

Explaining the Importance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to a Child

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"Mom, what made white people think it was OK to own black people? Why did they even DO that?"

This question came out of my then-6-year-old's mouth last February. At 7 o'clock in the morning. The abruptness of his question, the look on his face, hinted that he had been sitting on this question all month—that it was the very first thing that occurred to him during the onset of Black History Month, and that it was the one question that had not been addressed at all.

"Well. It's complicated."

It's complicated. That was the best short answer I had for my child, the best way to explain how past generations of families lived in a world where normal was defined by whether they were property owners, or the owned property. How a civil war was fought over the South's attempt to secede-- thus removing a large chunk of the agriculture industry-- from the U.S. economy. How what started as a few people showing compassion to the enslaved eventually gained enough energy to amend the federal constitution.

How the change to the federal constitution outlawed the right to force people into slavery, but did not force individual state constitutions to recognize those freed as equal citizens. How freeing the people did nothing to end their economic and social imprisonment, for without the right to education, to own land, to vote—upward mobility could not be obtained.

How to explain to a child that slavery would be abolished, but the civil rights and liberties of an entire subsection of the U.S. population—so determined by a genetic tendency for darker skin—would continue to suffer another 100 years of legally protected racism?

Many adults do not understand the lasting impact that generations of slavery and racism have had on the social evolution of our country, how

How to explain that a mere 50 years have passed since the enactment of The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination?

How to explain all of this to a child for whom shades of skin color mean nothing more significant than an ancestor's proximity to the equator and evolutionary deposits of melanin?

How do you explain all of this to a child?

I explain with books—like **Through My Eyes by Ruby Bridges**. I use facts and timelines and admit to my own confused understanding of continued discrimination. We celebrate the holidays that celebrate the people that fought for true equality; those that refused to accept equality could come from separation. I take them to events like the one being sponsored by NC MomsRising, Northgate Mall, and a number of area mothers' associations and nonprofit organizations. The 4th annual "Children's Birthday Party for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." will be held Monday, Jan. 20, from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. to celebrate Dr. King's life and legacy in a way children can understand. The free party will take place at Northgate Mall's Center Court, located at 1058 West Club Blvd., in Durham.



Stephanie Lormand (pictured at right) currently resides in Raleigh with her husband, two sons and an assortment of pets. She escapes housework by participating in groups like [NC Momsrising.org](http://NCMomsrising.org), and writing about whatever catches her interest at www.Scattermom.com.