

I [STILL] Can't Breathe — Supporting Kids Amid Racialized Violence

A Discussion Between embracerace Staff and Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith

Webinar Discussion Guide

Pre-Thinking

Before you start this conversation with children, it is important to do some self-reflection. Some questions to consider are:

1. What emotions come up for you as you think about talking to your child(ren) and/or student(s) about race?
2. What were the conversations in your household about race when you were growing up?
3. What is your goal? What do you hope your child(ren) will learn or gain through these conversations?
4. What personal work will make you a better role model/teacher for your child(ren)?

Discussion/Reflection Prompts for “*I [STILL] Can't Breathe*’ Supporting Kids of Color Amid Racialized Violence”

General response to Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith’s discussion with embracerace:

1. What are your thoughts, feelings, reactions to this discussion?
2. What surprised you?
3. What did you learn? What was most helpful?
4. Do you have any questions you still need answered?

Checking in With Ourselves:

1. Dr. Briscoe-Smith, a clinical child psychologist who specializes in trauma and issues of race, reminds us that we must be aware of ourselves to be most effective in supporting our children/students; “*I need to check in with myself to see how I’m doing so I can see how I can be available to my kids*”.
- **What are ways that you can check in with yourself to be available to your children/students?**

2. Dr. Briscoe-Smith also talks about the importance of really listening to our children in order to best support them. *“We really have to listen to our children. And when I say listen, I mean, we have to listen to the behavior of our toddlers. We have to listen to the play of our 4, 5, 6 year olds. We have to listen to what our adolescents are telling us. We really have to listen and we’re going to have to do an extra bit of work separating out our worry from what they’re telling us...Our capacity to listen is directly related to our capacity, in general.”*

- **How do you prioritize your own self-care to expand our capacity to listen? What have your children/students been communicating? How can you more effectively listen to your children/students in the future?**

3. Role modeling, in an age-appropriate way and using age-appropriate language, is important for demonstrating how to deal with difficult and big feelings; *“For me to be chipper in the midst of a pandemic and racialized violence all day, every day isn't real and it teaches them that they have to negotiate horrible trauma by getting rid of their own feelings.”*

- **What have you been modeling for your children/students? What do you want to model for them? How can you do this more effectively?**

Supporting Kids of Color Amid Racialized Violence

1. When asked about the specific fears around (children’s) racial identity in these times, Dr. Briscoe-Smith shared *“The message that Black kids are receiving is that their lives do not matter. We’re getting questions. I get this question from my son: ‘Will a police officer kill me?’ That question about that means to have that located in their bodies and their spaces is heartbreaking and it’s too much. (and)...I can’t as easily to my Black son say, ‘No, you’ll be fine.’ ”* The impact is not the same for all children because the level of vulnerability is not the same for all children.

- **What came up for you as you heard that or what comes up now as you are asked to reflect on that?**

2. In responding to the concerns of multi-racial children, Dr. Briscoe-Smith talks about the need for radical listening. *“The radical listening that’s necessary in the context of being a mixed kid now... (When listening to mixed race kids): we didn’t get questions from them about, ‘I don’t know where to belong’. It’s that ‘Other people won’t let me belong.’ That’s very different....The idea isn’t that a person doesn’t understand who they are, it’s that so many people are unwilling to listen.”*

- **Who have you not been able to radically listen to in order to understand who they are? How do your biases and experiences make it difficult to really listen to different experiences?**

3. Families of color have not had the privilege of ‘protecting’ their children by not talking about what is really happening in the world in the same way as white families. When asked about the right age to have this conversation, Dr. Briscoe-Smith says, *“The answer depends a little bit on the age of the child but my go to question when I’m asked about this is, ‘Would you rather be the person who tells them about what’s going on or would you rather have them learn from someone else?’ Because they’re going to hear about it and even if there’s limited screen time, it’s not far. It’s not hard to find out, to hear a thing... You don’t have to go into all the details. You can hear in the language I said for my son ‘People haven’t been kind.’ That’s an understatement in terms of what it is but that was a 6 year old appropriate language for that... ‘Who do you want to tell your child about what’s going on? Not whether, but who?’”* She also says *“I don’t think my job as a parent is to protect. I think my job as a parent is to prepare.”* And later *“I really want to challenge the notion that the conversation will be traumatizing. What’s more traumatizing is not being equipped to face this and not being prepared. And that preparation take time...this is not one talk...this is a small talk that you have all the time.”*

- **If you think your job as a parent, family member or teacher is to prepare and equip children, how might that change the conversation you have with them and the age you begin the conversation? What do you think of the idea “to prepare” kids rather than “to protect” them?**

4. Releasing tension, fear and anger from children’s bodies is especially challenging during COVID. Dr. Briscoe-Smith shares how physical movement in community is not available in the same way now, but that *“the idea of paying attention to our bodies is of central and foundational importance...we really have to be conscious about providing (spaces for kids of color to feel joy). So we can encourage our kids. And this can be hard...It’s okay for us as parents to have something that is non-negotiable. I know there’s a lot of things that are going on with our parenting right now that we want to be extra flexible and kind and understanding...but it’s okay to pick a place to fight... ‘You’ve got to be in movement for 15 minutes”*

- **Have you found effective ways to release tension, fear and anger from your body/ your children’s or students’ bodies? If yes, what has seemed to help? If no, what might you be willing to try with your young people? (remember the joy aspect- funny relay races or obstacle courses, dance parties, timed scavenger hunts, imitating animals)**

5. A therapist, who was worried that she had made a mistake in her response to a young Black client who had watched a video on YouTube of an innocent Black person being murdered (telling her not to watch those videos to protect her) asked how to return to the conversation. Dr. Briscoe-Smith acknowledges *“the therapist’s instincts...around, ‘I don’t want you to have to see that.’ Which is different than, ‘You should stop looking at it.”* She encourages the therapist to apologize, acknowledge the mistake, open up space to continue the conversation and problem solve: *“I’m sorry, I think I made a mistake. I want for us to think a little bit more about this. I held some worry for you that you were seeing such terrible things. But I want to us think about when that comes up again in your hand, what we can do?”*

- **Have you ever made a mistake in a conversation that you would like to return to? How could you use Dr. Briscoe-Smith’s advice to follow up with that child? How does this help you think about future conversations with your children or students?**

6. *“The added burden of being a person of color is that we have to prepare for and (engage) with teachers to make sure they’re educating our children fairly.”*

- **How can you join/build your community to more effectively engage and ‘lift up questions of equity’? If you are a teacher, how do you ensure you are educating children of color fairly?**

Hope for the Future

1. *“The last thing I’ll say about that it’s so compelling for us to go back to normal. The idea that going back to normal means that we won’t have to talk about this... This hasn’t been normal for a bit, and let’s not rush to return to normalcy when we’ve had so many children and families be disproportionately impacted from the pandemic and from this wave of racialized violence.”*

- **What do you hope never returns to the way it was? What can you do to support and uplift voices that have previously been silenced?**

2. *“I’m going to invoke Mr. Rogers, ‘We can look for the helpers.’ Right? I think the reason why that quote is so widely cited is how child specific and child friendly it is, which is to encourage us in the midst of terrible things, to look for the helpers... ‘I look for the helpers. How are you a helper?’”*

- **How can you look for helpers? How can you talk to your children about helpers? How can you be a helper? How can your children be helpers?**

3. Dr. Briscoe-Smith quotes (misquotes) John Powell ‘Scientists tend to think that we are made up of atoms, but really we are made up of stories.’ ... That’s... why we’ve got to listen to our kids. We need to listen to their stories... I hope that’s also what’s happening in the streets is that people are listening to other people’s stories.”

- **Whose stories will you be more intentional in listening to, teaching, and sharing?**

4. A final thought (another John Powell quote, followed by words from Dr. Briscoe-Smith) *“This is an inflection point. This is a moment that can be moved to make sure that things are different.” I know we’re weary because we’ve had inflection points in past and we’ve had inflection points in the recent past. As much as I can say that things are different now because they’re worse in many different ways, they’re also different now because the opportunity to really effect change is different. Our youth are stepping into it and leading it with such boldness and such fierceness that it’s awe inspiring. And that had to come from them, and it had to come from their parents as well. We can do this. When I say, do this, I think we can effect change so that hopefully, in two years from now, I won’t have to come back and have this conversation.”*

- **What can you do to effect/activate change?**