feelings come up for you when you hear messages like that?”
<p>14-18 years old</p> <p>Adolescents are solidifying racial and political identities and can analyze injustice more deeply.</p>	<p>Balance realism with empowerment and collective strength.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Citizenship and belonging are often racialized in this country.” • “That reflects a system shaped by history, not your worth.” • “Our ancestors survived exclusion and built community anyway. We carry that resilience.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How do you want to respond or engage when you see this happening?”

When You Don’t Know What to Say

You do not need perfect words. These conversations are part of supporting children and youth in understanding dignity, justice, and belonging, and in developing a healthy racial and ethnic identity. You can say:

- “I don’t know enough about that yet. Let’s find out together.”
- “That’s a big question. I want to think about that, so I can respond thoughtfully.”

What NOT to Say (adapted with resources from www.childnet.org/immigration-resources.)

It is natural to want to protect children from scary topics, but some common responses can make things worse.

Avoid phrases and actions like:

- “Don’t worry about it.” This can feel dismissive.
- “That won’t happen to us.” This may give false security.
- Replaying or talking about scary news footage. This increases anxiety.

Instead, try saying:

- “You’re not alone. People are helping, and I’m one of them.”
- “It’s okay to feel scared. We can talk about it and try to find ways to feel better.”
- “We’re doing everything we can to keep our family and others as safe as possible.”

Talking with Children and Youth When they are Curious

In racially diverse settings, young people may experience ICE activity or racialized targeting very differently. Some may feel fear or anger. Others may feel defensive, confused, or unaffected. All children are forming meaning about race, power, and belonging.

The Purpose of the Conversation is to:

- Provide greater comfort through factual information.
- Interrupt stereotypes before they are normalized.
- Develop critical thinking about media and rhetoric.

<p>4-6 years old</p> <p>Children think concretely and literally. Ideas about fairness are forming early.</p>	<p>Keep explanations simple and grounded in fairness.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes adults treat people unfairly because of how they look.” • “Rules are not always fair.” • “ICE is a group of adults that is supposed to be checking to see if people can legally live in this country. Some families are upset with them because they feel they are not being fair.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What have you heard about this? What questions do you have?”
<p>7-10 years old</p> <p>Children are beginning to think logically but still rely on adults to interpret complex social issues.</p>	<p>Introduce racial profiling and interrupt myths early.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes people are stopped because of assumptions about their race. How someone looks does not tell you where they were born.” • “Being born here doesn’t mean someone is treated fairly and being born in another country doesn’t mean they should be treated unfairly.” • “Some families are being separated because of rules about where people were born. Sometimes people are also treated unfairly because of how they look or where others think they are from. That can be really sad and confusing. In our family, we (or I) believe it’s important to treat people fairly and with care. It’s not okay when people are treated as if they don’t belong.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What do you already know about this? What questions do you have?”
<p>11-13 years old</p> <p>Youth can understand</p>	<p>Name racism directly and focus on humanity.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p>

<p>fairness and injustice more deeply, though emotions may intensify.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Race and citizenship are not the same things. People of Color are sometimes assumed to be here ‘illegally’ when they are citizens.” • “No human being is illegal.” • “People who are undocumented deserve to be treated with dignity and humanity. Laws may be debated, but a person’s value as a human being is not.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What have you heard about this and where did you hear it? What questions do you have?”
<p>14-18 years old</p> <p>Adolescents can analyze systems, power, and history.</p>	<p>Encourage historical context and critical media literacy.</p> <p>Sample Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Citizenship and belonging have been racialized throughout history.” • “Stereotypes influence how policies are enforced.” • “Let’s explore how this is being framed in different forms of media.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How do media and political messages shape who is seen as ‘American’? What questions do you have?”

Talking with Children and Youth to Interrupt Harm

The goal is not to debate someone’s humanity, but to protect dignity, guide understanding, and ensure that students of color and other targeted populations are not placed in the position of representing or explaining their group.

The Purpose of the Conversation is to:

- Protect the dignity and safety of young people from targeted communities.
- Interrupt the development of assumptions about racial superiority and inferiority.
- Build empathy and moral courage (not shame).
- Shift from debate to understanding.
- Develop collective responsibility rather than individual blame.
- Restore the community to one where all young people experience belonging.
- Build critical thinking about power, policy, and media.

<p>4-6 years old</p> <p>Young children process events concretely and may blend real events with imaginative thinking.</p>	<p>Establish belonging and empathy.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Everyone in this classroom belongs.” • “I know you didn’t mean it, but those words can hurt people’s feelings.” • “Let’s explore where those ideas came from and how they make people feel.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How do we help each other feel like we belong?”
<p>7-10 years old</p> <p>Peers and media increasingly influence beliefs, though children still rely on adults to interpret complex issues.</p>	<p>Encourage reflection and connection.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Can you tell me what you meant by that?” • “I care about you, and I need you to know those words aren’t okay. We can figure this out and learn together.” • “When we say things about someone’s skin color, family, religion, or where they come from, it can hurt in a deeper way because those things are important parts of who they are.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Where did you hear that, and what do you think it means?”
<p>11-13 years old</p> <p>Youth can analyze fairness and injustice more</p>	<p>Increase understanding and enforce non-negotiables.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p>

<p>deeply, but conversations may become emotionally charged.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We have different experiences and different opinions. Let's make sure we listen to each other and show respect as we share.” • “It is not okay to use dehumanizing language with one another.” • “Let’s focus on understanding how to better get along with one another, rather than proving a point.” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How might this issue affect different groups in different ways?”
<p>14-18 years old</p> <p>Adolescents can engage in abstract analysis of power, policy, and history.</p>	<p>Restore community and encourage systems analysis and critical media literacy.</p> <p>Sample Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Why do you think someone might be upset by that comment?” • “That is particularly harmful right now because of what is happening in our country. That comes from an idea people invented — it’s a stereotype, not a fact.” • “That idea is harmful, and we need to correct it. We all absorb messages. What matters is what we choose to do next. What needs to happen to make sure our community is one where everyone can feel a sense of belonging?” <p>Dialogue Question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What responsibility do we have when we recognize a pattern of inequity?”