

Spotting racial discrimination

To make sure we treat all races fairly, we must first know what unfair treatment looks like.

Are you racist? The likely answer would be a loud and clear "No!". And, by and large, most people sincerely believe they are not at all racist.

Is there **racial discrimination** taking place around you? The answer to this second question tends to vary more. Some people might say "yes", while others say "no". And, a few would shrug their shoulders, admitting that they really don't know.

It is not easy to talk about **racism** and racial discrimination. They are sensitive topics. That is why no teacher would walk into your classroom and ask all students who are racist to stand up. Teachers typically wouldn't ask those who have been discriminated against to put up their hands either. If they did, your class might feel uncomfortable.

Yet, we know that racial discrimination is a big problem all over the world. But, how will we get rid of the problem if we don't mention it? We must have honest conversations about discrimination. Talking about it clears up the clutter in our minds so that we can see more clearly what needs to be done.

The good news is that a lot is being done worldwide. Last month, *What's Up* explained how many countries, including Singapore, have promised to get rid of racial discrimination. (You can find the article online at more.whatsup.sg).

In a healthy society, people should be able to talk about problems that affect them.

So, while not everyone is comfortable discussing racial discrimination, we should not just avoid the topic.

In Singapore, we have opportunities to discuss it. Racial Harmony Day has been around in our schools for the past 20 years. Then, there is an organisation called OnePeople.sg. It conducts many events, bringing together youth as well as adults to talk about their experiences of racial issues.

Such efforts will be effective only if you and I do what is right in our daily lives. The first step is knowing what racial discrimination looks like.

Can you spot it?

Are you able to recognise racial discrimination? Try this quiz. Tick the examples that you think are forms of racial discrimination.

A friend's parent asks Suri where she is from. Suri replies, "Singapore." The parent pats Suri kindly on the shoulder and says with a smile, "Cannot be, my dear. You are so dark."

When Joe's new eraser is stolen, he accuses Teja. Teja says he didn't do it. Joe retorts, "I know it's you because your kind always lie and steal."

Roy, a good basketball player, is not selected for the neighbourhood team. "All the others are Chinese. Poor Roy ... he'll feel out of place," explains the caring volunteer coach to Roy's father.

When the new foreign student,

Olivia, joins her classmates during recess, the local students switch from speaking in English to their mother tongue so that Olivia is left out of the conversation.

At a weekend camp, the group leader cheerfully says, "Nita, why don't you wash the dishes? Your people are experts at it — that's why so many maids are from your country."

The class clown loves to crack jokes about Greg's community. One day, he says to Greg, "Hey, dude, be a sport! Don't take it so personally! You know I'm just joking, right?"

If you ticked all of the above, congratulations! You've scored 100%. Every one of these is a form of racial discrimination.

The parent really believes that all Singaporeans are fair-skinned. The basketball coach thinks he is doing Roy a favour by not picking him. And, the class clown wants to be popular so desperately that he doesn't even realise how mean his jokes are.

These three people are not aware that their words and actions are hurtful. They may not even be racist. As for the others, they surely know that they are being mean. Deliberate or not, racial discrimination is wrong.

How to respond?

Suri, Teja, Roy, Olivia, Nita, and Greg are the victims in these six stories. How would you respond if you were one of them?

What if you were just an observer? Why are people like Joe, the camp leader, and Olivia's classmates so unkind? Are there ways in which kids can help to stop these kinds of discrimination?

These are some of the questions that we must talk about. Racial discrimination hurts individuals and communities as well as the whole society. Its roots go back to ancient history. Its seeds continue to be planted. To stop this thorny weed from spreading, we must stand united, shoulder to shoulder as equals, and work together.

You are growing up at a time that could be the turning point for getting rid of racial discrimination. Around the world, there are more real efforts now than ever before. Next year, when you return to school, *What's Up* will continue to share with you how the world is working on this problem.

Whether you were born and brought up in Singapore or arrived recently, what matters is that you are here now. Don't get left out. Join in the conversation and learn what you and your friends can do to help.

— By MARY GEORGE

VOCAB BUILDER

racism (say "ray-sizm"; noun) = believing that some races are better than others.

racial discrimination (say "ray-shel dis-kri-mi-nay-shun"; noun) = treating some people worse than others because of their race.



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