Sports, Mascots and Bias

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events

Topic Summary
The decades-old controversy over the Washington D.C.'s football team's name has come back into the news lately. The Washington Redskins, a National Football League (N.F.L) team, has been criticized for using the term “redskins.” Every major English dictionary describes the term “redskin” as derogatory and Native American people and others consider it an offensive epithet. There is debate over whether the term “redskin” originates from the scalped head of a Native American, red body paint or the red color metaphor for race. Regardless of its
origin, since the mid-19th century “redskin” has been a slang word white people used for Native American people.

As a result, terms such as “redskin” have almost disappeared from common usage except for sports teams. Even with sports teams, there used to be more than 3,000 teams with Native American names and mascots. That has been steadily in decline; currently there are fewer than 1,000 high school, college and professional teams that use Native American mascots. One other NFL team, the Kansas City Chiefs, has a Native American-themed name. Major League Baseball has two Native American named teams: the Atlanta Braves (known for their “Tomahawk Chop” at games) and the Cleveland Indians. There is also one National Hockey League team, the Chicago Blackhawks.

Last year, fifty U.S. Senators signed a letter asking the N.F.L. to push for a name change of the Washington D.C. football team. In June 2014, The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office revoked the trademark of the N.F.L.’s Washington Redskins for the second time. And last October, President Obama said, “If I were the owner of the team and I knew that there was a name of my team—even if it had a storied history—that was offending a sizeable group of people, I'd think about changing it.” This fall, California became the first state to ban public schools from using "Redskins" as a team name, nickname or mascot.

Age
10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- What do you think about the Washington Redskins’ name change controversy?
- What do you think are the different perspectives on this issue?
Do you think the players and teams, who have a strong influence over the public, have a responsibility to send a strong message about names and mascots? Why or why not?

Should the fans' and general public's opinions about sports teams' names and mascots be factored into the team's decision?

Do you think the Washington football team should change their name? Why or why not?

Questions to Dig Deeper

- Are there any sports teams in our town/city or state that use Native American mascots or names? How can we find out more about that?

- How are mascots, slurs, names and epithets used in ways that are offensive and biased? How is this harmful?

- What more do you want to know about Native American history and the bias and discrimination directed at Native American and Indigenous people?

(The "Related to this Resource" and Additional Resources section provide articles and information that address these questions.)

Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Find out if your town, city or state has a sports team using a Native American mascot and write a letter expressing your point of view about it.

- Educate others about this controversy by sharing information on social media, having individual conversations or organizing an educational forum or debate in school.

- Watch the video Proud to Be together; discuss the message of the video, what impact it has on your thinking and how that can be conveyed to others.
Additional Resources

- Children's and Young Adult Books About Native American and Indigenous People (ADL's Books Matter)

- California Becomes First State To Ban 'Redskins' Team Name (Huffington Post Sports)