

Guidelines for Being a Strong White Ally

by Paul Kivel

What does an ally do? Being allies to people of color in the struggle to end racism is one of the most important things white people can do. There is no one correct way to be an ally. Each of us is different. We have different relationships to social organizations, political processes, and economic structures. We are more or less powerful because of such factors as our gender, class, work situation, family, and community participation. Being an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create, and decide what needs to be done.

Times change and circumstances vary. What is a priority today may not be one tomorrow. What is effective or strategic right now may not be next year. We need to be thinking with others and noticing what is going on around us so we will know how to put our attention, energy, time, and money toward strategic priorities in the struggle to end racism and other injustices.

Here are some general guidelines compiled from people at workshops.

- **Assume racism is everywhere, every day.**

One of the privileges of being white is not having to see or deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present. Notice code words for race, and the implications of the policies, patterns, and comments that are being expressed.

- **Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power.**

Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of color and consolidating power and privilege for white people.

- **Notice how racism is denied, minimized, and justified.**

- **Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism.**

Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.

- **Understand the connections between**

racism, economic issues, sexism, and other forms of injustice.

- **Take a stand against injustice.**

Take risks. It is scary, difficult, and may bring up many feelings, but ultimately it is the only healthy and human thing to do. Intervene in situations where racism is being passed on.

- **Be strategic.**

Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Attack the source of power.

- **Don't confuse a battle with the war.**

Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.

- **Don't call names or be personally abusive.**

Since power is often defined as power over others—the ability to abuse or control people—it is easy to become abusive ourselves. However, we usually end up abusing people who have less power than we do. Attacking people doesn't address the systemic nature of racism and inequality.

- **Support the leadership of people of color.**

Do this consistently, but not uncritically.

- **Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice.**

We have a long history of white people who have fought for racial justice. Their stories can inspire and sustain you.

- **Don't do it alone.**

You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks, work with already established groups.

- **Talk with your children and other young people about racism.**

Paul Kivel is an educator, activist, and writer on issues of violence prevention and social justice. He is the author of Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice (New Society Publishers, 2002). You can contact him or access his work and other resources at www.paulkivel.com.