

Educator Resource Guide

Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice

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Something Happened in Our Town is a children's picture book aimed to facilitate adult-child conversations about racial injustice. Elementary school aged children generally respond very well to the book. They readily understand the book's message that it is unfair to treat people differently based on skin color. The book sparks age-appropriate discussions of historical events from slavery to segregation to current racial inequities in the criminal justice system. Children sometimes share feelings about their own experiences of bias and brainstorm about appropriate solutions. This guide is designed to support you in using the book as a tool to foster empowering discussions with your students. Although these conversations might feel a bit uncomfortable at first, they often are enlightening and inspiring!

BENEFITS OF ADDRESSING RACE AND RACISM IN THE CLASSROOM

- Ignoring the existence of racism communicates indifference.
- Acknowledging racism prepares children to challenge unfairness appropriately.
- Many children are already aware of police shootings and marches for racial

justice. They are eager to ask questions and discuss these issues.

- Discussion of real-life issues builds trust, engagement, and open communication.
- These lessons meet social-emotional and history/social studies learning goals.

PREPARATION TIPS

Teacher Preparation

- Educate yourself about the history of racism in the U.S. and reflect upon your own cultural identity, socialization, and implicit biases
- Review guidelines on discussing race and racism in the classroom (see below). It is important to balance discussion of the painful history of race relations with the vision that social change is possible
- Review the *Note to Parents & Caregivers* in the book and access the online menu of discussion questions
<https://www.apa.org/pubs/magination/pdf/441B228-read-aloud-tips.pdf>

Class Preparation

We recommend that your classroom library contain books representing diversity and resilience across multiple dimensions. It would be helpful for children to have exposure to books about:

- Similarities and differences across humans and the benefits of diversity
- Everyday events and joys in the lives of Black and brown children
- Kindness, empathy, and anti-bullying

Parent Preparation

Many parents expect teachers to discuss current events with students. However, some parents may object to books about modern day racism, as opposed to those about slavery or the civil rights movement. They may be distrustful of data documenting disproportionate police shootings of Black individuals. Or, they may object to characters in *Something Happened in Our Town* expressing anger about those police shootings. However, most parents want their children to treat everyone fairly and to stick up for those who are bullied or excluded due to their race. Nevertheless, given the potential for a range of parent opinions about antiracism, it is recommended that teachers: (a) obtain support from their administrations about their use of the book, and (b) communicate with parents about the rationale and goals for the lesson before reading the book. Some teachers have allowed parents to withdraw their children from the book reading, though this practice may undermine the book's

message of anti-racism. Teachers may also want to form an Equity/Inclusion committee, including diverse parents, to guide schoolwide efforts to provide an inclusive and honest curriculum, as well as equitable opportunities and discipline procedures.

Presentation Format Options

- Conduct classroom read-aloud with discussion
- Include book in classroom library (suitable for independent readers in 3rd grade and up)
- Include book in list of independent reading or book report choices
- Provide schoolwide parent workshop on how to talk with children about racism, with relevant booklists

Book Discussion: Special Issues

- Children are typically emotionally engaged by this story, but not overwhelmed. Some children feel sad or frustrated, especially children of color. Provide support by reflecting the child's feelings. If children haven't raised their hand, don't put them on the spot by requesting reactions. Also, avoid asking someone to be a spokesperson for their race.
- This story helps children understand that police officers are human beings who sometimes make mistakes. In our experience, children do not develop global negative opinions about police

officers. If a parent is concerned about this potential outcome, you might highlight the balanced view expressed by the Black father in the story (“There are many cops, Black and White, who make good choices.”). Invite younger children to mention some of the ways that police are helpful. With older children, discuss how police departments are working to reduce bias and excessive use of force.

- We have not experienced a child making a racist statement in response to the book, but this might occur. Guidance for this situation is provided in the *Note to Parents and Caregivers*.

STORY EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Vocabulary Development

The *Note to Parents & Caregivers* provides child-friendly definitions of relevant vocabulary words (e.g., racism, prejudice, stereotype). For upper elementary students, provide definitions of these words before reading the story. During the reading, pause to allow them to identify examples of these concepts.

Draw a Comic

Ask children to draw a comic strip about a time they experienced or witnessed racial injustice, or about an imagined unfair situation. Instruct them to use Frame 1 to show the unjust situation, Frame 2 to show how the victim feels, and Frame 3 to show the victim (or a bystander) standing up for fairness.

Make a Protest Sign

This story introduces children to social activism. Afterwards, encourage students to choose a societal problem that they would like to help solve (e.g., racial justice, community gun violence, climate change). Give students a small poster board to make a sign for an imaginary march. You can attach paint stirrer “handles” to the posters if you wish. Allow students to explain why they chose a particular issue.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Resources for Educators, Parents, and Families from Anti-Defamation League:

<https://www.adl.org/education-and-resources/resources-for-educators-parents-families>

Classroom Resources from Learning for Justice:

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/classroom-resources>

It’s Not So Black and White: Discussing race and racism in the classroom by Dr. Beverly Tatum:

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/its-not-so-black-and-white/>

Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom: A Resource for Educators, National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//addressing_race_and_trauma_in_the_classroom_educators.pdf