



## TALKING ABOUT RACE

# Common Questions Children Ask and Ways to Respond

The following questions often come up with younger children and may come up for you too. Following each question is an example of an inappropriate and an appropriate response. Using these questions as a model, answer any questions that might arise with age-appropriate facts.

### 1. "Why is Jamal's skin so dark?"

#### *Inappropriate*

"His skin color doesn't matter. We are all the same underneath." (This response denies the child's question, changing the subject to one of similarity when the child is asking about a difference.)

#### *Appropriate*

"Jamal's skin is dark brown because his mom and dad have dark brown skin." (This is enough for 2- or 3-year-olds. As children get older you can add an explanation of melanin.) "We all have a special chemical in our skin called melanin. If you have a lot of melanin, your skin is dark. If you have only a little, your skin is light. How much melanin you have in your skin depends on how much your parents have in theirs."

### 2. "Why am I called Black? I'm brown!"

#### *Inappropriate*

"You are too Black!" (This response is not enough. It doesn't address the child's confusion between actual skin color and the name of the racial and/or ethnic group.)

#### *Appropriate*

"You're right; your skin color is brown. We use the name Black to mean the group of people of whom our family is a part. Black people can have different skin colors. We are all one people because our great-great-grandparents once came from a place called Africa. That's why many people call themselves African-Americans."

### **3. “Will the brown wash off in the tub?”**

(This is a fairly common question because children are influenced by the racist equation of dirtiness and dark skin in our society.)

*Inappropriate*

Taking this as an example of “kids say the darndest things” and treating it as not serious.

*Appropriate*

“The color of José’s skin will never wash off. When he takes a bath the dirt on his skin washes off, just like when you take a bath. Whether we have light or dark skin, we all get dirty but our skin stays the same color after we wash it. Our skin is clean after we wash, no matter what color it is.”

### **4. “Why does Miyoko speak funny?”**

*Inappropriate*

“Miyoko can’t help how she speaks. Let’s not say anything about it.” (This response implies agreement with the child’s comment that Miyoko’s speech is unacceptable, while also telling the child to “not notice,” and be polite.)

*Appropriate*

“Miyoko doesn’t speak funny, she speaks differently than you do. She speaks Japanese because that’s what her mom and dad speak. You speak English like your mom and dad. It’s okay to ask questions about what Miyoko is saying, but it is not okay to say that her speech sounds funny because that can hurt her feelings.”

### **5. “Why is that girl in a wheelchair?”**

*Inappropriate*

“Shh, it’s not nice to ask.” (admonishing)

“I’ll tell you another time.” (sidestepping)

Acting as though you didn’t hear the question (avoiding)

*Appropriate*

“She is using a wheelchair because her legs are not strong enough to walk. The wheelchair helps her move around.”

