

2021 – 2022

TORY

Something Happened in Our Town
EDUCATOR GUIDE

children's
theatre
company

SOMETHING HAPPENED IN OUR TOWN

March 8-25, 2022

A Children's Theatre Company Original World Premiere Production

Friendships challenged, a world changed, and two young people struggling to make sense of it all. Follow friends and neighbors, Josh and Emma, as they navigate their way through an experience beyond their control and understanding.

Josh and Emma have many questions about the tragic killing of a Black man by a White police officer. Real questions that deserve real answers. But during conversations over dinner, at bedtime, before and after school, their families (one Black and one White) find such answers don't come easily. Layered with compassion and humor, this show invites you to walk alongside Josh and Emma as they confront uncertainty within their town and between themselves. More than just a "must see," this play will help families more fully understand how their neighbors' experiences might be different than their own.

written by **CHERYL L. WEST**

directed by **TIMOTHY DOUGLAS**

based on the book "Something Happened in Our Town" by **MARIANNE CELANO, PhD, ABPP; MARIETTA COLLINS, PhD; ANN HAZZARD, PhD, ABPP**



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Countering Racism and Racial Injustice with Children

By Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard

It is understandable that adults want to protect children from life's harsher realities to help them feel safe. Therefore, many parents or teachers may not have discussed racial bias or police shootings with young children. Parents of children from ethnic minority groups typically do talk to their children about racial injustice to prepare and protect them, but may not be sure when or how to start these conversations. For all adults, it is hard to find the right words when discussing this challenging topic.

There are many benefits of beginning to discuss racial bias and injustice with young children of all races and ethnicities:

- Research has shown that children even as young as three years of age notice and comment on differences in skin color.
- Humans of all ages tend to ascribe positive qualities to the group that they belong to and negative qualities to other groups.
- Despite some parents' attempts to protect their children from frightening media content, children often become aware of incidents of community violence, including police shootings.
- Parents who don't proactively talk about racial issues with their children are inadvertently teaching their children that race is a taboo topic. Parents who want to raise children to accept individuals from diverse cultures need to counter negative attitudes that their children develop from exposure to the negative racial stereotypes that persist in our society.

How to Address Racial Bias with Children

General Guidelines

- Take the time to address your child's questions or comments. Do not ignore or sidestep them with blanket reassurances (e.g., "We are all the same inside").
- If your child makes a negative racial comment, ask him or her in a nonjudgmental tone, "what makes you say that?" Your child's answer may provide an opportunity to counter generalizations or to increase empathy.
- Encourage multidimensional views of others. Preschoolers tend to view people as all good or all bad. You can help your child to recognize human complexity and learn to consider both similarities and differences between people in appearance, feelings, preferences, and behaviors.
- Balance your acknowledgement of the reality of racism with messages about hope for change and the availability of help.
- Be prepared to talk about what your child sees and hears. He or she may need help in understanding community events or news stories. It may be difficult to limit your child's exposure to graphic images or overly detailed information about community violence, but try to do so to avoid inducing undue anxiety.

continued 



How to Address Racial Bias with Children continued

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Parents can also demonstrate behaviors that promote children’s positive attitudes towards racial and cultural diversity.

- Make a proactive effort to regularly engage in activities with individuals from many cultures. Ensure diversity in the media, toys, books, and art that are part of your child’s life at home and school.
- Make a rule that it’s not acceptable to tease or reject someone based on identity. If teasing occurs, try to find out what underlies the behavior. If the conflict is really about another issue, help your child recognize and resolve that issue. If the underlying reason is discomfort with differences, plan activities to try to overcome that discomfort.
- Demonstrate and encourage acts of kindness toward others and activities to challenge injustice (e.g. protest marches or vigils).

Unique Issues for African American Families

Parents of African American children often face unique challenges in addressing racial bias with their children. Unfortunately, children of color are likely to experience racist encounters. Here are some strategies to keep in mind:

- Strive to promote a positive racial identity in your child by having ongoing conversations and reading books about contributions of African Americans to science and culture, and by participating in community and family activities that contribute to a positive sense of self embedded within an African American community.
- Prepare your child for racist encounters, beginning in preschool. If children feel safe, they can express their disagreement in an assertive but non-aggressive manner with peers who have made racist comments.
- Encourage your child to inform you or trusted adults (e.g. teachers) about racist behaviors from others. Your child’s disclosures will give you an opportunity to discuss how to maintain positive self-esteem and respond appropriately to these challenging situations.



Springboard

Ideas of what to talk about, write about, or explore while connecting *Something Happened In Our Town* to your classroom curriculum



What does justice mean to you? Who defines justice at home? Who defines justice at school?

Who are the people in your community that help you feel safe? What do they do to keep you safe?

One of the ways people express beliefs is through signs that can be displayed in yards, windows, or at protests. Create a sign to showcase a cause you believe in.

Why do you think protests start? Why do you think Malcolm felt the need to participate in the protests?

What are some of the ways we can keep each other safe in our community?

Who defines what is right and what is wrong at home? What about at school? Or in your community?

Create a plan to welcome new students into your classroom. How can you make them feel welcome?

Stories of violence and police brutality can be upsetting. If you are upset, who is a trusted adult you can speak with?

What is the most important thing people need to feel safe?

Write a letter giving Emma or Josh advice on how to handle the recent events they experienced.

Research how change is made in your community. Attend a school board meeting, local election forum, or debate.

Identify a problem in your community. Brainstorm possible solutions to this problem and outline a plan to implement a solution.

Create an identity museum in your classroom! Ask student to each bring in an object or artifact that represents their identity to display in the museum.

Write persuasive letters to community leaders expressing changes you want to see in your neighborhood.

Many characters in the play use social media to express their feelings. Discuss how social media has impacted social justice causes. What are the positive outcomes of social media? What are the negative?

Research the origins of police and policing. How did communities stay safe before police departments were created?

Compare rural policing practices with urban policing practices. How are they similar and how are they different?

Discuss prejudice. What does it mean and in what ways do you see it affecting your community?



Class Act: Scene Work

Objective: In this activity, students will use existing script text to analyze characters, setting, and conflict. Students will preform as a character in a scene from *Something Happened in Our Town* by Cheryl L. West.

Directions: A script is written differently than a book. The character who is speaking will be in all caps on the left. Words appearing in italics are stage directions. Stage directions are not read aloud in the play and they provide information that clarifies the action, setting, intentions, etc.

As a class, read the script excerpt on page 12, taking turns reading the character's lines. It may be helpful for the first read to have someone read the stage directions aloud. As a group, answer the following questions:

- Who are the characters in the scene?
- What is the setting of the scene?
- What is the most important moment in the scene?
- What are the actions in the scene?
- What is each character's goal in the scene?

Break into small groups to stage the scene. Share for the class.

Class Act: Character Interview

Objective: In this activity, students will use their imagination to invent backgrounds, justify actions, and answer questions from a character's perspective. Students will generate questions to better understand a variety of characters and build empathy. Students will offer advice and ideas to help the characters.

Directions: Place a chair at the front of the room. Ask for a volunteer to come to the front of the class and pretend to be Emma.

The rest of the students will play the role of news reporters who are interviewing Emma for the local newspaper. The teacher can model by asking Emma a few questions, then invite the class of reporters to ask her questions.

Sample questions

- What do you enjoy about school? What about school is hard?
- Why is Josh your best friend?
- What do you love about your family?
- How did you feel when you heard what happened in your town?
- How do you think Josh might be feeling about what happened in your town?

After interviewing Emma, do the same activity for other characters in the story such as Sophia, Ms. Garcia, Josh, or Malcolm. This activity can also be used to explore historical figures, people you are studying in current events, or characters in other stories.



Class Act: Narrative Picture

Objective: This activity challenges students to compare and contrast characters, infer meaning in a picture, and practice creative problem solving skills. Students will use their imagination to create imagined situations within a sequence of events.

Directions: Show the class the illustration by Jennifer Zivoin below from the book *Something Happened in Our Town*. Give each student an opportunity to share with the class what they observe about this picture.

Divide students into small groups and have them re-create the picture with their bodies. Once all the students are frozen in the scene, allow each to make up a line of dialogue their character/object would say. Allow each student in the scene to say what their character/object is thinking in the scene. Reflect on how what we say and what we think are different. How do you decide what to say out loud and what to keep to yourself?

Dismiss students back to their small groups to brainstorm what might have happened right before this photo was taken. Create a tableau of this situation.

As a large group, analyze the conflict of this scene and brainstorm how this conflict might be solved. Dismiss students back to their small group to create a tableau of a potential solution to the conflict. Allow each group to showcase all three tableaux (beginning, middle, and end) in front of the class.

Ask the audience to make observations about the created scenes. How was the conflict solved?



Class Act: Two Line Scenes

Objective: Prior to seeing the show, this activity explores short snippets of the script. This allows students to start anticipating themes and plot while using their body, voice and imagination.

Directions: Write the provided lines below on the board or hand them out physical slips of paper.

Partner A	You can look at him and tell he doesn't know how to play. How's he even going to understand? He doesn't even speak English.
Partner B	Do you need to speak English to kick a ball?

Instruct students to find partners or assign partner groups. One student will be Partner A and one student will be Partner B. Partners should start by simply saying the lines then becoming silent. The leader will know all groups are done and ready for the next instruction when the room is silent.

Begin to give students prompts for how to say the lines. Give groups time to try the prompt with the lines. Again, when the room becomes silent, you will know they are ready for the next prompt.

Example prompts:

- High/low volume
- High/low pitch
- High/low tempo
- Excited
- Sad
- Concerned
- Other emotions

After you have experimented with different prompts, allow groups time to discuss which they felt were the most successful. Partners should rehearse how they would choose to perform the lines.

Invite volunteers to showcase their lines for the class. Ask the audience what they observed about the scene. How did their decisions impact the meaning of the scene?

Challenge partners to hypothesize what happened right before and right after these lines. Allow each group to create a short scene showcasing their hypothesis. This activity can be done with each group getting the same lines or you can choose a variety of lines from the script excerpt on page 12.



Team Builder: Take a Stand

Objective: This activity encourages students to examine their stance on a topic. This activity works best in an open area.

Directions: Create a line through the center of the space using either painters tape or other distinguishers. One side of the line represents “agree” and the other side of the line represents “disagree;” however, the room represents a spectrum with the middle representing neutral.

Pose a question to the group and ask them to stand on the point in the agree-disagree spectrum that describes their feelings. After everyone has found their spot, ask select students why they stood where they did. Encourage students to be persuaded by their peers—they can move to different points as their outlook shifts or perspective changes. Spend time unpacking each question and responses as needed.

Below are a few prompts to get you started. We encourage starting at questions with low stakes and moving to higher stakes as students become comfortable with the activity. Spend time unpacking after the activity concludes.

Example prompts:

- Pizza is the best food ever created.
- I find it easy to make friends with those around me.
- I can be friends with someone who has different opinions from me.
- I have been treated differently or unfairly because of the way I look.
- It is possible for adults to make mistakes.
- Police officers have the community's best interest in mind.

Team Builder: Classifications

Objective: This activity encourages students to think about the aspects of themselves they have in common. This activity works well in a large open space such as a gym or playground.

Directions: Challenge students to group themselves based on what they have in common from the ankles down. Students will naturally group themselves based on footwear. Everyone needs to be included in a group. Do the same thing with what they have in common from the waist down, neck down, and neck up. Finally, challenge them to just group themselves based on what they have in common without giving any further directions about what they need to have in common. Keep giving them that challenge until they have transitioned from what they are wearing or physical traits and begin to group themselves based on shared interests. The goal is to get students to think about what they ALL have in common (we are all in 2nd grade, we all are wearing t-shirts, we all go to school, etc.).

Discuss the activity with your students. How did they feel when they found a group that they had in common with? Did it feel better to find a they were left out of a group or couldn't find a group?

Team Builders: I Dream Of...

Objective: This activity allows students to explore their dreams for the future through physicality and gesture. Students will make observations and infer meaning.

Directions: Gather students in a circle. One at a time, each student will step forward and say “Hello, my name is (insert name here) and for my future, I dream of..” They will then show their dream for the future through gesture or mime. Allow each student to have a turn showcasing their dream. When everyone has had a chance, reflect with students about what they observed. What were the similarities they saw? Did any gestures stand out? What emotions did they feel while watching these gestures?

Write It Out: Paper Plate Assumptions

Objective: This activity challenges students to think about prejudice and create deeper, more empathetic understanding of character motivations. Students will consider point of view and also think about the prejudices that affect them.

Directions: Start by discussing the concept of prejudice as a class. What does prejudice mean? When are moments students have witnessed or experienced prejudice?

Give each student a paper plate. Choose a character from the play such as Emma, Josh, or Malcolm for your plate to represent. On the back of the plate or the bump side, write all the things people may assume about the character without knowing them. (ex: Emma is a girl so she must like pink, Josh is young so he doesn't know as much). Discuss how these assumptions might make these characters feel. Then, turn the plate over to the eating side and write all the things that are true about each character (ex: Emma is strong, Josh is very smart). Discuss which statements on which side of the plate are the most important about the character.

Dismiss students to work individually on the activity focusing on a different character. Retell or rewrite the story of *Something Happened in Our Town* from the perspective of that character. How does that change the story? Did this activity change your opinion of that character? Have you ever experienced similar feelings or events?

To explore the concept further, ask students to do the same activity but do it about themselves. Write on the outside of the plate things that people may assume about them without knowing them. Then, turn the plate over and write the things that are true about them. Share the finished products with the class and discuss. What surprised the students? Did students find any similarities with the characters in the play or with their classmates? How does this activity connect to the concept of prejudice? What can we do if we notice or experience prejudice?



Script Excerpt

Below is an excerpt of *Something Happened in Our Town* by Cheryl L. West

SOPHIA So, you have an uncle that's a cop?

LING I'd never want to be a cop.

EMMA But cops are the best people. My Uncle is brave!

LING Too scary.

SOPHIA You're always scared of something.

EMMA My uncle is like my dad.

SOPHIA But he's not. You don't have a dad.

LING Sophia, that isn't very nice.

SOPHIA I wasn't trying to be nice. I'm just stating a fact.

LING It would be different if he was at least a detective or something. Like on TV.

EMMA TV cops aren't real.

SOPHIA Will he at least be in his uniform when he comes? I do like their uniforms, dressed to impress.

LING And will he have his gun?

EMMA He has to. It's regulation.

SOPHIA My mother says we should get rid of all cops and their guns. Put 'em in jail so they can get a taste of their own medicine.

Costume Design

A costume designer is someone who decides what characters will wear. Sometimes their job is to create costumes for larger than life character such as the Grinch but sometimes their job is designing for regular people such as those in *Something Happened In Our Town*. Design an outfit that Josh, Emma, or Sophia would wear on their first day of school.

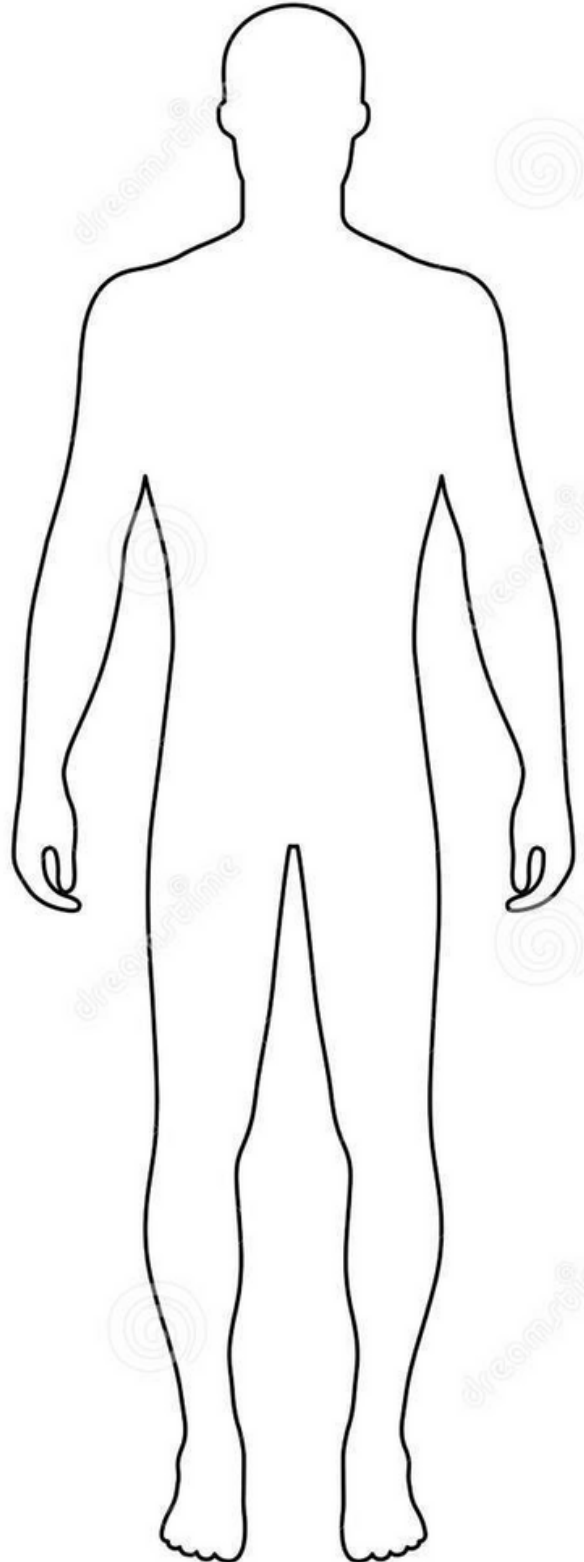
Character's Name:

Three adjectives that describe them are:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____



Corkboard Conversations

Use the sticky notes below to think critically about *Something Happened in Our Town*.

Three adjectives that describe this play are...

- 1
- 2
- 3

This play made me feel...

This play made me think about...

A status I would post on my social media after seeing this show is...

A question I still have is...

This play taught me...



My Rating of *Something Happened in Our Town* at Children's Theatre Company

FURTHER RESOURCES

Social Justice in the Classroom

Learning for Justice
Resources

[Learn More](#)

Woke Kindergarten:
Woke Wonderings

[Learn More](#)

Black Lives Matter in
Schools Curriculum
Resources

[Explore](#)

Guide to Facilitating
Conversations in the
Classroom

[Learn More](#)

Social Justice
Booklists

[Explore](#)

Teaching for Change
Resources

[Explore](#)

Teaching Young Kids
About Race

[Read More](#)

Teach Resistance
Lesson Plans

[Explore](#)

More About *Something* Happened in Our Town

Q&A with the Authors -
Banned Books Week

[Watch](#)

Author Interview-
Speaking Psychology

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Author Interview-
Embrace Race

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Mail Letters to:

Children's Theatre Company
2400 Third Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55404

Submit Student Questions at:

[www.childrenstheatre.org
/offbookquestions](http://www.childrenstheatre.org/offbookquestions)

Check out more activities on:



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Questions? Email:

schools@childrenstheatre.org

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