

Some Guidance for Talking with Kids about the Protests that are Sweeping this Country

Students will come to virtual school having seen protests against racism on the news. You need to talk about what they've seen and about what they are thinking and feeling. You may worry that you are ill-equipped to handle such a conversation, that it is touchy, that your kids are young, that you could say the wrong things. But what you need to know is that if you are silent, if you circle around the topic, then your silence speaks loudly and clearly. If you are silent, that silence says that you do not see the pain that Black people in particular are experiencing. You--and by extension, your class--become onlookers, standing silently by, eyes averted. In doing so, you participate in injustice.

How do you talk with kids about what's happening in the nation right now? You might have reservations about opening things up. If you say, "Class, you are most likely aware of the protests against racism that have been occurring around the country, What are you thinking and feeling?" you may rightly worry that some children will talk about the protests as violent looting and that discussion would heap yet more pain onto the shoulders of the children in your class who will already be feeling the most pain. So instead of starting with that general opener, you may want to spend some time framing your class' ways of thinking about the protests that are occurring.

One way to do this is to talk about the history of protest in this nation, pointing out that America was born in protest. The American Revolution--an entire war--was fought because early colonizers resisted taxes that they thought were unfair. The famous Boston Tea Party that we speak of now as a patriotic event was actually a riot. We refer to those looters now as patriots, but they carried torches and destroyed property. They threw the British tea overboard in an effort to say, 'Enough.' We refer to that event as the 'Boston Tea party' but it was not a party--it was a riot, and there was violence and looting. Throughout history, there have been many other times when important freedoms have been won only after protests erupted across the land, some of which became violent. Just two weeks ago, hundreds of armed protestors stormed the state capitol building in Lansing, Michigan in protest of the stay-at-home mandate due to COVID-19.

So yes, we all wish that change occurred in this country through peaceful means but historically, there have been times when anger erupts and protests are not peaceful, and in the long run, sometimes that has unfortunately been the means through which injustices are finally, finally, addressed. As Eddie Glaude Jr., chair of the department of African-American Studies at Princeton University said, "Anger, going all the way back to Aristotle, announces that something just happened here. It puts folks on notice that something must change."

You will certainly want to help your students understand the causes for the unrest that is sweeping the nation. The killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers is in and of itself, a cause that requires a response. Two things about that horrifying death. It will not help for you to show students the image of George Floyd's neck being stepped on by a police officer. That image is traumatizing. No, it is not helpful for Black and Brown kids, especially,

to continually see themselves being physically harmed and killed. You do not need the emotional triggers that those images provide. We are all raw enough.

But you will talk about what happened, and about the onlookers who let that happen. You'll also want to be sure your students understand that his death at the hands of a policeman was one of many, and that so far, while one has been arrested, the others involved in inflicting that violence have not been held accountable for their actions.

Then, too, students need to know that this recent death occurs against a backdrop in which unemployment and COVID-19 both, are disproportionately tearing apart the lives of Black and Brown people. So these accumulated grievances combined have brought us to this moment. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told us long ago, "A riot is the language of the unheard." And Ibram X. Kendi adds. "Protest is the heartbeat of humanity. It is the sound of human rights beating to live."

When you embark on this conversation with your students, you will need to have thought about ways to help your children hold tight to hope. You'll want to tell them that the only response to a moment such as this one is for each of us to resolve to do more to create communities of care in our physical and virtual classrooms and in our home communities.

You can remind your students that onlookers have a deep level of responsibility. To see injustices and say nothing is to condone them. When things are unjust, we must speak out. We must be allies. Being allies means we are willing to take risks on behalf of each other, to stand alongside each other.

Finally, we hope that you help your students realize that creating communities of care within their own lives is not enough. People also need to be able to see racism and call it by its name. For example, think again about the protests that are underway across America right now. It's not just ahistorical to refer to these protests as un-American or uncivilized; it's racist. And it is worth pausing to notice that when scores of armed protesters stormed Michigan's capitol building, those protesters were referred to by some as The Great American Patriot Rally. When protests are described differently based on the color of those who protest, that is racism, and we need to call it by its name.

Legendary basketball player, author, and activist Kareem Abdul-Jabar says, "Racism in America is like dust in the air. It seems invisible - even if you're choking on it - until you let the sun in. Then you see it everywhere. As long as we keep shining that light we have a chance of cleaning it wherever it lands." Your conversations with students, the language and lenses you provide, lets the sun in, illuminating injustices and making it possible to work toward better days ahead.

Colleagues, hold onto the words of Glaude when he said, "So I believe in my heart of hearts that you and I and those of us who are committed to a more just America, a new America, we have to get about the business of building it now."