

Reading to End Racism™
Activities for Middle School

Some Simple Ideas:

1. Call your assigned teacher beforehand and get a brief idea of what the students are studying currently to help tie in your book and discussion to their curriculum.
2. Create your own bookmarks, stars or pledges to hand out to the class with a topical design and/or “Reading to End Racism” printed along its side. Print them in them black and white and encourage the students to color them individually and to keep as a reminder of the day and the lessons they learned.
3. Use the RER Peacemaker Pledge to conclude your session.
4. Hand out simple green ribbons and small safety pins as badges for students to wear to announce their commitment.

Ice Breaker/Introductions

Grades: 4-8

Time Allotted: 5-10 minutes (10-30 sec./child)

Purpose: To help put the group at ease, improving discussion with the group. All the children respond verbally to the ice breaker, helping them be more willing to participate in discussion later. This ice breaker may also help the RER Reader capture some of the names of the students in the class.

Directions:

- Tell the class you’ll ask each child to say his or her name and one interesting point about their ancestry. (Younger children may need to have a review of what “ancestry” means.)
- Model your request: “I’ll go first. I’m Joe Smith, and my grandfather on my mother’s side came from Ireland to Ellis Island.” (This models a *brief* response.)
- Go around the room hearing the students’ responses, accepting all answers—there are no incorrect answers.

This may be a good lead-in to your own personal story or to the definitions in the Reader’s Guidelines.

Ice Breaker/Circle Game

Grades: 6-8

Time Allotted: 5-10 minutes

Purpose: To engage all the students, including those who are reticent to talk. The questions also begin to get the students thinking about racism.

Room Set-up: Chairs must be arranged in a circle; there should be one less chair than participants.

Directions:

- This game is similar to musical chairs. Ask all the students to take a seat; you stand in the middle. Have a basket ready with questions written on scraps of paper (*see samples below*).
- Say: “The person who is “it” is going to read a Yes/No question, and if *for you* the answer is **yes**, move to another chair. If the answer for you is **no**, stay seated. Are you ready?”
- Model being “it” by picking a question from the basket and reading it out loud. Those who answer “yes” move to a new seat, and you also take a seat.

There will be a scramble for seats and one person will be left standing; he or she will be “it” next, and will repeat the process by reading the next question. Continue for several questions until you are ready to begin your reading.

Sample questions: (*make up your own appropriate to your reading*)

- Do you have a grandparent who was born in another country?
- Have you ever heard a joke that reflects prejudice or racism?
- Have you ever felt left out of something because of your race or ethnicity?
- Have you ever heard a racist comment or seen a racist act?
- Do you know what ethnic group bagels come from?
- Do you know what ethnic group kim chee comes from?
- Thinking about race and ethnicity, have you ever said something that later you wished you hadn’t?

NOTE: Tie the questions to your book selection; kim chee, for instance, works if the book is about Koreans.

Role Playing/Enactment

Grades: all

Time Allotted: 5 minutes per each

Purpose: To bring alive the emotional content of a racially charged scene or situation; to give the students a chance to practice their new anti-racism skills

NOTE: an “enactment” means that children re-enact a key scene as it was portrayed in your book selection; “role playing” can be a made-up situation where the children are given roles to play and they ad lib and brainstorm how to respond

Room Set-up: Push back chairs to create a “stage”

Directions For a Re-Enactment:

- Identify the scene you will be re-enacting and ask for volunteers to play the different roles. It’s fine to have boys in girls’ parts and vice versa.
- Go over the scene you’ve chosen, perhaps re-reading it, and then ask the volunteers to act it out for the class.
- After the role playing, thank them for being willing to volunteer.

As an example, in the book *White Sox Only* by Evelyn Coleman, a young African-American girl in the 1950s goes downtown. She is thirsty and, seeing a sign at the drinking fountain saying “Whites only,” takes off her black shoes and stands in her white socks to drink from the fountain. She is harassed by a White man. Other African-Americans support her by also taking off their shoes and going to the fountain. One man finds a way to send off the aggressor. One student can play the girl; another the racist White man; many students can be the townspeople; and one can be the ally.

Directions For a Role Play:

Present a scenario of potential race-based conflict, or solicit one from the class, and ask for volunteers to take roles in it. Typical roles would include a victim, an ally, a perpetrator and a bystander. Note that the victim can defend him or herself, as well as get assistance from the ally. Give the volunteers their roles, and then let them work out the scenario. When they are through, ask the participants how they felt in their roles.

(Role Play cont)

Suggestions:

- If the first group arrives at one solution, ask a second group of volunteers to use the same scenario but come to a different solution. Help you students to work through tough scenes by asking for input from the “audience.” When they are through, ask the participants how they felt at particular moments in their roles.
- More than one group can work on a scenario at a time, giving more students a chance to participate. They may not all be able to present their “plays” to the class because of time constraints.

Pair Share

Grades: 5-8

Time Allotted: 3 minutes per question; consider using more than one question

Purpose: To give every student a chance to talk. It also helps students sort out what insights they may have that they may want to share with the class.

Directions:

- Ask the students to find a partner. Give them a question or issue to consider, and tell them that one of them will have one minute to talk about it while the other person listens. Emphasize that the listener’s job is the most important. Call “time!,” and ask them to switch roles. Time this carefully.
- You may choose to use one question, or a few questions. It may be best to start with feeling questions and then follow up with more intellectual questions.
- Ask for reports from the students or teams after the class re-convenes. Instruct the students that comments from your partner are confidential and can be shared only with permission.

Sample questions:

- “How did you respond to the part of the book where....?”
- “Have you seen or heard of other examples of”
- “What examples can you come up with how race plays a role in society now?”

Suggestions:

- This activity is good immediately following a reading.
- Groups of three or four students will work, too.
- You can use this to highlight issues important to your reading selection by posing the question prior to the reading.

Agree/Disagree (or Take A Stand)

Grades: 7-8

Time Allotted: Up to 10 minutes

Purpose: To give the students an opportunity to form and express their own opinions about race-related situations. Because movement is involved, it also adds an active element to the RER presentation.

Directions:

- Write a debatable statement on the board (*samples below*). This could be based on the story you read, on your own experiences, or from modern real events.
- Say: “I’ve written something here that some of you may agree with, and others may disagree with. If you agree with this, please stand over here (*on one side of the room*). If you disagree with this statement, please stand over there (*the other side*).”
- Once the students have moved—and it doesn’t matter if there is only one person on one side and everyone else is on the other— say, “I’d like one person from each side to say why they agree or disagree. Once both people have spoken, if anyone wants to change their mind and move to the other side, they can.”
- After that, you can have two more people express their point of view, and then two more.
- Or, if everyone is on one side, you can put a second statement on the board and start over again.

Sample statements:

- Drawing from your book, “When x happened, it represented racism.”
- “It is an example of racism that more Latinos drop out of school than students from other ethnic groups.”
- “The laws of our land don’t allow racism anymore.”
- “There is racism in our school.”

Debrief: This exercise isn’t intended to come up with one right answer to these questions, but rather to get students thinking about ideas that may not think about in their everyday life. So, close with saying “Thank you for being so honest in expressing your opinions. It’s obvious that there is more than one way to look at these situations. Now let’s move on to...”

Racial Demographics

Grades: 3-8

Time Allotted: 2 minutes

Purpose: This exercise may help students understand more fully that they live in a multicultural world—even if they don't see it that way in their daily life.

Set-up: Use the skin-toned doll-like cut-outs from the RER supplies. Ask two or three students to put circles of tape on both sides of ten of the brown cutouts; the other side is stark white.

Directions: Put the cutouts on the bulletin board with nine white sides and just one brown side facing out.

- Say, “These dolls represent all the people of the world. In 1965, schools in Boulder were almost all white, like this.”
- Then turn over one more dolls so two have the brown side exposed. Say, “Now, this represents the percentage of people in the City of Boulder who are White versus of Asian, African, or Latin descent.”
- Turn over one more (making 7 white, 3 brown); that represents the state of Colorado.
- Then turn over 2 more (5 and 5) and that represents the state of California right now.
- Say, “How many more should I turn over to represent the whole world?” The answer: three more (now 8 brown, 2 white).

Suggestions: You can also estimate what your school was like when you were a child; what the student population of the school you are reading in is like; or make projections about the future.

Discussion: You can ask the students, “How is the world changing?” or “How might the people around you be different depending on where you live?”

Close by saying, “We live in a society where the people are increasingly of diverse backgrounds, and to be able to work with people of many backgrounds is more important all the time,” leading in to your discussion of how to help end racism.

Institutional Racism

Grades: 6-8

Time Allotted: 10 minutes

Purpose: To show how institutions can wittingly or unwittingly have racist policies or outcomes. Many children know of racism only in the context of one-on-one insults, or in a historical context. This exercise highlights racism in a broader context.

Directions:

- First review the definitions of prejudice, racism, and institutional racism. Also, discuss what is an institution in this context. Use the blackboard for these definitions.
- Then say: “I’m going to give you a series of situations that have happened in the last few years primarily in Boulder County. I want you to think about each situation, and then I’ll ask you, “is this an example of institutional racism?”
- Read your first statement (*from the list below or from your own experience or from the book*), and then ask for a show of hands. You may call on one or two people to explain why they think it is or isn’t institutional racism.

Go on fairly quickly to the next statement. Use 6 to 10 examples.

Sample experiences: (*not all necessarily examples of institutional racism*)

- A woman wanted to buy a Latina doll for a friend’s child, and she couldn’t find one at Target or Playfair Toys in Boulder. She finds one in Aurora, an eastern suburb of Denver with a racially diverse population.
- A Muslim woman dressed in a burqa isn’t served at a store counter in the right order; the White woman behind her didn’t call attention to the lapse.
- John, a Navajo, was pulled over on I-25 by a police officer who said a tail light was out. He was ticketed, and then when the officer had driven off he looked and the tail light was working fine.
- A Japanese-American man finds that store keepers speak slowly and extra loudly to him, even though English is his first language.
- There is a school in Boulder where 85 percent of the children are Latino. The Anglo families in the area generally “open enroll” their kids elsewhere.
- African Americans have trouble finding hair care products in Boulder, people to cut their hair, or cosmetics that are appropriate to their skin.

- The high school dropout rate for Latinos in Boulder Valley schools is around 20 percent; for all students it is around 10 percent.
- A middle school child said, “She’s a typical Chinese—she does everything perfectly.”
- Banks sometimes have different loan criteria for different racial/ethnic groups.
- A preschool child asked, “do people with brown skin have brown bones?”
- Trent Lott, the former leading Republican in the Senate, said recently that it was a shame that Strom Thurmond’s segregationist party didn’t win the presidency in 1948.
- A middle school child from Boulder used the word “nigger” as a supposedly funny insult to another child.
- In an experiment, African-American and White college students were sent out to rent apartments. The African Americans were told more often that the apartments had already been rented.
- A biracial middle school girl from Boulder Valley reports that an adult she knows said that “She should date within her race.”

Debriefing: Say, “This exercise isn’t intended to come up with one right answer to these questions, but rather to get you thinking about how racism can come from institutions as well as individuals. Thank you for taking a look at these situations. Now let’s move on to...”