

EDITOR'S PICKS

# Why Sugar Coating the History of Slavery Is a Bad Idea If We Want to Empower Our Kids

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September 25, 2017. (September 25, 2017)

37



“The difference between a lady and a woman back in colonial times was that ladies had more power and influence because of the number of slaves they owned.” These were the words spoken to my family while on a recent tour of the Peyton Randolph House in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

Peyton Randolph was elected the presiding officer of the First Continental Congress at Philadelphia in 1774 and the Speaker of Virginia’s House of Burgesses in the years leading to the Revolution. He and his wife Betty Harrison Randolph owned 27 slaves. This now historic site is set up to educate visitors about the stark contrasts between freedom and slavery at the house of one of America’s most prominent families.

As we left the tour, I pondered how I was going to explain the concept of slavery to my young white children. It is not exactly a common conversation topic at our dinner table. Nonetheless, I know deep in my heart how critical it is that they learn about this awful part of American history. If they don’t know what happened in the past, how will they ever work towards a better future and ensure that we never go back to those dark times?

I asked my 9-year-old son what he thought of the tour and if he knew anything about what was discussed. He immediately linked the idea of slavery and racism to what he learned in school about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement. I was proud that his school incorporated these lessons into their social studies curriculum. Not all schools are brave enough to delve into such challenging topics.

I can remember how shocked I was in college when I sat in my Women's Studies history class to discover that much of the history I was taught in high school and earlier completely left out women's roles in important historical events.

Given the current tension in America between people of different backgrounds, such as the horrific showing of hatred in Charlottesville, I have to wonder what role we as parents must play in order to ensure our children get an honest education about history – without frightening them too much.

### **Are they too young to learn about slavery?**

The answer is a resounding “no” from experts at Scholastic. They explain that conversations about skin color typically start in preschool as children become more curious about other people and the world around them.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, said children are not waiting around for adults to talk about these issues. She found that kids are ready to discuss these topics early and are already doing so whether we realize it or not.

Unfortunately, many parents shy away from talking about the world's ugliness with their kids, hoping that they will stay naïve and innocent for as long as possible. Thomas says this is not the best approach to take. It is more effective if we are in touch with our children earlier on and address these issues together as they grow.

It may be difficult to find the appropriate time or place to bring up slavery. Keep an eye out for opportunities that pop up, like a TV show, a book, a song, or an event that touches on the topic. Or maybe your young child notices that someone else has darker skin than they do. The more subtly you broach the topic, the easier it will be for both you and your child.

An article in Parenting magazine offered a really clever way to begin the conversation with young children. Invite them to help cook some eggs with you in the kitchen. Be sure to have some white eggs and brown eggs. Ask your child what they notice about the eggs. What is different about them on the outside?

Then crack the eggs together and ask them what they notice about the insides of the eggs. Point out how they are the same inside. Then make the link by explaining how eggs are just like people – they come in different shades, but they are the same on the inside. We should not judge someone by their appearance.

### **Tips for teaching children about slavery**

Because talking to our kids about slavery is such a challenging task, I scoured the internet for expert advice on how best to address it. Here are some amazing tips to consider:

#### **Examine your own biases first**

Before you even begin to talk to your children about slavery and racism, take some time to look inside yourself and acknowledge your own experiences, biases, or privileges that may influence how you address these issues.

Don't be afraid to share your own struggles about these topics with your kids. You can tell them that you are not an expert and want to work together with them to learn more. Consider taking the [online test about bias created by Harvard experts](#).

#### **Tell them the truth**

Slavery is a very complicated issue that tends to be over-simplified to the detriment of children's education. Be sure to use correct definitions and tell the whole story.

Many resources only cover the Underground Railroad or the Emancipation Proclamation, but there is a lot more to the history of slavery. Turn to expert resources, like the [Teaching Tolerance website](#) that will walk you through the most effective ways to talk about the details of slavery.

#### **Avoid generalizations and stereotypes**

Choose your words carefully. Not every Northerner was an abolitionist, and not every Southerner supported slavery. Although the North ended slavery decades before the Civil War, the people there continued to profit from it by manufacturing the whips, lashes, and chains used to enforce slavery in the South.

Also, be careful not to say that people were “born a slave.” Nature does not make people slaves; people enslave other people. Slaves were people treated like property and tortured for profit.

### **Celebrate the positives**

There are tons of awful details about how slaves were treated that we do not want to dwell on too much with our children. Be sure to also focus on some of the heroes of that time who fought for their freedom, such as Arnold Cragston, a slave by day who rowed others to freedom by night, and Milla Granson who taught fellow slaves to read and write.

### **Encourage them to express their emotions**

Learning about slavery can be very distressing. Give your children a safe space to reflect on how it makes them feel. Their emotions can range from anger, shock, frustration, sadness, hopelessness, and fear. Then ask them to look for ways to transform those negative emotions into positives, like hope and activism.

### **Link history to present time**

The most important reason to study the awful parts of history is to ensure that it does not repeat itself. Take time to draw links between slavery then and racism and slavery today.

Human trafficking and forced child labor are examples of how slavery is still going on today. Sadly, racism is still entrenched in American culture. Explain to your children that slavery caused racism, and people are still fighting it. (Unfortunately, there are all too many examples in the news every day to point to.)

### **Be a good role model**

Many Americans think people are “naturally” racist, that racism is genetic. This couldn’t be farther from the truth. According to experts, humans are not born racist. Instead, racism is a product of history. Our children are watching and listening to us.

Dr. Beverly Tatum, psychologist, educator, author, and past president of Spelman College, suggests that the best way to reduce children’s prejudices is to model an inclusive home, demonstrating that we have friends of all backgrounds. She explains that “parents who have learned to lead multicultural lives, connecting with people different from themselves, are more likely to have children who develop those important life skills at an early age.”

### **Resources**

Fortunately, we have plenty of well thought out resources to turn to when it is time to talk to our kids about slavery.

#### **Books**

Books are a wonderful way to initiate a discussion about slavery with children. Young readers can safely experience scary, sad, and uncomfortable issues through reading. Here’s a list of recommended books for kids about slavery:

- “Now Let Me Fly: The Story of a Slave Family” by Dolores Johnson
- “If You Lived When There Was Slavery In America” by Anne Kamma
- “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” by Terry M. West
- “If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad” by Ellen Levine and Larry Johnson
- “Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad” by Ellen Levine and Kadir Nelson
- “Lest We Forget” by Velma Maia Thomas
- “Unspoken” by Henry Cole
- “Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky” by Faith Ringgold
- “Frederick Douglass: The Last Days Of Slavery” by William Miller

- “Nettie’s Trip South” by Anne Turner
- “Many Thousands Gone: African Americans From Slavery To Freedom” by Virginia Hamilton et al.
- “The Price of Freedom: How One Town Stood Up to Slavery” by Dennis Brindell Fradin, Judith Bloom Fradin, and Eric Velasquez

**Films**

As children get older, it is helpful to sit with them and watch documentaries or movies that address slavery and racism. “Roots”, “12 Years a Slave”, “Amistad”, “The Underground Railroad”, and “A Woman Called Moses” are some of the most popular ones to explore.

Common Sense Media also has an online database of suggested [African-American experience films](#).

**Field Trips/Museums**

Visiting hands-on exhibits like the one at [Colonial Williamsburg](#) offers experiences that your children will remember forever. Here are some museums to visit that address slavery:

- [Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture](#) in Washington, D.C.
- [Lest We Forget Slavery Museum](#) in Philadelphia, PA
- [Ozarks Afro-American Heritage Museum](#) in Ash Grove, MO
- [Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History](#) in Detroit, MI
- [National Underground Railroad Freedom Center](#) in Cincinnati, OH
- [Whitney Plantation](#) in Wallace, LA

**Hope is on the horizon**

The best news of all is that after our visit to Colonial Williamsburg, my son found the idea of slavery so ridiculous and unbelievable. The concept of treating people differently because of the color of their skin is so foreign to him. He plays with kids of all backgrounds at school and would never dream of it being any other way.

We can only hope that this next generation will be color blind and never put up with intolerance of any kind.

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## More Recommendations for You

 <p><b>I’m Scared My Child Will Turn out Like Her Dad</b></p>	 <p><b>Conducting These 3 “Mom Audits” Made Me a Better Parent</b></p>	 <p><b>How to Get Your Kids to Listen</b></p>
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