

Your Child Knows the Color of Their Skin. So, Now What?

5 Tips For Teaching Black American History to Your Littles.

By Monica Dorsey



If intellect is measured by the capacity to learn, two to seven-year-olds are the most intelligent people in the world! Your little ones' brains absorb information at twice the rate of an adult. As conscious parents, we actively find ways to introduce math, social-emotional learning, first and even second language skills during this critical learning phase.

In the meantime, while they play with toys, grouping objects by color and shapes, their supercharged brains are solving problems and filling in blanks. They are connecting the dots from a lifetime of observation. At just three months old, babies recognize the skin color of their primary caregivers. By a year and a half, your toddler realizes the face smiling back at them from the mirror is their own reflection. It is an exciting time when they begin to experience the world around them and form a sense of self.

Unfortunately, studies show that by age five, your beautiful melanated child prefers a white friend over a black one when given a choice. What does that say about how they view themselves? "White Is Right" continues to trump "Black Is Beautiful" in America. We can argue that these labels should not exist. However, we can not fill out a government form without checking a box that reminds us that they do. It is impossible to completely insulate our little

ones from the social cues of society at large. However, we can counter the adverse effects by creating a safe learning environment where they can develop a healthy self-image. During these crucial early years, we can help assign positive attributes to their "group" by introducing Black American History.

5 Tips for Teaching Black American History to Your Littles.

1 *Introduce Fascinating People.* Build pride in your child's heritage by relating the many accomplishments of people that look like them. Melanated Americans have contributed to every facet of American life. We have been craftsmen, inventors, artists, explorers, business owners, scientists, farmers, philosophers, musicians, medical practitioners, soldiers, and educators. Find the spark of inspiration by concentrating on the person's essence, not the events surrounding them. The positive attributes will shine through, and your child will naturally relate those complementary characteristics to themselves.

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2 *Engage with Activities.* To teach about amazing people, first, you need to gain your child’s attention. Forget about teaching long biographies and memorization of timelines and dates. Young kids can’t comprehend the difference between the 1990s and the 1890s. However, they are wired to explore and discover.

Use their natural curiosity to your advantage by introducing new concepts related to historical figures. Frederick Douglass is an example of a person who used an objective style of writing in his speeches, newspaper articles, and autobiographies. He swayed a generation. An activity exploring the difference between fact and opinion or real vs. fantasy will hold their attention while teaching new skills.

3 *Don’t Box Them In.* During these early years, children are learning their self-worth. We want to build our littles up, so they realize their possibilities are endless. Avoid using labels relating to race. Not because we want to teach a false narrative of colorblindness or that race does not matter. We know it does. However, this is a formative phase for your little one.

Relying solely on labels created by mainstream society, with deliberately negative connotations, is counterproductive. As their primary educator, our child’s well-being is first and foremost. No matter what label you prefer (Black, African-American, a person of color), they are all fabricated labels that suggest minority. We have the option to teach their identity as a position of strength. Instead of stating a label, show an age-appropriate video or picture of the historical figure. They will make the connection that the person who has done great things looks like them

4 *Create a Safe Space.* Children will learn to love learning if we show enthusiasm and express that their thoughts and opinions matter. Ask open-ended questions with no right or wrong answers, and encourage their thought process. Allow them to make mistakes and celebrate their accomplishments with sincere verbal encouragement. This significant parent-child interaction builds trust and lays the groundwork for future conversations. With a safe place for learning, your child will become a thinker who will grow into a capable minded adult.

5 *Skip the “S” word.* How many times have you read a biography written for children that begins similar to, “Frederick Douglass was born a slave”? This immediately creates a narrative of being lesser. Slavery is not our legacy, nor is it our shame. Avoid imprinting your child with these harmful untruths. No one is born a slave! We are born with exceptional talents and gifts. Unfortunately, people were forced into slavery by evil people. Conversely, George Washington was a slaveholder who continued that role throughout his life. Children’s biographies rarely reflect this side of his story. Perspective is key. Be mindful that how we frame our history is as important as the history presented.

We can and should teach our children Black American History at a young age. By waiting until later years, we give the impression that our accomplishments are lesser, or worse, did not exist. The key is to present the information in an age-appropriate way that empowers and feeds their thirst for knowledge. When they learn about the incredible obstacles our ancestors overcame, it will only make their stories that much more impressive. We have the power to support a healthy self-image today, so our children are strong enough for the full story tomorrow.