



early risers

Waking up to racial equity
in early childhood.

Discussion Guide

Season 8, Episode 3: *Look for the Helpers: Helping Kids Make Sense of a Changing World*, released October 7, 2026

Learning Goal: How the lessons of Fred Rogers can help us today

Suggested Conversation Length: 60 minutes



Early Risers is a podcast focused on how to talk with young children about race. The podcast invites early childhood experts into conversations about how parents, caregivers and early childhood educators can tackle this big topic with the little ones in their lives.

Background

When the world feels uncertain, children look to the adults they trust for answers. But what happens when the people children are taught to see as "helpers" don't always make them feel safe? Dianne Haulcy sits down with Emma Swift Lee, director of the Fred Rogers Institute, to explore how caregivers can have honest, age-appropriate conversations about race, fear and safety. Together they discuss why children need truthful answers and how simple, reassuring conversations can help them make sense of difficult events while preserving hope. Inspired by Fred Rogers' work, Emma shares practical strategies for talking with young children about scary news, redefining what it means to be a helper and reminding every child that they are loved, valued and worthy just as they are.

Guest Bio

Emma Swift Lee is the Director of the Fred Rogers Institute at Saint Vincent College, where she works with educators and caregivers to support the interactions and relationships that help children grow and learn. Emma and her colleagues are continually learning from Fred Rogers' legacy and practical scholarship in child development in order to develop professional learning and community-building opportunities for children's helpers. Before joining the institute, Emma worked at the RAND Corporation as a policy analyst. Her work included research, evaluation and technical assistance for projects in early childhood and K-12 education in both rural and urban settings. She holds an Ed.M. in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard University and a B.A. in Psychology from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Discussion Questions

- Emma Swift Lee talks about what her father learned about race from his family in the South when he was young. Have you talked to your children about what you learned about race when you were young? Was it good information? Was it disturbing?
- Emma's father went against his family's racist ideas when he allowed a student from Ghana to room with him when he was in college. Have you had a similar experience going against what you learned from your family about race?
- Talk about the importance of Fred Rogers' message, "I like you just the way you are" and "There is no one else in the world just like you," as they relate to young children of all races.
- Fred Rogers told children to "look for the helpers." Who can children in your community "look to" for help? How do you talk to young children amid a crisis or social unrest?
- Emma Swift Lee says Fred Rogers knew children were already overhearing news about the assassinations in 1981, so it made sense to talk about it. What messages about race do you think young children are hearing from the internet and social media in 2026? Which of these messages need to be discussed?
- Emma Swift Lee states that you do not always have to get it right the first time. Talk about a time when you felt like you did not "get it right". Did you circle back with your child or children? Why or why not?

- Emma Swift Lee suggests taking a pause to ask, "What have you already heard?" when a child asks about a recent racialized event. What are some other things you can say to slow down while staying engaged in the conversation?
- Dianne talks about how neighbors volunteered to help during Operation Metro Surge in Minneapolis. What message does this example of neighbors helping neighbors send to immigrants of color?

Closing the Discussion

As you close the discussion, make sure everyone gets a chance to at least answer the final question so the discussion ends on a positive note. Acknowledge key points and lessons learned. Finally, point out additional resources available to participants.

Additional Resources

- [Fred Rogers Institute](#) – Practical tools, articles, and videos for helping children navigate difficult conversations, emotions, and challenging current events.
- [Fred Rogers Productions](#) – Parenting resources, free family activities and conversation starters focused on emotions, kindness, empathy and building resilience.
- [Sesame Workshop: See Us Coming Together](#) – Age-appropriate resources that help families talk about race, identity, belonging and community through stories and activities.
- [PBS KIDS for Parents](#) – Activities and conversation starters about feelings, kindness, community and current events.

General Facilitator Tips

- Read through all the questions first.
- Reiterate the purpose of the discussion is to learn from each other.
- Create an agreement with everyone in the discussion group that helps create a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere. Acknowledge that talking about race can be difficult.
- Be sensitive to how people identify.
- Be prepared for a response to any remarks that might be offensive. The person saying it may not be aware that it is offensive, so be gentle in pointing it out.

Group Agreements

Ground rules and group agreements are a way to respect safety. Ask members to brainstorm and collectively determine group agreements. Here is some information you can reference:

- [Group agreement information from Seeds for Change](#)
- [Community Agreements tool from Just Lead Washington](#)
- [Sample group agreement from GSAFE](#)

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