

Teaching About Race: A Waldorf Parent's Guide



“If humanity is to live in the future in a socially right way, humanity must educate its children in a socially right way.” - Rudolf Steiner

This guide is written out of my experience as a certified diversity & inclusion trainer, my professional background in curriculum development and education, my sense of obligation to provide something useful as the Chair of our school's Diversity Committee, my lived experience as a black American, and my growing understanding of Waldorf education in my sixth year as a Waldorf parent. As Waldorf parents who want to thoughtfully approach issues of race and ethnicity it can be challenging to find resources that take into consideration our measured approach to the intellectual and social growth of our children. As I looked at my library of resources regarding teaching children about race I turned to Embrace Race whose mission is to “Raise a generation of children who are thoughtful, informed and brave about race”. Their guide provided a reasonable match to the developmental stages of the Waldorf grades. To be clear one does not have to follow this guide in this order, and some of us do not have the luxury of delaying critical discussions about race, bias, prejudice etc. with our children of color, but my hope is that this will provide a place to start.

~ Candice

Grade 1 - Start Early

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: By grade 1 children have been noticing differences in people for years. If you haven't already, now is the time to talk openly about these differences and begin an open communication about race in your family by showing a willingness to discuss skin color, other languages etc. Your actions at this age and before set the tone for your family's racial discussions in the future.

Embrace Race Recommends:

- By 6 months of age babies are noticing racial differences; by age 4, children have begun to show signs of racial bias.
- Let your child know that it's perfectly okay to notice skin color and talk about race. Start talking about what racial differences mean and don't mean.

Grade 2 - Encourage Your Child

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: Second graders remain in a world of imagination while continuing to develop their will. Stories of great individuals some of whom overcame exceptional challenges are a part of the Waldorf curriculum. Introducing books about people of different races - especially books about heroic individuals can open up discussions and observations around race.

Embrace Race Recommends:

Encourage your child to ask questions, share observations and experiences, and be respectfully curious about race.

- Expose your child to different cultural opportunities – photographs, films, books, or cultural events, for example – and discuss the experience afterwards.
- You don't have to be an expert on race to talk with our child. Be honest about what you don't know and work with your child to find accurate information.

Grade 3 - Be Mindful

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: In the third grade there is a dawning realization of the self separate from the world, and a focus on practical pursuits. Our children begin to watch what we do closely and may make judgements about what they see. Now is the time to practically demonstrate your values through your true friendships with people who are of different races and cultures than your own, and seeking to expose your children to people from a variety of backgrounds.

Embrace Race Recommends:

What kids hear from us is less important than what they see us do.

- You are a role model to your child. What you say is important, but what you do - the diversity of your friendship circle, for example - is likely to have a bigger impact.
- If your child doesn't attend a diverse school, consider enrolling her in after-school or weekend activities such as sports leagues that are diverse if you're able. Choose books and toys that include persons of different races and ethnicities. Visit museums with exhibits about a range of cultures and religions.

Grade 4 - Face and Know Your Own Bias

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: One aspect of fourth grade is the study of Norse literature wherein students learn about strength of character, selflessness, and courage. It takes courage to face our own biases - especially with our children looking to us as examples, but doing so can demonstrate to your child the courage required to admit when we as parents struggle to improve ourselves and become better people. To explore your own bias you can take [Harvard University's Implicit Association Test](#) and uncover unconscious bias in a variety of areas, race included. You can find practical advice for overcoming our biases with [Psychology Today's resource](#).

Embrace Race Recommends:

Let your child see you acknowledge and face your own biases.

- We're less likely to pass on the biases we identify and work to overcome.
- Give your child an example of a bias, racial or otherwise, that you hold or have held. Share with your child things you do to confront and overcome that bias.

Grade 5 - Know and Love Who You Are

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: In fifth grade Waldorf students are developmentally eager to take on new challenges. Students study ancient cultures and civilizations. This is a perfect time to explore your family's history and culture.

Embrace Race Recommends:

- Talk about the histories and experiences of the racial, ethnic, and cultural groups you and your family identify with. Talk about their contributions and acknowledge the less flattering parts of those histories as well.

- Tell stories about the challenges your family (your child's parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great grandparents, others) has faced and overcome.

Grade 6 - Develop Racial Cultural Literacy

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: The sometimes turbulent inner life of the twelve year old child brings a deep desire for balance. Emphasize the differences within racial and ethnic groups at this time to balance the understanding of the group, while acknowledging the people within the groups that are different. Contrast and comparison is a part of the Waldorf grade 6 curriculum and students are able to understand these concepts.

Embrace Race Recommends:

Develop racial cultural literacy by learning about and respecting others.

- Study and talk about the histories and experiences of groups we call African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and whites, among others.
- Be sure your child understands that every racial and ethnic group includes people who believe different things and behave in different ways . There is as much diversity within racial groups as across them.

Grade 7 - Be Honest

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: Seventh grade is a time of great capacity and understanding. Older children can have clear discussions about bigotry and oppression, and understand the ongoing pursuit of equity and fairness in the world both near and far.

Embrace Race Recommends:

Be honest with your child, in age-appropriate ways, about bigotry and oppression.

- Children are amazing at noticing patterns, including racial patterns (who lives in their neighborhood versus their friends' neighborhoods, for example). Help them make sense of those patterns, and recognize that bigotry and oppression are sometimes a big part of those explanations.
- Be sure your child knows that the struggle for racial fairness is still happening and that your family can take part in that struggle.

Grade 8 - Tell Stories

Waldorf Developmental Considerations: The study of revolutions in grade 8, while not directly related to race, includes lessons learned and understandings that can lend

themselves to exploring those people who led resistance and built resilience in the American Civil Rights Movement and others.

Embrace Race Recommends:

"Lift up the freedom fighters": Tell stories of resistance and resilience.

- Every big story of racial oppression is also a story about people fighting back and "speaking truth to power." Teach your child those parts of the story too.
- Include women, children and young adults among the "freedom fighters" in the stories you tell. A story about racial struggle in which all the heroes are men wrongly leaves many people out.

The final two actions can and should be done at any stage of childhood as appropriate and as opportunity presents.

Continually - Be Active

Embrace Race Recommends:

Be active - don't be a "bystander" on race.

- Help your child understand what it means to be, and how to be, a change agent.
- Whenever possible, connect the conversations you're having to the change you and your child want to see, and to ways to bring about that change .

Continually - Plan for a marathon, not a sprint

Embrace Race Recommends:

- It's okay to say, "I'm not sure" or "Let's come back to that later, okay?" But then do come back to it.
- Make race talks with your child routine. Race is a topic you should plan to revisit again and again in many different ways overtime.

Sources:

<https://www.embracerace.org/resources/teaching-and-talking-to-kids>

<https://www.centerforanthroposophy.org>

<https://www.waldorfindspirations.com>

<https://www.waldorfeducation.org/waldorf-education>