A TEACHING TOLERANCE GUIDE

LET'S TALK!

DISCUSSING RACE, RACISM AND OTHER DIFFICULT TOPICS WITH STUDENTS

TEACHING TOLERANCE
A PROJECT OF THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

ABOUT TEACHING TOLERANCE

Founded in 1991, Teaching Tolerance is dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children.

The program provides free educational materials, including a K-12 anti-bias curriculum: *Perspectives for a Diverse America*. Teaching Tolerance magazine is sent to over 400,000 educators, reaching nearly every school in the country. Tens of thousands of educators use the program's film kits, and more than 7,000 schools participate in the annual Mix It Up at Lunch Day program.

Teaching Tolerance materials have won two Oscars, an Emmy and dozens of REVERE Awards from the Association of American Publishers, including two Golden Lamp Awards, the industry's highest honor. The program's website and social media pages offer thought-provoking news, conversation and support for educators who care about diversity, equal opportunity and respect for differences in schools.

For more information about Teaching Tolerance or to download this guide, visit tolerance.org.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Educators play a crucial role in helping students talk openly about the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of social inequality and discrimination. Learning how to communicate about such topics as white privilege, police violence, economic inequality and mass incarceration requires practice, and facilitating difficult conversations demands courage and skill—regardless of who we are, our intentions or how long we've been teaching.

Use the strategies in this resource as you prepare to facilitate difficult conversations about race and racism. You can also use them to build competency when discussing other types of discrimination, such as gender bias, ableism, and religious or anti-LGBT persecution. We hope you find the resource useful, and that you will share it with colleagues. And don't forget to check out the list of additional PD suggestions and classroom activities starting on page 13.

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PREPARE YOURSELF

ASSESS YOUR COMFORT LEVEL

Many educators avoid talking about race and racism. It's uncomfortable, may lead to conflict, and calls for skills few of us possess. Often, this avoidance comes down to a fear of misspeaking, sounding racist or unintentionally doing harm.

Part of getting students ready to talk about race and racism is to first deal with our own fears. Before initiating a classroom discussion, do a simple self-assessment.

Consider the following statements and select the one that best describes how you feel.

I would rather not talk about race/racism.
I am very uncomfortable talking about race/racism.
I am usually uncomfortable talking about race/racism.
I am sometimes uncomfortable talking about race/racism.
I am usually comfortable talking about race/racism.
I am very comfortable talking about race/racism.

Then use a sentence-stem activity to self-reflect.

The hard part of talking about race/racism is ...
The beneficial part of talking about race/racism is ...

After reflecting on your own comfort level, think about how you will stay engaged when the topic of race arises.

- Do you feel ill-prepared to talk about race and racism? If so, commit to learning more about the issues by studying history, following current events and brushing up on anti-racism work.
- Do you reroute classroom discussions when you sense discomfort in the room? If so, commit to riding out the discussion next time.
- Do you feel isolated in your teaching about race and racism? If so, commit to identifying a colleague with whom you can co-teach, plan or debrief.

- Do you worry about your ability to answer students' questions about race and racism? If so, commit to accepting that you don't have all the answers and embracing the opportunity to learn with your students.

FIND COMFORT IN DISCOMFORT

Teaching about structural inequality such as racism requires courage—from you and from your students. It's normal to feel discomfort as you reflect on your own experiences with racial inequality and deepen your understanding of racism. But the more you practice facilitating difficult conversations, the more you'll be able to manage the discomfort. The conversations may not necessarily get easier, but your ability to press toward more meaningful dialogue will expand. Stay engaged; the journey is worth the effort.

Being uncomfortable should not mean being unsafe, if it can be avoided. As a class, establish classroom norms that include a list of specific words and phrases that students commit to not using. The list might include calling people's opinions "stupid" or "lame," saying, "That's so gay!" or using the n-word or the r-word.

Students can create and sign a contract of norms and behaviors that define the classroom community as a socially and emotionally safe place. The contract might include such statements as "Try to understand what someone is saying before rushing to judgment" or "Put-downs of any kind are never OK." If the conversation becomes very personal, you may want to establish structures for allowing students to share experiences—uninterrupted—without response from other students. (See our resource on Serial Testimony for more information: tolerance.org/meaningful-discussions.)

Pre-established norms or a contract can help students support a healthy classroom environment and reduce the likelihood that you will have to intervene.

BE VULNERABLE

Avoiding conversations about race and racism can arise from our own fears of being vulnerable. As you prepare to engage students in difficult conversations, consider this question: What will a discussion about race and racism potentially expose about me?

Use the graphic organizer *Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment* (found on page 18) to list three vulnerabilities that you worry could limit your effectiveness. Next, identify three strengths that you

believe will help you lead open and honest dialogues. Finally, list specific needs that, if met, would improve your ability to facilitate difficult conversations.

ADDRESS STRONG EMOTIONS

Students' reactions to talking about race and racism will vary. They may react passively, show sorrow, express anger or respond unpredictably. Some students may become visibly upset; others may push back against discussing these topics in class. Many of these reactions stem from feelings such as pain, anger, confusion, guilt, shame and the urge to blame others.

Seeing members of the class respond emotionally may elicit reactions from you or other students. Guilt and shame can lead to crying that may immobilize conversation. Anger might lead to interruptions, loud talking, sarcasm or explicit confrontations—all of which can impede important dialogue. Your role is to remain calm and assess the situation. If the tension in the room appears to be prompting dialogue and learning, continue to monitor, but let the conversation play out. If the tension boils over in confrontation that jeopardizes student safety (emotional or otherwise), take steps to diffuse the situation.

Refer back to *Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment*. How can the strengths you listed calm students and diffuse tension, yet avoid shutting down the conversation? Spend some time thinking ahead about how you will react to strong emotions.

Use the strategies in *Responding to Strong Emotions* (found on page 19) to develop a plan. You know your students; consider the emotional responses likely to emerge. Add others you think might emerge, and list potential response strategies.

Planning ahead and establishing a safe space within your classroom should diminish students' discomfort. It's important to note, however, that for some students—particularly members of marginalized, nondominant or targeted identity groups—you may not be able to provide complete safety. It's also true that overemphasizing identity safety runs the risk of minimizing the diverse realities of our students' lived experiences both in and outside school. In addition to providing safety for your students, build their resilience and strength so they will be more willing to take the risks involved with feeling uncomfortable.

PLAN FOR STUDENTS

To facilitate difficult conversations with your students, equip them with strategies they can use to persevere during difficult conversations. Here are some pedagogical approaches to help students learn to sit with their discomfort and to moderate it over time. The approaches outlined here are for students in grades 6–12. Suggested adaptations to each strategy for grades K–5 are listed separately.

STRATEGY ONE: REITERATE→CONTEMPLATE→RESPIRE→COMMUNICATE

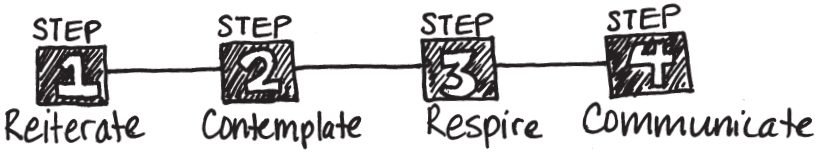
Explain these steps as a way to communicate while feeling difficult emotions. These steps won't prevent or change the emotions students may feel, but they can help them self-regulate.

Step 1: Reiterate. Restate what you heard. This step enables students to reflect on what they have heard as opposed to what they think they may have heard. Repeating what they have heard limits miscommunication and misinformation.

Step 2: Contemplate. Count to 10 before responding. Students can think about their responses and use the time to compose what they want to say. Taking time to think about their responses helps move students away from immediate emotional responses that can potentially derail the conversation.

Step 3: Respire. Take a breath to check in with yourself. Suggesting students take a few breaths before responding may help them settle their thoughts and emotions during difficult conversations.

Step 4: Communicate. Speak with compassion and thoughtfulness. Students should do their best to speak as they want to be spoken to, assuming good intentions and seeking understanding. Explain that when they disagree with something someone has said, they should focus on challenging the statement rather than the person who said it.



STRATEGY TWO: CHECK IN WITH STUDENTS

Staying on top of the emotional temperature in the classroom and checking in with students about how they are feeling helps you know when to stop and address strong emotions. Checking in nonverbally to gauge students' comfort levels allows all students to participate without being singled out or put on the spot. Try these ideas.

Fist-to-Five. You can quickly gauge a number of things—readiness, mood, comprehension—by asking students to give you a "fist-to-five" signal with their hands.

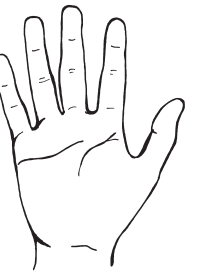
Fist = I am very uncomfortable and cannot move on.

1 Finger = I am uncomfortable and need some help before I can move on.

2 Fingers = I am a little uncomfortable, but I want to try to move on.

3 Fingers = I am not sure how I am feeling.

4 Fingers = I am comfortable enough to move on.



5 Fingers = I am ready to move on full steam ahead!

Stoplight. Use the colors of a traffic light to signal student readiness and comfort. Throughout the discussion, you can ask students if they are green, yellow or red. Students can also use the "red light" to request a break or a stop when they are feeling strong emotions or have been uncomfortably triggered.

Green = I am ready to go on.

Yellow = I can go on, but I feel hesitant about moving forward.

Red = I do not want to go on right now.

STRATEGY THREE: ALLOW TIME AND SPACE TO DEBRIEF

Everyone engaged in an emotionally charged conversation needs to allow for the safe "discharge" of emotions before leaving the classroom. Provide the opportunity for students to debrief what they are learning *and* their experience of learning it. Depending on your group, you may want to devote a portion of each lesson—half a class period or an entire class—to debrief and reflect. Try these ideas.

Talking Circles. Gather in a circle and create, or review, the norms that will help build trust. Select a significant object as a talking piece that allows participants to engage equally in the discussion. Whoever holds the talking piece can speak, while the rest of the circle listens supportively. Pose a question or statement to begin. It can be as simple as "How do you feel about today's lesson?" As the facilitator or circle keeper, you will participate as an equal member of the group. As students become familiar with the process, consider inviting them to be circle keepers.*

* Amy Vatne Bintliff, "Talking Circles for Restorative Justice and Beyond" tolerance.org/blog/talking-circles-restorative-justice-and-beyond

Journaling. Personal reflection through writing can be extremely effective for debriefing after difficult conversations. Journaling helps students process their emotions on their own terms and at their own pace. Decide whether journals will be kept private or serve as a space for you to dialogue with students by writing back and forth.

K–5 ADAPTATIONS

Try these modifications and adaptations to the strategies for grades K–5.

K-5 STRATEGY ONE: REITERATE→CONTEMPLATE→RESPIRE→COMMUNICATE

Explain the steps in age-appropriate language: *repeat, think, breathe* and *feel*. Use symbols and words to help students visualize and demonstrate the communication expectations. Practice and model expectations several times before engaging students.

Step 1: Repeat
Say it again.

Step 2: Think
Count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

Step 3: Breathe
In through the nose; out through the mouth.

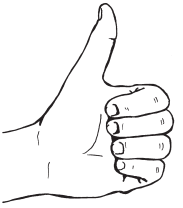
Step 4: Feel
Put yourself in their shoes.

K-5 STRATEGY TWO: CHECK IN WITH STUDENTS

Fist-to-Five works well with many K–5 students; however, consider using the simpler **Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down** when first introducing the strategy.

Thumbs Down = Whoa! That doesn't feel good.

Thumbs to the Side = Huh? I need some help.



Thumbs Up = I am ready! Let's go!

Similar to **Stoplight**, the **Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down** strategy gives students a manipulative to safely interrupt difficult conversations when they might not have the courage to do so verbally.

K-5 STRATEGY THREE: ALLOW TIME AND SPACE TO DEBRIEF

Role-playing with puppets. Puppets allow students to communicate playfully and safely. Create a space for students to talk using puppets or other play objects. Children can ask questions through the puppets and may be less likely to feel uncomfortable disclosing uncertainties. Students can engage in puppet play alone, with a partner or in small groups.

Drawing. Like journaling for older students, drawing can provide young students a valuable opportunity for personal reflection and emotional processing. Drawings can be shared or kept private.

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

Facilitating difficult conversations can be emotionally draining or even painful for teachers. Make time to process, reflect and recharge in positive ways. Find colleagues or friends who can listen while you debrief conversations about race and racism. Take advantage of professional learning communities where you can discuss the dynamics in your classroom. Keep a professional journal and use writing to process and reflect.

These PD and activity suggestions from Teaching Tolerance offer authentic opportunities to connect difficult topics like oppression and inequality to a variety of subjects. Browse, share and let us know how you use them!

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

RACE AND PRIVILEGE

Straight Talk About the N-Word
This Teaching Tolerance feature story focuses on the complexities of the n-word, how it became offensive, and why and with whom it is still popular today.
www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-40-fall-2011/feature/straight-talk-about-n-word

Reflection Activity: Identity
Use this guide to engage in reflection about personal identity.
www.tolerance.org/reflection-activity-identity

Test Yourself for Hidden Bias
Willingness to examine our own biases is an important step in understanding the roots of prejudice. Take this test to measure your unconscious biases.
www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias

Toolkit for The Gentle Catalyst
This "adult privilege" checklist can be used as a tool to help teachers think about their own privilege in the classroom.
www.tolerance.org/privilege-assessment

Talking With Students About Ferguson and Racism
Read the reflections of one high school English teacher on discussing these topics with her students.
www.tolerance.org/blog/talking-students-about-ferguson-and-racism

On Racism and White Privilege
This excerpt from White Anti-Racist Activism: A Personal Roadmap, which explores issues of race and white privilege.
www.tolerance.org/article/racism-and-white-privilege

Ferguson, U.S.A.
This article offers educators three approaches for thinking and talking about the events in Ferguson, Missouri.
www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-49-spring-2015/feature/ferguson-usa

The Gentle Catalyst
This article highlights three teachers who are serving as "gentle catalysts": people who gently ask you to examine your own privilege.
www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-46-spring-2014/feature/gentle-catalyst

It's Still Good to Talk About Race
Consider the fear and hesitation surrounding conversations regarding race, and listen to one educator who responds honestly and directly.
www.tolerance.org/talk-about-race

"Hang Out" With Anti-bias Education Experts
Five winners of the Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching discuss topics surrounding anti-bias education with some of the biggest names in the field. Sonia Nieto focuses on how to sustain a courageous conversation around race. Peggy McIntosh discusses privilege and curricular revision that can support teaching about race.
www.tolerance.org/blog/hang-out-anti-bias-education-experts

LGBT

Sex? Sexual Orientation? Gender Identity? Gender Expression?
This feature story helps clarify the confusion surrounding the nature of gender, sex and sexual orientation.
www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-50-summer-2015/feature/sex-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-gender-expression

Books Help Open Talks About LGBT Issues
Discover practical insight into using books to educate students on LGBT topics.
www.tolerance.org/blog/books-help-open-talks-about-lgbt-issues

Best Practices: Creating an LGBT-inclusive School Climate
This extensive guide provides advice for educators on cultivating an LGBT-inclusive school environment.
www.tolerance.org/publication/best-practices-creating-lgbt-inclusive-school-climate

"That's So Gay": From a Teacher's Perspective
One educator describes the evolution of his perspective on students using the phrase "That's so gay."
www.tolerance.org/so-gay-teacher-perspective

Coming Out as a Safe Zone for LGBT Students?
This blog offers ideas for supporting LGBT students and helping to keep them safe.
www.tolerance.org/blog/coming-out-safe-zone-lgbt-students

Finding the Courage to Act
Hear from one teacher whose decision to reach out and speak up made a profound difference.
www.tolerance.org/blog/finding-courage-act

Saving the Lives of Our LGBT Students
Insight from a university professor helps educators understand the balance of building trust while establishing and maintaining boundaries.
www.tolerance.org/blog/saving-lives-our-lgbt-students

ABILITY

When Students Teach
Consider the commonplace misuse of language around ability, the source of tension and stress for many people.
www.tolerance.org/blog/when-students-teach

Let's Disable the Word Lame
In the same way we've diminished the pejorative use of *gay* and *retarded*, this educator calls for the end of contemporary usage of *lame*.
www.tolerance.org/blog/let-s-disable-word-lame

Looking Beyond Labels
A psychologist reflects on the effect of mental health labels and ways to avoid their limitations.
www.tolerance.org/blog/looking-beyond-labels

RELIGION

Diverse Beliefs in Homogenous Classrooms?
Learn how to teach about a diversity of religious and nonreligious beliefs in a homogenous classroom.
www.tolerance.org/blog/diverse-beliefs-homogenous-classrooms

Religious Diversity in the Classroom
This extensive resource examines how awareness of religious diversity affects global citizenship, and how teaching about religion across grade levels and subject areas can help meet academic standards. The series includes five webinars, as well as activities, lessons and blogs.
www.tolerance.org/seminar/religious-diversity-classroom

Agree to (Respectfully) Disagree
Learn how to encourage respectful conversations about religious diversity in the face of excluded or offended students.
www.tolerance.org/blog/agree-respectfully-disagree

STUDENT-FACING RESOURCES

Perspectives for a Diverse America
This K–12 curriculum includes hundreds of diverse texts for diverse readers. The Community Inquiry strategies, in particular, are designed to help students develop their verbal skills as they discuss social justice topics by referring to the text. Lenses include ability, race and ethnicity, LGBT, gender, religion, immigration, class and place. Visit this seminar page to learn more about *Perspectives*.
www.tolerance.org/seminar/teach-perspectives-diverse-america

LESSONS/ACTIVITIES

RACE AND PRIVILEGE

Activity for "Straight Talk about the N-word"
As one of the most loaded words in the English language, is there ever a place for the n-word? Explore this question with students in the upper grades in this activity.
www.tolerance.org/toolkit/portfolio-activity-straight-talk-about-n-word

Teaching *The New Jim Crow*
These lessons explore myriad issues surrounding race, justice and mass incarceration. *Talking About Race and Racism*, specifically, helps students understand how to participate in an open and honest conversation on these topics.
www.tolerance.org/publication/teaching-new-jim-crow

LGBT

Marriage Equality: Different Strategies for Attaining Equal Rights
This lesson focuses on the different means by which people bring about change using the Constitution.
www.tolerance.org/lesson/marriage-equality-different-strategies-attaining-equal-right

Toolkit for "Gender Spectrum"
In this lesson, students consider the roots of gender stereotypes, their consequences and how to change them. Available for grades K–2 and 3–5.
www.tolerance.org/toolkit/toolkit-gender-spectrum

ABILITY

The Civil Rights Act and the ADA
This activity asks students to read and compare the language of selected civil rights legislation.
www.tolerance.org/activity/civil-rights-act-and-ada

Toolkit for Beautiful Differences
This toolkit will help teachers and students discuss issues of accessibility and what they mean in your school and local community.
www.tolerance.org/toolkit/toolkit-beautiful-differences

Picturing Accessibility: Art, Activism and Physical Disabilities
These four lessons focus on public design and provide opportunities for students to discuss what they know and don't know about accessibility, ableism and stereotypes regarding people with disabilities.
www.tolerance.org/lesson/picturing-accessibility-art-activism-and-physical-disabilities

RELIGION

Toolkit for In Good Faith
Expand students' knowledge and understanding of the religious diversity (or lack thereof) in their city, country or state.
www.tolerance.org/religious-diversity

The School Holiday Calendar
Students think about how school districts respond to the needs of increasingly diverse populations by learning about the debate in New York City public schools around religious holidays.
www.tolerance.org/lesson/school-holiday-calendar

The First Amendment and Freedom of Religion
By examining the controversy surrounding an Islamic cultural center, students discuss whether religious freedom is absolute and if religious freedom requires respect for other religions.
www.tolerance.org/lesson/first-amendment-and-freedom-religion

Peace Be Upon You
Explore the separation of church and state regarding school prayer and religious tolerance.
www.tolerance.org/activity/peace-be-upon-you

GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

Avoiding conversations about race and racism can arise from our own fears of being vulnerable. As you prepare to engage students in difficult conversations, consider this question: What will a discussion about race and racism potentially expose about me?

Use *Difficult Conversations: A Self-Assessment* to list three vulnerabilities you worry could limit your effectiveness and three strengths you believe will help you to lead open and honest dialogues. Finally, list specific needs that, if met, would improve your ability to facilitate difficult conversations.

Use *Responding to Strong Emotions* to think ahead about how you can create emotional safety in your classroom. The suggested strategies are general; use your knowledge of yourself, your students and your classroom culture to create a specific and personalized plan.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: A SELF-ASSESSMENT

VULNERABILITIES	STRENGTHS	NEEDS
EXAMPLE: "My children are multiracial. Can I be objective?" "I don't know enough about the issues described here. Am I 'allowed' to lead a discussion while I also learn?"	EXAMPLE: "I have good rapport with my students." "I use community resources to support learning."	EXAMPLE: "I need to learn more information about sex, gender and gender expression." "I need clearer ground rules for class discussions."

RESPONDING TO STRONG EMOTIONS

EMOTION	STRATEGIES TO USE IN THE MOMENT	YOUR PLAN
Pain/ Suffering/ Anger	Check in with the students. Model the tone of voice you expect from students. If crying or angry students want to share what they are feeling, allow them to do so. If they are unable to contribute to the class discussion, respectfully acknowledge their emotions and continue with the lesson.	
Blame	Remind students that racism is like smog. We all breathe it in and are harmed by it. They did not create the system, but they can contribute to its end.	
Guilt	Have students specify what they feel responsible for. Make sure that students are realistic in accepting responsibility primarily for their own actions and future efforts, even while considering the broader past actions of their identity groups.	
Shame	Encourage students to share what is humiliating or dishonorable. Ask questions that offer students an opportunity to provide a solution to the action, thought or behavior perpetuating their belief.	
Confusion or Denial	When students appear to be operating from a place of misinformation or ignorance about a particular group of people, ask questions anchored in class content or introduce accurate and objective facts for consideration.	

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