

# Seven Questions You Can Use To Talk With Your Children About The Unrest In America



In 1968 when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated I was a college student in Atlanta Georgia and immediately thrust into the middle of the movement that would change the nation. We had great leaders in the Black community in Atlanta – and in the nation – who helped us **understand, process** and **react** to the events around us.

In 1992 riots broke out in America after the acquittal of the four police officers involved in the beating of Rodney King. My three kids were all teenagers at the time, and we talked with them to help them **understand, process** and **react** to the events around them.

Unfortunately, we are here again in a confusing and terrible time of racial strife in America. My kids are all grown. However, now, I have 10 grandkids – 6 of whom are teenagers or very young adults. Most are living nearby but, because of social distancing restrictions imposed because of the Coronavirus, I am unable to sit with them and discuss this matter to help them **understand, process** and **react**. My situation is not unique. So, as I thought about how I would approach a conversation with my grandkids I decided to put my approach to paper – hoping my comments would be of help to others.

One thing I have learned in my 70 years is that when you talk with your children about tough issues, it is important for you to listen as much as you talk. In fact, it is generally best to listen first. I've put together a list of seven questions you can use that will allow you to listen and discussion the events of the week with your child or children. These questions can be used with kids of all ages. If you find them helpful, please share them with others in your social networks.

*William Shackelford*

Father, Grandfather, Former Civil Rights Activist, Cultural Diversity Trainer, Concerned Citizen

## Seven Questions You Can Use To Talk With Your Children About The Unrest In America

### **Q1. What have you seen on the news (TV/Social Media, etc.)?**

With this question you will be able to gauge your children's current level of exposure to the events. Don't assume they have seen all you have seen or, that they fully understood what they have seen.

### **Q2. How do you feel about what you have seen? (or What do you think about what you have seen?)**

The goal of this question is to encourage you children to express their feelings and emotions about what they are seeing/experiencing. I personally prefer the direct approach ("How do you feel ...") but, chose the one that fits your child best.

### **Q3. Do you know why they are protesting/rioting?**

Again, this gives your children a chance to express themselves and gives you a chance to gauge where they are on this issue.

### **Q4. What is the difference between a Rally, Protest and Riot?**

This is one many adults have trouble with. You and your children are probably hearing all three of these terms – often being used interchangeably. However, they are not the same. I would define them as:

**Rally** – An event organized by an individual or group around a defined issue or issues with a fixed start and end time and place.

**Protest** – An event organized by an individual or group around a defined issue or short list of issues generally with a fixed start time and place but, flexible end time and place.

**Riot** – An unorganized gathering – often with multiple leaders – with the intent of harming individuals, damaging property and/or looting.

It is possible (even common) to have just a rally or just a protest – with no violence or destruction of property. However, what happens sometimes is what started as a peaceful rally or protest descends into a riot (as we saw have seen all across America).

### **Q5. What type of Rally, Protest, Riot would you participate in?**

The intent of this question is to test their understanding of the difference between constructive and destructive protest. You are doing this by asking them to give you examples from their own experience.

### **Q6. How should police respond to a Rally? Protest? Riot?**

First, you should help your children understand that it is the job of the police to protect them and the community (including property). They don't always get it right but, that is their job. Then, you should discuss each of the three situations separately. Use this question to inform your children of the many businesses in your community that are owned by people from the community. When discussing how police should respond to riots, ask your children, "Would it be fair for the police to allow rioters to burn down OUR businesses?" and similar questions. Help them understand that, during times like this, the job of the police is so much more difficult and that many of the police are from their community.

### **Q7. So, what would you like to see happen next?**

This is a question that is "forward looking". You want to end the discussion on a positive note – something that gives your children hope for the future. For very young children you can reframe the question with language like, "In a beautiful world, how would we treat one another?"