Lonnie Chavis of ‘This is Us' Reflects on His Experiences with Racism

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

Topic Summary

Lonnie Chavis is an actor who stars in the television series, This Is Us; he plays the 13-year-old Randall Pearson. He started acting at a very young age and has been on numerous television shows and in movies, including “The Boy Behind the Door,” which was released in 2020.

In June 2020, Lonnie Chavis wrote an essay called, “America Needs to Change,” which was published in People magazine. In the essay, he shares his various experiences with racism.
experiences with racism. He wrote the essay in the wake of an ongoing public conversation and reckoning about racism and police violence against Black people. Chavis has a unique point of view as a Black actor and as a young person who speaks directly to other young people. In that role, his words may resonate more powerfully.

Lonnie Chavis wrote the essay as a personal letter to his Mom to explain how he felt after learning about the May 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police. You can watch Lonnie Chavis talking about his thoughts and reason for writing it on “Live with Kelly and Ryan”: "This Is Us" star Lonnie Chavis shares the open letter he wrote about his experiences with racism.

Racism is defined as: “The disrespect, harm and mistreatment of people of color based on made up ideas that white people deserve to be in charge and treated better.” Here are some important things to keep in mind:

- **People of color** includes people who are Black, Latinx, Asian and/or Native American.

- **Mistreatment, harm and disrespect** can be done on purpose by people or by groups. Sometimes harm is caused even when it's not on purpose. People can experience harm based on where they live, their experiences with police, by a doctor, by pollution in the air and water, by their experiences at school. Harm can be done on purpose by a person which can by physical, psychological or emotional. Groups and institutions (like education, police, healthcare, media) can also cause harm by not helping people of color, treating them unfairly or not allowing them to get what they need.

- **Made up ideas** refers to ideas people may have like “white people deserve better treatment” or “white people deserve to be in charge.” You may not always be aware that these thoughts or feelings exist within your community or even your mind, but they show up in different ways. Some of these ideas come from the past, like legalized slavery, segregation, voter suppression, etc. and the attitude “back in the day, people believed that...”
Even though most people would say out loud that those ideas are wrong, they can still cause harm by remaining stuck or ingrained in our mind and in our world.

Read Lonnie Chavis’ essay together silently or aloud. When reading this with young children, instead of reading the whole article, read a few excerpts and explain some of the vocabulary and concepts as you read.

Age

8 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- How did you feel while reading the essay? What thoughts came to mind?
- What surprised you about what Lonnie Chavis wrote? What ideas had you heard of before?
- Why do you think he wrote the essay?
- Could you relate to anything in the essay? If so, what?
- If you could ask Lonnie Chavis a question, what would you ask?
- Have you seen or been a target of racism? What happened? How did you feel? Did you or anyone else say or do anything?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- When Lonnie Chavis says, “America needs to change,” what does he mean?
- If kids your age and others read the letter, what impact do you think it will have?
- Do you have any questions about the definition of racism? Is it different than how you thought about the word before?
What do you think we can do to challenge and interrupt racism?

Idea for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Share Lonnie Chavis’ essay with family, friends and on social media and talk about the important messages about racism that are in the essay. Talk with them about their own experiences of racism or other forms of bias and what can be done about it.

- Help to organize a teach-in or forum at school about what issues of bias and injustice students are experiencing at your school. Discuss what can be done about it so that you can create a climate of safety, inclusion and equity for all students.

- Get involved in local or national activism efforts that address racial justice or another issue of injustice that is important to you. Use our resource, 10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism.

Additional Resources

- Lonnie Chavis of 'This Is Us' Writes about Racism (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism
- Experiences with Race and Racism (ADL Lesson Plan)
- George Floyd, Racism and Law Enforcement (ADL Table Talk)
- Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate
- Teaching about Racism, Violence, Inequity and the Criminal Justice System (Collection of resources)