

No Place for Hate® Activity Library

Lonnie Chavis Shares His Experiences of Racism

Lesson Plan and Overview

Lesson Plan: [Lonnie Chavis of 'This Is Us' Writes about Racism](#)

In June 2020, Lonnie Chavis, the young actor who stars in *This Is Us*, wrote and published an essay called “America Needs to Change” about his experiences with racism. He wrote the essay in the wake of an ongoing public conversation and reckoning about the issue of police violence against Black people and systemic racism. Chavis has a unique point of view as a Black actor and as a young person who speaks directly to other young people and whose words may resonate more powerfully in that role.

Grade Level

Grades K-5

Learning Objectives

- Students will explore bias and racism by reading an essay by child actor, Lonnie Chavis.
- Students will reflect on their own experiences with or witnessing bias and prejudice and the extent to which anyone intervened.

Materials Needed

- [Lonnie Chavis's Open Letter About Racism](#) (video)
- [This Is Us Star Lonnie Chavis, 12, Shares His Experiences with Racism: 'America Needs to Change'](#) (article)

Words You Might Use

Bias: A preference either for or against an individual or group that affects fair judgment.

Prejudice: Judging or having an idea about someone or a group of people before you actually know them. Prejudice is often directed toward people in a certain identity group (race, religion, gender, etc.).

Stereotype: The false idea that all members of a group are the same and think and behave in the same way.

Core Activity

Show the video [Lonnie Chavis's Open Letter About Racism](#) to students. After watching, have students turn and talk with someone sitting near them to share their first thoughts about the video. They can use these questions if they need a prompt: *How did you feel while watching the video? Why did Lonnie Chavis write the letter to his Mom?*

Then engage them in a class discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:

- Who is Lonnie Chavis?
- How does he feel about the character on *This is Us*?
- Why did Lonnie Chavis write the letter to his Mom?
- What does Lonnie Chavis hope happens because he wrote the letter?
- How did you feel as Lonnie Chavis read parts of the letter aloud?

Next, read aloud the article, [This Is Us Star Lonnie Chavis, 12, Shares His Experiences with Racism: 'America Needs to Change'](#). **For upper elementary (grades 3-5)**, read the whole essay aloud. **For lower elementary (grades K-2)**, read a few excerpts and explain some of the vocabulary and concepts as you read, as needed.

After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:

- How did you feel while you were listening to the essay?
- Why did you feel that way?
- What happened to Lonnie Chavis?
- Could you relate to any of the situations he shared?
- If you could ask Lonnie Chavis a question, what would you ask?
- What does Lonnie Chavis say about what needs to change?
- What do you think needs to change?

Finally, have students make a poster (either digital or paper) that shares a slogan they come up with about prejudice, bias, stereotyping or how to interrupt it. The poster can include the slogan and an image they create themselves or find online. You can first brainstorm possible slogans as a group and then each student can choose one of those or make up their own. Examples include: "Stamp Out Bias "Say No to Racism," "Bias Not Allowed Here," "Diversity is Our Superpower," "Stop Bullying. Start Empathy," "Listening Makes Us Stronger." When completed, the posters can be hung around the school or posted on the school's website. (In addition, you can have students take turns sharing their slogans on the school's P.A. system during morning announcements.)

Optional Follow-Up/ Going Further

Note: These additional activities can be done as follow-ups to the core activity and they can also serve as an additional NPFH activity if the core activity is completed first.

- Have students engage in small group discussions about their own experience with bias or prejudice. Divide students into small groups of 3–4 students each. Have them take turns (two minutes each) to share an experience they have had with bias or prejudice. First, remind them of the definitions and model this by sharing your own experience if possible. Explain that the experience they share can either be one they experienced themselves, one that they observed or one they heard about. They should answer these three questions: (1) What happened? (2) How did you feel? (3) Did you or anyone else do anything about it or act as an ally? If not, what would you have wanted to do or wished someone did?
- As a follow-up to the small group discussion, have students write an essay about the experience they shared in the small group, or another experience about bias or prejudice. They should share in the essay the same thoughts they shared in the small group discussion and anything else they'd like to: (1) What happened? (2) How did you feel? (3) Did you or anyone else do anything about it or act as an ally? If not, what would you have wanted to do or wished someone did?
- After creating the posters with slogans above, match older students (grades 3-5) with younger students (grades K-2) and visit them in their classrooms. In the classroom, match one younger student with one older student and have them show each other their poster and share how they came up with the slogan and picture and why.

Home Connection

Share ADL's Table Talk: [Everyday Bias](#) with families.

How Activity Meets NPFH Requirements

All students will engage in discussions about bias and prejudice and reflect on one young person's experiences with racism. Students will also discuss and reflect on experiences they've had with prejudice and bias. The process of creating slogans and posters about interrupting bias will help the school envision an environment where bias is actively challenged.

Virtual Variation

Have students watch the video on their own or with a family member. After watching, engage students in a virtual classroom conversation using the discussion questions or have them respond in writing to at least three of the questions, and submit those responses. For the read aloud part of the activity, make (and share) a short video of yourself reading aloud the essay, or read aloud during synchronous class time. In the final activity, have students create their posters either on paper or digitally and share by submitting them to you and you share or sharing them during synchronous class time. Then share the posters on the school or classroom website.

***This Is Us* Star Lonnie Chavis, 12, Shares His Experiences with Racism: 'America Needs to Change'**

PEOPLE's Voices from the Fight Against Racism will amplify Black perspectives on the push for equality and justice

By Lonnie Chavis June 17, 2020 12:00 PM



PHOTO: VALERIE MACON/AFP VIA GETTY

*Known for his role on the Emmy Award-winning NBC drama series *This Is Us*, actor Lonnie Chavis captured hearts as '9-year-old Randall,' the younger version of Emmy-winning actor Sterling K. Brown. Here, the 12-year-old anti-bullying advocate—who has launched a campaign, IGTV show and hashtag around #FixYourHeart—shares what started as a letter to his mom about growing up in the U.S. as a Black boy and struggling to find words to reflect his feelings about the tragic death of George Floyd.*

My life matters, but does it? America paints a very clear picture of how I should view myself. America shows me that my Blackness is a threat, and I am treated as such. I actually didn't learn about being Black and what that would mean for me until I was 7 years old. I thought I was a peach man, so my parents educated me on being a Black man really quick with long talks, books and movies like *Amistad* and *Malcolm X*. I was overwhelmed with confusion, fear and sadness. I had to lean on my faith in Christ for hope, protection and understanding.

Being a young Black boy in Hollywood made it even more fearful. I can recall the time when I realized there are not a lot of people that look like me on these Hollywood sets and asked my mom where all

the Black people were. I also remember being invited to events but then being treated very poorly by security or entrance checkers, like I wasn't supposed to be there, until I had a publicist to announce me. I think of going to Hollywood events with other actors and actresses where I was constantly asked if I'm the boy from *Black-ish* or the boy from *Stranger Things*. I guess we all look alike since we are all Black. Can you imagine being confused for any other Black kid just because you all share the same profession? I can.

I can recall a time on set when I started crying listening to an actor portray a racist grandmother toward my character. The director and writers told me that they didn't need me to cry for the scene. However, it was hard for me not to cry as I witnessed what I had just learned was my reality. I wasn't acting, I was crying for me. Can you imagine having to explain to a room full of white people why I couldn't hold back my real tears while experiencing the pain of racism? I can.



The Chavis family (L-R): Najah, Ryan, Lonnie, Andrew, Tyler and Lonnie Sr.

PHOTO: LONNIE CHAVIS

It didn't stop there. I was racially profiled at a restaurant in San Diego while visiting one of my young Black costars. Her Black cousins and I were accused by a young white girl working the cash register of trying to steal the few tips in her tip cup. It was a huge ordeal that almost led to police being called on us while we were with our parents—until some wonderful fan who happened to be white told them that I was a professional actor on two television series currently airing and argued that he doubted I would need to steal her few dollars. My mother never played the “he’s an actor” card. She definitely knew and argued that we were being targeted merely because we were a group of young Black children. Can you imagine someone thinking you are a thief just because of the color of your skin? I can.

At this point, I knew by experience that this nation will never take it easy on me, and that all Blackness could be perceived as a threat in America. My mother was taking me to work one morning, just blocks from the Paramount Studio lot, when she got pulled over in our new BMW. The white cop approached my mother's window and asked her, "Whose car is this?"—not about her license and registration, or even why he pulled us over. I had been taught about how to behave if ever getting stopped by the police, but nothing prepared me for this. My mom was guilty of driving while Black. She had to go to her trunk for more paperwork, and I watched the cop hold his hand on his gun as if my mom was a threat. I was scared for her; I was scared for me. I didn't know what to do in that backseat, but just to get on the phone with my dad. It became clear to me that the other three times we were pulled over in Hollywood/L.A. areas after that were because we were Black in a nice car. Can you imagine it being normal to start recording with your cellphone as soon as your mother is pulled over for a traffic stop? I can.

If you don't understand what's going on in the world, then understand this: This is what the world looks like for me. A 12-year-old Black boy. This is my America. Policies need to change, laws need to change, the police need to change, Hollywood needs to change, hearts need to change, America needs to change. Change has got to happen for unarmed Black citizens to not live in fear of being murdered. Can you imagine being me in 2020 and wondering what the future holds? I can't.

To help combat systemic racism, consider learning from or donating to these organizations:

- *Campaign Zero (joincampaignzero.org), which works to end police brutality in America through research-proven strategies.*
- *ColorofChange.org works to make the government more responsive to racial disparities.*
- *National Cares Mentoring Movement (caresmentoring.org) provides social and academic support to help Black youth succeed in college and beyond.*

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