



## SOUTH ORANGE | MAPLEWOOD COMMUNITY COALITION ON RACE

### **Talking to Children about Race: Language Matters!**

We all know words can hurt. Slurs, insults, and swears can be highly offensive and derogatory. Kids sometimes repeat language that they hear from peers, family, or media without knowing or understanding the pain it causes. And, sometimes they use words and gestures intentionally to tease, to be mean, to bully, or to harass.

Oppressive slurs used against marginalized or oppressed groups and insults can be language-based, gestural, or graphic. Be proactive by addressing issues of stereotyping, insults, racial or ethnic slurs whenever they arise. Reflect on where that language, gesture, or sign comes from and the bias that is perpetuated as a result. If your child invokes stereotypes, address it when you see it by challenging biased language, including so-called “jokes.”

Keep in mind that language evolves and changes: we need to stay attuned to what words and phrases have underlying or nuanced meanings and to understand the history of some commonly used phrases—especially when they are disrespectful or racist. We can be most respectful when we stay in touch with people’s preferred identity names.

*Note: This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather samples of offensive language, gestures, and signs that have been in the media recently or that people have reported in our community. Please have a look at some of the articles and websites listed here for deeper dives into the topic.*

### **Graphic or sign-based slurs**

Examples include: Swastikas, Confederate flag, Burning Crosses, Noose, Pepe the Frog (Pepe the Frog is a popular Internet meme used in a variety of contexts. In recent years it has also been appropriated by white supremacists who use it in racist, anti-Semitic or other hateful contexts).

*There are many other signs, symbols, and gestures. The ADL (Anti-Defamation League) keeps a database:*  
[https://www.adl.org/hatesymbolsdatabase?cat\\_id%5B153%5D=153](https://www.adl.org/hatesymbolsdatabase?cat_id%5B153%5D=153)

### **Gestural & Nonverbal taunts using appearance or mannerisms**

Black face: demeaning practice used to depict Black people as foolish, ignorant, and worse.

Nazi salute

Any form of Mimicry: imitating someone’s speech, accent, physical abilities or mannerisms, etc. to belittle or degrade; for example, making ‘slanted eyes’ to mimic Asian eyes.

**Cultural appropriation or misappropriation:** Adoption of elements of a culture that has been subordinated in social, political, economic, status by a different cultural group. It may rely on offensive stereotypes, and is insensitive to how the culture of a group has been exploited by the culture in power. Costumes can easily fall into this category and parents should beware that appropriative costumes perpetuate harmful stereotypes or turn someone else's culture or identity into a caricature.

**Cultural Appreciation or Cultural Appropriation?:** <https://www.aihfs.org/pdf/8-1-16%20Cultural%20Appropriation.pdf>

### **Racist Language**

The N-word: Historically, the N-word more than any other word, signifies hatred and institutionalized racism directed toward Black people. It is linked with degradation and violence and is considered unspeakable and offensive in the mouths of non-Black people.

“Students spew it in the hallways, on the way to and from school, on buses and in sports practice. It proliferates in pop culture: in music, in movies, and in slang. Black people use it too, as a way to subvert its ugly history, rooted in slavery, racism and the systematic oppression of black folk, and a means of

reclaiming the word for themselves....For that same reason, white people, as the architects and enforcers of slavery, don't have our permission to use it." Taken from *The Root*.

<https://www.theroot.com/educators-shouldnt-be-afraid-to-teach-the-history-of-th-1828455435>

**For more information, also look at:**

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2011/straight-talk-about-the-nword>

<https://aaregistry.org/story/nigger-the-word-a-brief-history/>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/whites-refer-to-the-n-word/596872/>

**"That's so racist"** is a response that kids use as a way of minimizing real racist language to a joke. It trivializes racism. When kids use this phrase, take it as an opportunity to talk about racism. **For more information, see:**

<https://theestablishment.co/kids-misuse-of-the-term-racist-is-dangerous-so-let-s-disrupt-it-95235fb9a5fe/index.html>

**Be aware of coded language:** substituting terms describing racial identity with seemingly race-neutral terms that purport to disguise explicit and/or implicit racism. Examples include

- Urban, inner city, ghetto, 'hood, wrong side of the tracks, the other side of town, that part of town.
- Thug: a negative, racially-charged epithet, considered by many as a synonym for the n-word.
- Disadvantaged, deprived are terms that imply superiority of one class, race, or culture over another.

**Biracial, multiracial, and multi-ethnic** are usually deemed non-offensive—not half-black or half-white.

Black and African American are two preferred terms for people who can trace their ancestry to sub-Saharan Africa, especially those who are the descendants of North American enslaved people. 'Person of color' "is a term primarily used in the United States and Canada to describe any person who is not white. It does not solely refer to African-Americans; rather, it encompasses all non-white groups and emphasizes the common experiences of systemic racism." Yolanda Moses, professor of anthropology.

**Do not use Non-white:** this word implies that white is the standard.

**Minority** is often used to describe groups of people who are not part of the majority. This term may imply inferiority. Alternative: historically marginalized populations.

**Ethnic or National Origin Discrimination** is based upon an individual's nationality, country of birth or country of origin, or the country of origin of an individual's family or spouse. It also includes discrimination based upon a person's characteristics that are identified with a particular country or national origin, such as dress, accent, language, religion, or racial attributes.

**Use the appropriate degree of specificity:** "Dominicans" rather than "Hispanics." Many immigrants of African descent wish to be recognized by their homelands, as Haitian-American, Jamaican-American, Belizean, Trinidadian, or Ugandan. Latino/Latina/Latinx are used mostly in the US to refer to US residents with ties to Latin America.

Do not resort to Spanish or Hispanic as an all-inclusive term for any Spanish-speaking person or any people from countries where Spanish is spoken. To call people from Panama, Ecuador, El Salvador, Cuba, and so on "Spanish" erases large swaths of ethnic and racial backgrounds

The category "Asian American" and "Asian and Pacific Islander American" is another example of the social construction of race. The people from India, Pakistan, China, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Samoa, Guam, and Hawaii are not all the same "race," but they are lumped together.

Indigenous peoples are ethnic groups who are the original owners and caretakers of a given region, in contrast to groups that have settled, occupied or colonized the area more recently. American Indian is considered a

pejorative. **Read more here:** [https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-american-vs-indian-IIUK00r1EionG\\_T5\\_LgRA/](https://newsmaven.io/indiancountrytoday/archive/native-american-vs-indian-IIUK00r1EionG_T5_LgRA/)

**Insulting names and phrases:**

Mulatto is an offensive and outdated term.

Oriental is a Eurocentric name--call people by what they call themselves, not how they are situated in relation to colonial powers.

"You people"; "your people"

Build the wall

Where's your green card?

Go back to...

Comparing anyone to an animal (Russian pigs, etc)

Referring to certain nationalities, ethnicities, or religious practitioners as terrorists

Words used to belittle and dehumanize: Lazy, savage, primitive

Speak English

Where are you really from?

Behaving like wild Indians

Jew down and Gyp: both are offensive terms that are racist extensions of Jewish and Gypsy (slang for Roma) to mean to haggle down a price or cheat.

Chink, Ching Chong: slurs against Chinese people

Jap: an English abbreviation of the word "Japanese" that is considered an ethnic slur

Do not use the terms illegal aliens, an illegal, illegals, or undocumented to refer to immigrants.

**LGBTQ+:** Learn what the letters stand for and mean, keeping in mind that identity terms do not work perfectly for everyone and that there are many beyond the LGBTQ abbreviation (hence the "+"): Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. For more information, visit these sites that have glossaries and preferred terminology:

[http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/allys-guide-to-terminology\\_1.pdf](http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/allys-guide-to-terminology_1.pdf)

<https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2013/01/a-comprehensive-list-of-lgbtq-term-definitions/>

Understand that gender identity (One's concept of self as male, female or neither) is different from sexual orientation (How a person characterizes their sexuality).

Pronouns: A gender neutral or gender inclusive pronoun is a pronoun which does not associate a gender with the individual who is being discussed. Despite complaints, this is entirely possible in English, and will come with practice. They/their/them have been used as singular pronouns in English by some of the best writers.

Teach kids not to use the taunt "that's so gay" which reinforces that "gay" is negative or undesirable.

**Avoid use of the language of disability as metaphor,** which unfairly stigmatizes people with disabilities, like lame, crippled, and disabled.

Neurodiversity describes the variation in neurocognitive functioning. Do not use crazy, insane, moron, retard or retarded. Use neurotypical individuals as opposed to 'normal.'

**Focus on people rather than on a method of categorization.** Examples:

- "People with mental illness" rather than "the mentally ill."
- Enslaved people rather than slaves
- People of Korean descent rather than Asians
- Dominicans rather than Hispanics

### Responses to Challenge

"I didn't mean it like that" and "It's just a joke:" Both responses minimize the feelings of the injured or offended person and deflect the racism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, of the speaker.

**Claiming Reverse Racism:** A concept based on a misunderstanding of what racism is, often used to accuse and attack efforts made to rectify systemic injustices. Every individual can be prejudiced and biased at one time or another about various people and behaviors, but racism is based on power and systematic oppression. Individual prejudice and systemic racism cannot be equated. As white kids work through their understanding of racial bias and discrimination, they may reach for this term when they are treated unkindly or harassed with reference to being white. Read more here: <https://www.thoughtco.com/sociology-to-counter-claims-of-reverse-racism-3026067>

### Other resources:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ethnic\\_slurs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs)

<https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/slurs-and-biased-language>

[http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/beyond\\_golden\\_rule.pdf](http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/beyond_golden_rule.pdf)