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How To Talk To Kids About The National Day For Truth And Reconciliation

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BY DAVID ROBERTSON

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Canada is approaching its first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, during a year that has seen sobering revelations about the horrors of the Indian Residential School System. So I think it's time to prepare for important questions and conversations from young people.

With preparation, I believe that we can have meaningful discussions that will move us toward reconciliation, not further away. I've been left thinking: how do we find the right road, and keep walking on it?

I believe the starting point is to check in on personal knowledge of the history and impact of Indian Residential Schools. The more knowledgeable people are, the more ready we can be to effectively, and empathetically, educate youth. Not everyone will know the history, which is a roadblock to having these conversations — and a commitment to learning will help build a foundation for change. Without a grasp of the impacts of what happened, it makes it difficult or near impossible to teach a child about it.

If a kid asks, "Why do we have to wear orange shirts at school?" it's my belief that adults should be able to not only explain the reason why (that Phyllis Webstad had her clothing taken away, along with a new shirt her grandmother bought for her), but be able to connect that story to identity, assimilation and colonialism.

I understand it isn't any small task — we all have a lot to learn — and that's OK. If you're my age, Indian Residential Schools were never taught. How were you supposed to know? I went to school down the street from a former Indian Residential School and had no idea. But in 2021, that can't be an excuse anymore. There are more resources available than ever before that make it easier to stay informed. Once we inform ourselves, we can inform others.

"I went to school down the street from a former Indian Residential School and had no idea."

Carly Krug didn't learn about Indian Residential Schools when she was a child, but her kids will grow up knowing what happened and its impact.

Because I know it's not always easy to learn something new, here are a few things that have helped me along the way.

When you talk to a child, whether it's your kid or a student, make sure that you use language they can understand. It helps them, in turn, understand and avoids traumatizing them. This isn't to say that you should talk down to them, but rather, speak at their level. For a kindergartener, don't tell them that children were abused. Instead, say something like: "At many of the schools, the staff could be mean to the kids." A five-year-old doesn't need to be introduced to the reality of abuse, but they get what being mean is, and it's not too much for them to hear it.

That leads into another important point. Teaching kids requires thinking about levels of readiness. Consider what's age-appropriate based on where youth are on their learning journey. If a student has been educated about Indian Residential Schools since elementary school, by the time they're in high school, it's the right time to have those harder conversations. Most are mature enough, and in many cases a solid foundation has been built.

Be Precise, Use Proper Terminology

Note that in this article, I've referred to these institutions as Indian Residential Schools, not residential schools. Keeping in mind age appropriateness, acknowledge that what happened to Indigenous people was genocide. It wasn't a "horrible mistake." It wasn't "cultural genocide." It was genocide. Don't shy away from that truth, because it's indisputable. While we're at it, I believe we need to stop saying that Indian Residential Schools were a "black mark" on Canadian history. They are a huge part of Canadian history that affects everybody. I see no value in "othering" Indian Residential Schools. And really, Indian Residential Schools are not a thing of the past when so many Indigenous people, families and communities are still dealing with the trauma they caused.

They aren't yesterday, they are today.

What about what happened in 2021? Something I've noticed is that the unmarked graves of Indigenous children have continually been referred to as discoveries. But they aren't discoveries at all. Indigenous people have been talking about these unmarked graves, about burial sites at Indian Residential Schools, for a long time. Years ago, my father used to talk about, when passing through Brandon, Man., Indigenous children buried under what is now a campground. And the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada devoted a section on missing children and unmarked graves. The reality is, many people weren't listening to us, and ignoring something doesn't mean it's not there. It means someone isn't looking.

David Robertson wrote *When We Were Alone*, which is a children's book about Indian Residential Schools — find that title and more in this list of 10 Indigenous books for kids.

Remember: heavy lifting doesn't need to be a solo exercise. Yes, there's work to do to learn so that others can learn from you, but there is a wealth of literature on Indian Residential Schools by Indigenous writers.

Give kids books. Or read those books with them, and create opportunities to have pre- and post-conversations to decompress and break down the content. I think we need to take to heart that there is no reconciliation without truth, and that truth comes from story. Earlier this year, I put together a list of books about Indian Residential Schools for all ages, and it's a good place to start.

Your Role In Reconciliation

So, let's say you've studied. You understand the history, you understand its impacts and you and your kid have had some important dialogue. You've talked about it together, and you've answered some tough questions because you were ready for it. Now what? Well, if Indian Residential Schools are Canadian history, that means we all have a role in this thing called reconciliation, and we need to be active about it, not passive.

Passive to me would be doing some introductory reading, and then retiring the material. But I don't believe it's enough to learn or teach — after reading about the horrors, I should think there would be a desire to take action. We all have a part to play. The world won't be changed all at once — reconciliation is a long-term process — but each step means something.

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Parents can ensure their children participate in school activities if they are able, and that can be as simple as wearing an orange shirt, purchased from an Indigenous artist or organization.

There are plenty of fundraising opportunities for Indigenous communities that need support. A personal favourite of mine is the Indian Residential School Survivors Society. In the summer, my family and I were headed up to the legislature for a gathering to honour survivors, and those who did not survive. On the way there, we stopped at a lemonade stand where a non-Indigenous girl was raising money for Indian Residential School survivors. I walked away with a full heart, meeting a kid like that. And you know what? I think we're all capable of doing something like that — it's just figuring out what we can do, and doing it.

Finally, this is a time to step up. Speak up and stand with Indigenous people. Go to protests. Go to gatherings. Involve kids. And it shouldn't need to be said, but: do not tolerate racism and hate, because there's still a lot of that going around. Respond to ignorance, but do so with kindness and patience, because a lot of people grew up without learning about Indian Residential Schools, and they might just not know.

So tell them.

DAVID ROBERTSON

Read more from David here.

David A. Robertson (he, him, his) is an award-winning writer. His books include *When We Were Alone* (Governor General's Literary Award), *Will I See?* (Manuela Dias Book Design and Illustration Award), *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story* (listed *In The Margins*), and the YA trilogy *The Reckoner* (Michael Van Rooy Award for Genre Fiction, McNally Robinson Best Book for Young People). David educates as well as entertains through his writings about Indigenous Peoples in Canada, reflecting their cultures, histories, communities, as well as illuminating many contemporary issues. David is a member of Norway House Cree Nation. He lives in Winnipeg with his wife and five children.