

Trainer's Guide

for Transracial Adoption

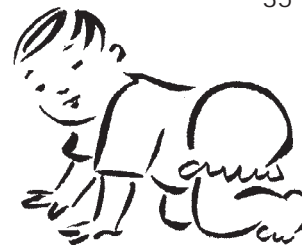
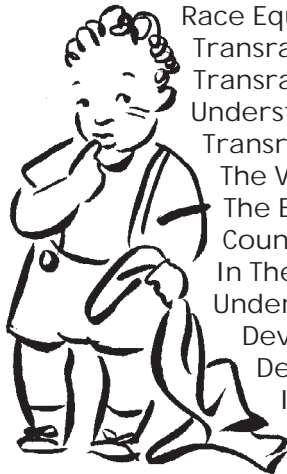


Handouts for Training Curriculum



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Adoption is a response to a life crisis.

It is a turning point, separating everything that comes before from what happens after. A decision that forces us to confront the most basic goals of life, it fosters change and growth for all who are touched by it.

Race matters.

When parents are raising a child of a race different from their own, the parents' lack of experience with the race of the child's birth heritage creates challenges for all members of the family.

Adoptive families have the desire and capacity to help themselves.

Asking for help is not an expression of weakness or defeat, but a show of strength, even though you may not be feeling particularly strong at the moment. The alternative, to become passive and not to reach out to find a useful action, is a response that will not serve your family. Our hope for this book is to support your positive desire to stretch as far as you can for your family.

Transracial adoption issues are not easy or comfortable subjects to discuss.

Support from well-meaning friends and family is often not enough. This book exists to serve the special needs of adoptive parents of children of color by providing tools to explore the issues and consider suggestions toward resolution. Breaking through the isolation and discovering how others handle similar situations can be a great relief.

Principles of Transracial Adoption



- ✓ **Transracial adoption is an issue, not a problem.**
A problem may be unsolvable — at the least, perplexing and difficult. An issue, on the other hand, is a starting point: a matter that results from a cause, can be anticipated, has no blame attached and can provoke growth and expansion to new consciousness.

- ✓ **Transracial adoption is more complex than same-race adoption.**

- ✓ **Visible differences between parents and children increase challenges to acceptance as a family unit.**

- ✓ **Normal developmental stages for transracial adoptive families are different from those of same-race adoptive families — but they are still “normal.”**

- ✓ **Issues regarding racial or ethnic awareness and development of positive racial identity must be addressed.**



You Don't Always Get What You Want

"I wanted their hair. Dudes at school hid spit balls in my Afro mop and laughed."

— *David French*

"Only black folk I knew as a kid were in TV sit-coms."

— *Roxie Agur*

"When my family went for a drive, we'd lock the doors when we drove through black neighborhoods."

— *Jenn Salter-Pierce*



"Family, friends... sometimes even I didn't see what was coming down.

So when a white person says to me, 'it doesn't matter if they're black, white, brown or green...' or 'there's only one race, the human race,' a shudder goes down my spine. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey...don't matter. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, Brown v. Board of Education, the March on Washington...don't matter. The Jubilee Singers, the Harlem Renaissance, Motown... don't matter. Black people were not enslaved, did not resist, escape, campaign and lose our lives because we were 'green.' Yet these are the arguments that many 'lay' people use to justify transracial adoption. Those two sentences erase a history of oppression and survival against enormous odds, as well as a legacy of courageous resistance and struggle. They also set us up to fail. As we grow into our teens, adopted children discover that being 'human' is simply not enough."

— *Julia Sudbury-Oparah*

"As I was growing up, countless classmates told me, 'You don't act Black.' I am sick to think now that I took it as a compliment.

My parents told me I was Ethiopian, Mexican, black and white. They saw racial divisions as dangerous. If we ignored race, they hoped, we might all live happily as one. But when I was a child, my life wasn't 'colorless.' it was white. And colorblindness is a luxury young black children can't afford. Love does not prepare an African American child for the society we live in. And love does not replace the importance of knowing your own ethnicity and culture. Today, I say I am African American."

— *Rachel Nordlinger*



For children adopted across racial lines, race and adoption often become inextricably connected. Racial differences may serve as markers for other issues of “not belonging.”

Because race is so obvious a marker of difference between members of a family created through transracial adoption, it is likely that the child finds race the most powerful reminder of his or her unique status within the family and of the lack of genetic connection to the adoptive parents. Many adopted adults have told us that they have never been able to think about adoption as an issue separate from race.

children teach them about their unfolding sense of adoption and race. Part of our general bias against kids is that we assume we know what they mean without really listening to them. We keep our own mouths so busy that we fail to hear what’s coming from theirs. But in the end, the child’s perception is all that really matters.

**The goal is a child who can say:
“I’m glad you are my parent because you understand how I feel.”**



This does not mean that transracially adopted kids do not have issues around abandonment, loss, risk structure and identity, like other adopted kids — it simply means that racial concerns often shape the playing field for those issues. For children of color with white parents, abandonment may look like separation from other people of color; loss may seem most prominently the loss of racial or ethnic culture; identity questions may always be focused on racial or ethnic identity. Parents need to let their



A Transracially-Adopted Child's Bill of Rights

By Liza Steinberg Triggs (Pact Press, Fall 1996)



Every child is entitled to love and full membership in her family.

Every child is entitled to have his culture embraced and valued.

Every child is entitled to parents who know that this is a race-conscious society.

Every child is entitled to parents who know that she will experience life differently than they do.

Every child is entitled to parents who are not looking to “save” him or to improve the world.

Every child is entitled to parents who know that being in a family doesn't depend on “matching.”

Every child is entitled to parents who know that transracial adoption changes the family forever.

Every child is entitled to be accepted by extended family members.

Every child is entitled to parents who know that, if they are white, they benefit from racism.

Every child is entitled to parents who know that they can't transmit the child's birth culture if it is not their own.

Every child is entitled to have items at home that are made for and by people of his race.

Every child is entitled to opportunities to make friends with people of her race or ethnicity.

Every child is entitled to daily opportunities of positive experiences with his birth culture.

Every child is entitled to build racial pride within her own home, school, and neighborhood.

Every child is entitled to have many opportunities to connect with adults of the child's race.

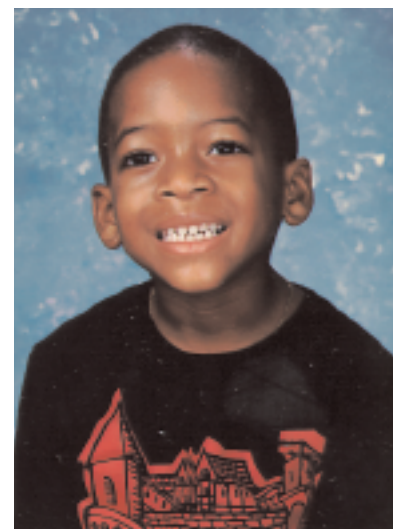
Every child is entitled to parents who accept, understand and empathize with her culture.

Every child is entitled to learn survival, problem-solving, and coping skills in a context of racial pride.

Every child is entitled to take pride in the development of a dual identity and a multicultural/multiracial perspective on life.

✓ **Every child is entitled to find his multiculturalism to be an asset and to conclude,**

“I've got the best of both worlds.”



Transracial Adoptive Parent's Wish List



It would be so nice if...

Everybody didn't think they were experts on my family;

Nobody ever wondered whether I was the best parent for my child;

Nobody ever wondered whether I was a good-enough parent to my child;

Nobody ever asked at the playground, the emergency room, or the barber shop where my child's parents were when I was right there;

I could protect my child from all pain;

My extended family supported my decision to adopt across racial lines 100%!;

I was able to see beyond my experience and anticipate every time racial issues would affect my child;

Nobody in the grocery store checkout line ever asked if my child belonged to me;

I was always effective in building bridges to my child's culture;

I had more energy and was able to go the extra mile every time to connect my child to her culture without sometimes making choices that were easier for me;

I could give my child my white privilege;

I could participate with my child in aspects of his birth culture without my very presence making the point that he is different;

It were easier and more natural for me to seek out friends of my child's birth culture;

I didn't feel that outsiders because of their attitudes about race, judged most things I did;

Nobody ever questions whether we were their "real" parents or they our "real" children;

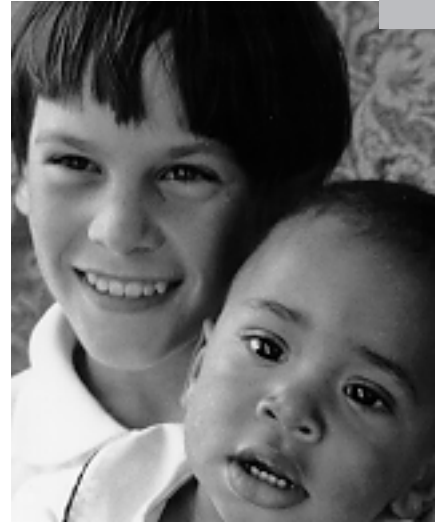
We always "got" it before it happened, anticipated every hurt or affront and were somehow able to protect our children from pain while still giving them the opportunity to become deep and incredible human beings with full capacity to love, care and be happy;

Everybody could be viewed and valued for who they are on the inside not just the outside.



TRY THIS

Understanding Identity



How do you see yourself? How do you see your child?

Objective: To look at the multiple factors that shape identity.

Directions: Take 60 seconds to complete each sentence, using as many descriptive words as you can. For children who are old enough, consider asking them to complete these sentences as well, substituting the word “parents” for “child” as needed.

My parents say I am...

My peers say I am...

My community says I am...

(I know this by the faces and voices of neighbors, service providers, professionals, etc.)

The media says I am...

I am missing altogether from...

I say I am...

My child is...

My child’s peers say she (he) is...

Our community tells my child that she (he) is...

The media says my child is...

My child is omitted from...

My child describes herself (himself) as...

Transracial Adoption Is Not the Issue

HOW CAN CHILDREN GAIN THEIR NEW FAMILY WITHOUT LOSING THEIR BIRTH HERITAGE?

HOW CAN ADOPTIVE PARENTS ADDRESS THEIR CHILD'S NEEDS WITHOUT APOLOGIZING FOR BEING WHITE?



The debate is getting tired.

Is transracial adoption best for kids? Do we accomplish anything by endlessly repeating this debate? Since transracial adoption is common and will continue, the more important question is how we can offer support after placement.

Issues are complex.

Transracially adopted kids have an absolute right to their own history and to honest answers, even to questions not yet asked. The issues are layers, like an onion skin. At the core are the regular everyday development issues all children experience as they grow from birth to adulthood, no matter how they joined their families. The next layer has to do with the basic issues of adoption: sensitivities to loss, attachment, intimacy, risk-taking, etc. (including honesty, including love, including good-enough parents who are responsive to their needs). On top of all of that, in addition to all of that, is the question of growing up feeling comfortable within one's racial and cultural identity of origin. Many adults who grew up with parents of races different from their own often say, "Don't take my race and culture from me. I want to feel proud to be who and what I am." The issue is not transracial adoption but rather the loss of the race and culture that is core to the basic identity of the child of color. Though it is a challenge that parents have probably not faced before, they can provide means for their child to embrace and feel confident in the racial identity that is a birth right. This will require race-conscious parents who can find the courage to change their own lifestyle in order to place their child's identity needs over their own discomforts or fears.



1—2—3—Stretch

When the culture into which a child was born has no ongoing presence or priority in that child's family, it is a loss of major proportion, yet it is a loss that can be addressed. When parents make the commitment to stretch their environment, values and circle of friends to balance family life, so that their child's heritage commands as much space as the parents', step one will begin. If they can connect their child to his or her heritage without apologizing for being white and without keeping the child separated in any way from the traditions within the family, step two will start. Taking action is step three.

Everyday life will tell our children, over and over, that their family is “different.” For them, it will be a common experience to be confronted with challenges, direct or indirect, explicit or implied, to the authenticity of our families. Ours don’t look like other families; we have uncommon variety in our skin colors, hair types, facial characteristics. And the children don’t share a certain family nose; they don’t have the experience (so often annoying to children born into a family), of being met at family reunions by the exclamations of distant relatives who joyously declare, “Oh my, you look just like your mother did when she was your age!”

And so our children’s experience largely lacks many of the ordinary affirmations of belonging. At the same time, their lives are filled with lots of occasions when family difference evokes the strongest notice. When you pick your child up from school, there’s the familiar surprised remark: “What? She’s your mom? But she’s white!” At the park, while you sit tucked next to your toddler, digging in the sand, a friendly stranger asks, “Which child’s yours?”

But we are family, nonetheless. Just as we want to help our kids develop tools to enable their acceptance by their racial group, we also should remember the tools that help demonstrate and

In our family we have a silly code we use when we deal with something stressful in public:
“Because every culture loves giraffes.”
Don’t ask what it means; you wouldn’t understand — and that’s the point!

strengthen our acknowledgement within the family of one another as family. We must act like family, with our own unique and exclusive family ways of doing things. If we pay a little attention, we can discover, identify, create or develop unique acts that reveal and affirm our belonging to one another. These family rituals are the bridge by which children can connect to the family in a way no outsider can do.

Don’t be thrown off balance by the word “ritual.” For some people, ritual has to do with religious practice. That’s not what we mean (though participation in religious activities can certainly be one of your family rituals). We’re talking about the stuff you do that is, or can be, woven into the fabric of your everyday lives. The type of activity doesn’t matter — whether it’s that you all roll your eyes together when Dad goes on his “silly” kick; or that every child participates in making a shared present at the holidays,

despite their groaning, or that you have your own special ways of waving goodbye — just make sure you are doing things that suit you, that are unique to your family, that allow for significant interaction among family members, and that your children come to understand are unique to your family, shared by none other.



“While at college, I had to choose whether to ‘be black’ or not.”

—Jennifer Robbins



“Before I was adopted, I was separated from two families—my birth mother’s and my birth father’s. I was also separated from my culture and my race. These losses have been huge. People interpret honest talk about them to mean that I wish I weren’t a part of my family. OR that I am not connected. OR maybe even that my mom and dad did something wrong by adopting me. OR that I am not grateful. But you know what, I am not ‘grateful’ that I had to be adopted. I don’t feel ‘wonderfully lucky’ that I was raised in a culture different from the one I was born into. What I do feel is that I love my mom and dad very much. I do feel totally connected to them. **I wouldn’t trade my family for any family in the world—and still I know what I have lost.”**

—Liza Steinberg Triggs

“Meeting with other people who were adopted transracially, it seemed we had all experienced a profound sense of loss. Would we have preferred to have been lost in the foster-care system? No. Would we rather have been adopted by white parents than not have been adopted at all? Yes. Would we want other children to suffer as we did when our lack of identity hit us on the head? No.”

—Rachel Nordlinger



“We need to address the structural reasons for the large numbers of Black children who are available for adoption, to look with honest eyes at the ongoing decimation of Black communities and the impoverishment of Black single mothers. We need to question a system which makes adoption an alternative to poverty. Anyone truly committed to the best interests of Black children should be campaigning for welfare rights, working to stop the incarceration of growing numbers of mothers and demanding funding for organizations that help Black families stay together. The solution is not for adoptive children to be counseled out of their anger, but for adoptive parents to be as angry and as passionate about racism and oppression as their children are.”

—Julia Sudbury-Oparah

Your
child
is
having
a
different
experience
in
the
world
than
you
are.



The super powers of good parents. Most of us grew up accepting certain myths implying that good parents have the wisdom and the will to take care of ALL of their child's needs. So what happens when we find out we can't?

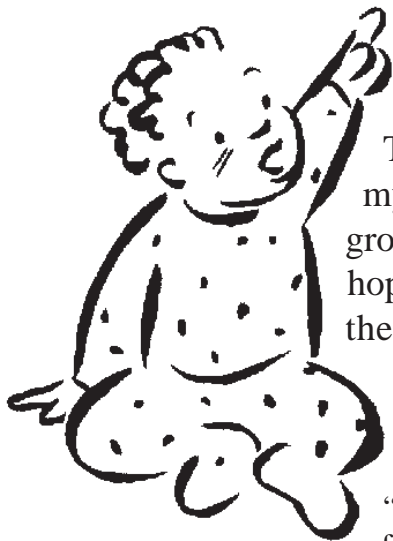
You are the expert on your child. Even though you and your child are different races, your child needs to belong to your family in every way possible. You must share every aspect of your heritage as unquestioningly as you would with any child you'd given birth to. Your child's primary need is to belong to you. Your child's other primary need is to belong to his or her birth culture.

Culture is what you live. The foremost challenge you face as an adoptive parent is that you will not be able to provide directly for all of your child's essential needs. No matter how hard you try or how much you want to, you cannot provide personally first-hand experience of belonging to his or her culture. Culture is not something you learn about in books or other second-hand resources; culture is something you live. No matter how wise you become about matters of a race not your own, you will always be acting beyond your own intuition and experience.

Be a bridge. Your child will need to belong to groups to which you cannot. Don't feel discouraged by his or her participation. The connection links that you have forged are the keys that will make his belonging possible.

“My name is Roxanne and this is the story of my adoption experience: not so sweet, but I survived, which is basically the point of my telling it. For anyone who is in fear of the unforeseen monsters that may be lurking around the corners of adoption: yes, as with anything, there are monsters to be conquered and there is that potential that they could gobble us up, which makes our actions so much more important. But please for a moment consider that as you are reading this, there is a child who is battling very real monsters alone. And imagine that when you make the commitment to take up arms, side by side with the child,

how many unnecessary scars you can, as a family, prevent. That said, I offer you my story, for you to grow and learn from, I hope, which I believe is the reason for our storytelling since time began.”



“Wondering about oneself and one’s identity, trying to determine who one is and will become, is a natural part of the transition from child to teenager to adult. Adolescence is, of course, often a difficult time for all children, adopted or not. But when you add to that the complicating fact of having been born in another country, of not resembling your parents or other members of your family or community, it’s that much harder to find out ‘who you are’ and ‘where you belong.’ All of this can sometimes seem overwhelming.”

—Susan Soon-Keum Cox

“A priest friend of mine once told me of his jarring experience when visiting a home for emotionally-disturbed adolescents. The priest walked into the home and heard a young man singing the Irish ballad, ‘Danny Boy.’ While singing, the young man had his back to the priest. When the song was finished, the priest went and tapped the young man on the shoulder, thanking him for such a beautiful rendition. The young man quickly turned, revealing an Asian face. The priest instinctively laughed: ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I thought you were Irish.’ The boy’s eyes filled with tears and he angrily responded: ‘I am Irish; my name is Michael O’Brien.’ Insanity and hell are the dangers we court when we will not permit the truth to be acknowledged.”

— Father Tom Brosnan

Understanding Cultural Competence

Objective: to demonstrate the steps in the development of competence.

There are two necessary dimensions to building new skills: self-awareness and competence. We can never be truly unconsciously competent regarding matters not “native” to our experience. Growth of awareness never ends, expanding as we realize anew what we do not know.

Can you eat comfortably with chopsticks? If you are like many non-Asian people, the first time you saw people eating with chopsticks you thought it looked easy.

Unconscious Incompetence (UI) is where we begin when we are learning new skills, because we do not even understand what it is we do not know. When we become aware of our relative incompetence (for example, when we discover that we cannot bring food to our mouths with chopsticks), we move to the stage of **Conscious Incompetence (CI)**. Now we know how much we don't know and can begin to increase our skill base knowledge in order to reach a level of **Conscious Competence (CC)**. If and when awareness and skill move from thoughtful effort to second-nature (which rarely happens with non-natives), we begin to practice **Unconscious Competence (UC)**.

Consider the following examples concerning race awareness. Place them on the four degrees of the competence scale in terms of the degree of self-awareness and competence being reflected by the speaker. Why did you choose this degree? We have given you our thoughts about the answers for comparison.

1. “I believe that we are all the same; race really doesn't matter at all. We are not worried about adopting across racial lines. We don't want people of our child's race to disapprove, but the truth is we don't care. Race doesn't matter to us. We believe that all people are really the same.”

UI—The speaker has no awareness of how race matters. People of color almost never claim that race doesn't matter.

2. “We live in the wrong neighborhood for our son (too white), but we don't want to move to the ghetto”

CI—The speaker is aware son should not be isolated from his racial group but is unaware of the wide range of lifestyles among people of color and assumes that to live among people of their son's heritage they must live in the ghetto.

3. “We went to a Kwanzaa ceremony we read about in the newspaper and we were asked to leave. Everyone there was black. It was awful!”

CI—The speaker is aware that the family could observe Kwanzaa as a way of connecting their African American child with their heritage but has not made any personal contacts to ask whether a transracial family would be welcome or unwelcome at the particular event they chose to attend.

4. “My Latino child looks Asian.”

UI—The speaker is aware the child appears non-white, but is unaware of the wide range of characteristics among Latinos. Latino or Hispanic is not a racial but an ethnic or cultural category. There are Latinos of African, Caucasian, Native (Indigenous) and Asian descent.

5. “Everyone says my biracial child looks white or Latino.”

UI—“Everyone” likely includes only white people. The statement is made from an exclusively white perspective. Because this is not mentioned by the speaker, it seems unlikely he or she is aware that people of color have a different reaction than white people in identifying the same child.

6. “I asked a Chinese friend if we could go the Almond Blossom Festival with her family.”

CC—Speaker is conscious of the need to connect to people of child's race and is building relationships in a proactive way that fosters a respectful and appropriate participation in cultural events and activities. The use of cultural guides can be a critical way to promote connection for transracial families.

7. “I hosted a get-together and felt surprised when a guest pointed out how diverse my group of friends is.”

UC—This speaker has reached a stage where diversity is so natural that it can be taken for granted.

Development of Racial Identity

In his landmark book *Shades of Black* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), William Cross describes several predictable stages in the development of Black identity, stages we believe to be similar to the stages of the development of identity for most Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans living in a white-dominated society. There is no particular age range attached to each stage and no expectation that all individuals will move through all stages, though the process typically spans the period from preadolescence to middle adulthood. Building racial identity is an ongoing process that continues over each person's lifespan. Some may stay at a particular stage without change, depending on temperament and life experiences. Cross suggests that persons traverse the following stages in developing racial identity:

I'm a person of color, but who cares? (Pre-encounter)

I may have no education about my cultural history, but I am sensitive to discrimination. I believe that white is best, so I experience "spotlight anxiety," or discomfort about being too different from white as the norm. My emphasis is on learning to fit into white culture.

Then along comes racism, right between my eyes. (Encounter)

An unexpected event occurs that catches me off-guard and forces me to acknowledge racism. It may be a personal event or something that happens in the larger community, such as the conflict in Watts between Koreans and Blacks, or the passage of laws to limit or deny services to my group. The encounter phase has two steps: experiencing an event, and then being "turned around" by it. I begin to think about what it means to be a member of a group assaulted by racism. I feel like a yo-yo swinging between high and low self-esteem. Very personal questions come up which bring on guilt, anger and anxiety. I'm so emotional that it gives me energy to get on to the next stage.

Riding the identity roller coaster (Immersion/Emerging)

Now, I kick out my old white-is-right view and decide to change. I don't really know how, only that change is needed. There is nothing subtle about this stage. I surround myself with symbols of my culture and seek out opportunities to learn from same-race peers. White people are boring. I don't have any interest in them. I yearn to learn about me and about where I've come from. My focus is on self-discovery. Confrontation, bluntness, and an either/or point of view are all I have time for. I just don't understand other people of color who don't live Black or Latino or Asian or Native "enough." Sometimes I think, "Whites are devils," and I want to drop

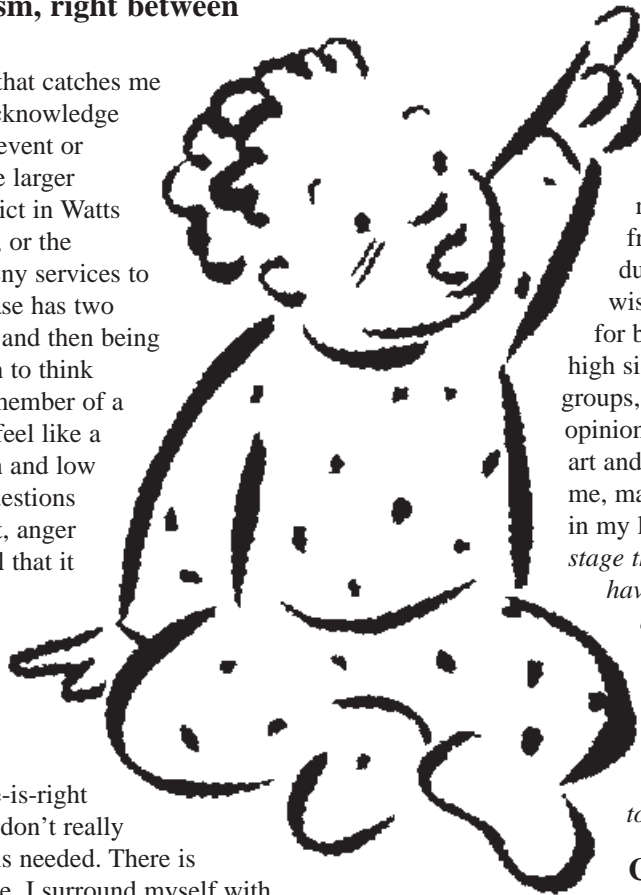
out of the process of getting along with them. Sometimes I get excited about the complex subtleties of racial identity. *The last possibility opens the door to stage four.*

Proud to be me/Inner peace/Fully grown. (Internalization)

Ah-ha! I feel fine, but it's hard to describe why, because it sounds phony—too good to be true. Finding inner peace as a person of color in a society that habitually undervalues my personhood is something huge, a transformation as powerful as the heat of the sun at midday. Dignity and deep relief arrive. A flood of energy to embrace my own heritage at the roots and the security to interact with others from different groups have come together during this stage, because the conflict over wishing to be what I am not or blaming myself for being the target has been resolved. Race has high significance in my life every day. I join new groups, change my style of dress, what I read, my opinions about the role of my group in history. The art and music I respond to, the causes that activate me, maybe even my name. Much that is important in my life changes. *According to Cross, by this stage the following five positive defensive functions have been developed: 1) awareness that racism exists; 2) anticipation of being targeted; 3) well-developed defenses to use when confronted with racism; 4) awareness that the problem is in the circumstances and does not result from the individual self; 5) spiritual orientation that prevents the need to demonize whites.*

Commitment.

In this final stage, I will become able to look beyond myself to develop an ongoing interest in the well-being of my racial community. Great examples of leaders as prominent as Dr. Martin Luther King or as unrecognized as my next-door neighbor model an ability to make a commitment beyond personal needs and maintain humility after success. I hope that I can follow.



Development of White Identity

In our race-conscious society, where white people receive benefits just for being white, many live out their lives without thinking about their own racial or ethnic identity at all. When a white identity develops, seven stages have been outlined.

Being white doesn't count. (Preconscious)

How many times in your life have you been asked to answer the question, Who am I? In response, white people who spend their lives in predominantly white environments commonly come up with a list something like this: mother, wife, partner, sister, worker, friend, liberal, middle class, Presbyterian, animal-lover, runner, dreamer, reader, and so on. Being white doesn't count. I tend not to note the qualities that make me part of the majority. In the preconscious stage of white identity development, I see being white as the norm. I notice race only when people are *not* white.

Uh-oh. You mean we're the bad guys? (Contact)

This stage brings an awareness of white privilege—the invisible advantages held by white people—including me—in life, because our society was designed with our needs in mind. This awareness begins when I have significant contact with a person of color and can't miss seeing how racism operates. I make a close friend or fall in love or watch Rodney King being beaten to a pulp on TV. I feel uncomfortable, guilty, shamed and angry.

I am responsible for educating. (Disintegration)

At this stage, the blinders have been removed. I begin to see racism everywhere. I get it! I feel outraged and committed to helping other white people get it. I join the Race Police, finding most other white people guilty. "They" are the enemy, I think to myself. My most important daily task, it seems, is to object to racist jokes, exclusions, injustices and institutional policies, objections I usually express in a shrill manner entirely lacking in charm. People I have known all my life tend to run when they see me coming. They wish I would stop it already. The peer pressure mounts, asking me to collude, to shut up and not to notice racism. But it's too late and I can never go back.

I, too, am in the group. (Reintegration)

Once you notice the elephant in the living room, it's hard to ignore it. When the mist clears, I come to realize that it's not enough to point out what others are doing wrong. I understand that people of color do

not perceive me as exempt from my group. I am white; therefore I am under suspicion. This is intense. Why don't they understand that I am not like the rest of "them"? I am beginning to hear that people of color consider my new truths to be old hat, mundane, even obvious. My belief in my own accomplishments is threatened. I start to get angered by the frustration, falling back on blaming the victims: people of color.

Now what do I do? (Pseudo Independence)

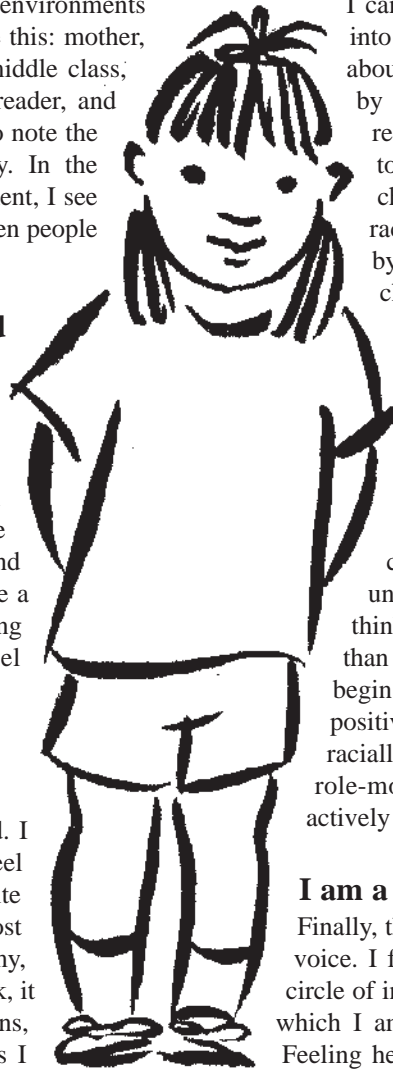
I can't get through the living room without bumping into the elephant, but I still don't know what to do about it. I understand white privilege and am shamed by it, but feel overwhelmed at the thought of being responsible for moving that elephant. How did I get to be so white? Why didn't I notice? How can I change all that I am? At this point, I may become a racial wannabe, trying to "pass" as a person of color by taking on some of what I perceive as their cultural characteristics. But that usually doesn't work, and I move cautiously toward a next step.

Finding white pride. (Immersion/Emerging)

The next step is to recognize the need to find positive racial identity for myself, reflecting a developing desire to embrace my own racial and cultural heritage as a source of pride rather than an unconscious element in my life. I seek new ways to think about whiteness, ways that offer options other than either unconscious privilege or the bad-guy role. I begin to seek out white people who have come to a positive understanding of what it is to be white and racially conscious. I seek out support from other white role-models, people who have fought injustice and actively worked against racism.

I am a work in progress. (Autonomy)

Finally, the elephant begins to respond to the sounds of my voice. I feel good about bringing up race within my own circle of influence, because I can begin to see some ways in which I am changing and my changes are affecting lives. Feeling heard releases energy and creates increased zest, a sense of empowerment, greater knowledge, an increased sense of self-worth, and a desire for more connections. I define ways in which I can actively work to interrupt racism while I also understand that there is much more to learn. My goals are to continue to learn more and to identify my personal areas of influence. I often apologize in advance just in case my words or actions may not be sufficiently sensitive to the experiences of people of color. But I genuinely hope to learn from my mistakes. As a result, people of color often view me as an ally.





“In affirmative action, designated individuals monitor the operations of institutions and so can notice (and correct) injustices in the absence of any complaint. This monitoring role is crucial because an accumulation of studies have shown that it is very difficult to detect discrimination on a case-by-case basis, even when the case involves the self.”

— Fay Crosby,

Understanding Affirmative Action

What Is Institutionalized Racism?

Institutionalized racism is subtle and covert discrimination backed by power and resources. “If the young are to avoid the unnecessary burden of self-hatred,” says Charles A. DeLeon, “they will have to develop a keen faculty for identifying, fractionating out and rejecting the absurdities of the conscious as well as the unconscious white racism in American society from what is worthwhile in it.” Racism is enforced and maintained by the legal, cultural, religious, educational, economic, political, environmental and military institutions of society. Racism is more than just a personal attitude; it is the institutionalized form of that attitude.

Effects of Facing Daily Racism.

In their book *Living With Racism*, authors Feagin and Sikes (1995) suggest that modern racism must be understood as daily experience, recurring encounters with racism which have a cumulative impact greater than the sum of the events. These events affect more than one member of the community in a domino effect touching both one’s way of living and one’s understanding of life. Daily experiences of discrimination restrict social, economic and political mobility to those who are living with them.



Will Transracially Adopted Kids Be Exceptions? NO!

They will be scrutinized routinely upon entering a 7-11 convenience store.

They will likely make less money than a white child of yours will.

They will be more likely to die a violent death than a white child of yours will.

They will likely experience more unemployment, layoffs and vague depression than you did or a white child of yours will.

“In my dreams, I saw myself as being white.”

—*Chinese woman*



“I come from a family in which diversity is the norm. My only cousins are biracial: white/Japanese. There are Christians and Jews, Mormons and Buddhists, not to mention a few agnostics and atheists in my immediate family. I was raised eating borscht, with cornbread and tofu on the side. As a child growing up, I was surrounded by, and imbued with, the idea that differences are something to be celebrated and treasured. I love this about myself, my family, and who I am. I have come to see this ‘difference’ as a great advantage I have in life. There is a certain freedom in not having to worry about being the same or fitting in.”

— *Chedgszey Smith-McKeever*



“I have no boyfriends and no boy is interested in me. A lot of my girlfriends are pretty average-looking, and they all have boyfriends. They say, ‘You are so beautiful. You’re so pretty.’ And I think to myself, then why don’t any of the boys like me? I know the answer is race. But we never talk about it. It is never acknowledged. At the end of the 9th grade I started hanging out in the Mexican section of town even though my parents went ballistic. I tried to learn what Chicano people do. I didn’t really know how to dance and I don’t speak Spanish. Some of them thought I was stuck-up because of that and because I’m shy.”

— *Sophia Greenberg*



“The census form came today. I saw the dreaded instructions, the stern admonishment to check only one box. White. Japanese. Other. There is the blank space to fill in, a half inch in which to claim identity. I am Other. Hambun-Hambun, or half and half. Happa. Biologically, genetically, I’m fifty percent Japanese and fifty percent... unknown. Adopted as an infant into a Japanese American family, I have always had a heightened awareness of my ‘otherness.’”

—*Susan Ito*

White Is Right. Not.

The difficulties occur when adoptive parents think their child looks white although he or she is of color. If they make no real effort to connect the child to her birth culture, basically assuming she will “pass” for white and will never have to deal with racial issues, she will pay a big price.

The darker the berry, the sweeter the juice.

African Proverb

In our race-conscious culture, the lighter one’s skin, the larger one’s privileges. Popular music croons that “White is right,” Asians are the model minority (translate “most like white”), “If you’re brown, get down and if you’re black, step back.” Would it surprise you to know that more white prospective adoptive families feel comfortable adopting transracially when the child’s birth parents are light-skinned or biracial than when the birth parents are both dark-skinned or African American? Probably not!

Most acknowledge the racial hierarchy in our country. The darker one’s skin, the greater one’s challenges. And we would not suggest that parents reach beyond their racial comfort zone in forming their families. Humans do not thrive in environments in which essential characteristics are not accepted. No child should grow up in a family unprepared to cherish him or her.



Wouldn’t it be nice...

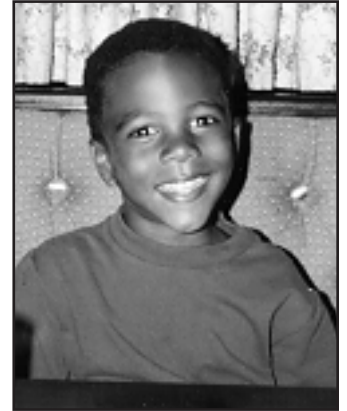
if being of color were regarded by all transracial adoptive parents as an advantage? If we truly believed having a dual racial heritage was positive, we would stop at nothing to help our children reap the advantages of their birth cultures. Our children are resilient and can survive in spite of our limitations — but don’t make the mistake of believing that your light-skinned child of color can create a secure identity by trying to “pass” as white. Parents must help their children embrace all aspects of their heritage. As white parents, we must challenge our own prejudices, rather than waiting for people of color to teach us. We were taught to stay separate from people who are different from us but we must work against that tendency and plunge into multicultural life by risking mistakes and taking responsibility for the mistakes we are sure to make.



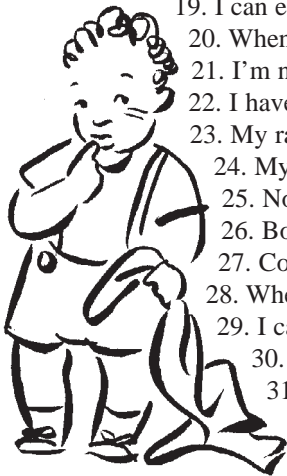
TRY THIS

Are You Affected By Racism?

Answer each question for yourself and then for your child of color. Note the differences and think about how they affect your view of the world and your self-esteem.



1. People of my race or ethnicity are positively represented in the media every day.
2. Supervisors, bosses, administrators, and people in charge are usually of my race or ethnicity.
3. I can be successful without people saying I'm a role-model for my race or ethnic group.
4. I can criticize our government without being thought of as an alien.
5. I can easily find a Santa Claus figure with skin color like mine.
6. My school gives equal presence and priority to positive representations of my race or ethnic group.
7. I can easily find most food products commonly used by people of my race or ethnic culture.
8. I feel comfortable in most groups I belong to because I am not the only one of my race or ethnic group.
9. I can find housing in a safe and affordable neighborhood if I need to.
10. Racist jokes do not usually target people of my group.
11. I can easily find beauty products made for people of my race or ethnicity.
12. None of my family members or friends has ever served time in jail or been arrested.
13. I am not accused of being "uppity" if I wear expensive clothing.
14. I'm not worried that I won't be served or asked to wait forever in a restaurant because of my race.
15. I am not pulled over when I am driving because of my race.
16. When I need help, my race doesn't work against me.
17. When I go shopping, store security doesn't follow me around.
18. I don't feel a need to take inventory of how race affects me personally because I don't feel any racism toward me.
19. I can easily find toys and books reflecting my racial heritage.
20. When I get a job, or am accepted into a college program, most people think it is based on merit, not race.
21. I'm not worried that there will be "no vacancies" at hotels or motels when a clerk sees my race.
22. I have never been discriminated against in any way based on my race.
23. My race is equally represented in reflections I see at school or at work.
24. My neighbors are not likely to be afraid of me because of my race.
25. No one expects me to have special talents or skills because of my race.
26. Boxes of crayons include colors that match my skin tones.
27. Contributions of people of my race are widely and positively acknowledged in U.S. history.
28. When I put on a self-adhesive bandage, it matches my skin color.
29. I can decide not to try without people thinking poorly of my race.
30. I can as easily find cosmetics matched to my skin color as to any other skin tone.
31. I can be in the racial majority in most of my daily activities if I choose to be.
32. I can wear sexy clothing without people thinking poorly of my race.
33. I am not likely to be targeted as a "trouble maker" because of my race.
34. I have never been asked to speak for those of my race.
35. I can easily find doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, hair stylists, etc. of my race in my community.
36. I can easily find child-care providers and schools with teachers of my race.
37. The President of the U.S. is likely to be of my race.
38. I am often viewed as being more ambitious than the people of color with whom I compete.
39. My achievements are not more often viewed as the result of luck than because of my own effort.
40. I have experience collaborating in multiracial groups.



When You Say Normal, Do You Mean White?

“I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in an invisible system conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.”

— Peggy McIntosh, *Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege*

You can't be who you're not!

Sometimes white parents become racial wannabes, making every possible effort to act as if they were the same race as their child. Not only is this crazy-making, it is a distressing message for kids: that is, one should try to assume a false identity in order to fit into the world. Transracially-adopted children have a more obvious dual identity than other adopted children: the racial or ethnic identity of their birth family and adoptive family are usually visibly different. In order to love themselves fully, these children must find a way to embrace both. Masquerading through life dishonestly is a hopeless approach. The best way to help our kids love themselves is to model what that looks like.



To heal our racist world, we tend to require that racism be somebody's fault — a white problem. But if you are white, you have to find pride in that heritage. Each of us has a rich cultural history to share with our children, no matter our race or ethnicity. Give them everything you are and be yourself so that they will grow up feeling comfortable letting loose and being themselves.

Does your personal experience get in the way? Most adoptive parents who are raising children across racial lines praise the benefits of a diverse multicultural society. We celebrate difference and have built our families on it. But when it comes to everyday life, it's natural for each of us to view the world through the lenses of our own experience. For white parents, that usually means using white experience as the standard. But don't let "normal" really mean "white."

What works at home with white parents may not work in the world with people of color.

Chinese kids growing up in Chinese families tend to feel comfortable in Chinese communities. They understand the cues and have experience with how to fit in with others and understand the meanings of other people's behavior. Asian kids growing up in white families have a certain status and are accepted within the family, but out among their peers, they have to earn love and approval. To accomplish this important task, they have to master new skills and coping mechanisms that work in the Asian community, skills their parents may be unable to teach. Developing this behavioral flexibility is no small task for children.

The best way to help is to build bridges such as significant relationships with adults of color who spend time with your family. Practice may not make your child feel totally at ease, but it will reassure him.

For Parents

Don't wait for an injury before you talk about racism.

Discrimination hurts everyone, but white parents are especially susceptible to surprise because, being less often the targets of racism, they don't anticipate it. Recognize that racism affects your child's life.

Prioritize. Fight the battles that make a difference. Model obtainable goals.

Make your commitment to fight racism clear to your child. This is especially crucial when rejection from others occurs.

Practice talking about race. This way you won't be nervous when you talk with your child.

Involve your child in a group that fosters appreciation of differences. Make sure your social life includes frequent activities with people of other races.

Racist things happen and they hurt. Prepare your child to expect teasing, comments, insults or rejection. Validate feelings that so-called "positive stereotyping" is painful and damaging.

Be a true ally. Make sure your child knows that you know she is not at fault.

Use the power of the family to brainstorm. Make a list of things to say or do when racist remarks or situations happen. Having options builds self-confidence.

Don't deny, explain away or make excuses for what your child experiences as racism. Don't say things like, "I'm sure he didn't mean it," or "I don't think she would consciously do something to hurt you," because although these statements may be true, they convey the message that you don't understand or worse yet believe them.

Validate your child's hurt. Offer comfort and share feelings. Don't teach your child to bury feelings instead of dealing with them.

Help your child externalize racist remarks. This is a critical coping skill. It can be developed through observations and modeled anger of parents.

Give yourself and thus your child permission to handle racist remarks imperfectly. Don't be ashamed. Talk about how you were surprised or unprepared. Decide what you will do differently next time. Share and processing is part of externalizing the experience.



For Children

Ask a Question.

When someone makes a racist comment, ask, "What do you mean by that?" or "Why do you ask?" These questions put responsibility back on the offender. Talking can clear up miscommunications.

Disagree.

What others say is just their opinion. You know better than they do. Tell them so.

Confront.

Don't grin and bear it. If someone hurts your feelings, say so. Say, "I don't like that," or "Stop it."

Make a joke.

Make a joke about what was said. Use the power of humor.

Whisper your responses.

A bully will have to get quiet to hear you if you whisper in response to their comment.

Withdraw.

At times, this can save your life. Don't over-use this because the world will get smaller and smaller. But stay safe!

Talk with a friend.

You can rebalance your mind and release the pain by sharing.

Use the power of family.

Brainstorm together about things to say in difficult situations. Practice staring as a family at people who stare at you.

Transformable Racism

Transformable racism involves false beliefs and assumptions that can be changed by pointing out the facts.

— *Blanche Radford Curry*

Reach out. Invite a family of a different background to spend a day with you.

Use your influence to push toward expansion of the curriculum at schools in your community to include cultural diversity, starting with preschools.

See to it that any group you are part of is racially inclusive.

Ask yourself if any group you are considering joining is anti-racist in principle.

Don't smile and let things pass. Express your opinion if racist or ethnic jokes are told, even if you are the only person in the group to do so.

Listen to people of color talk about their experiences with racism.

Talk with people of color about racism. Many white people have never even had one conversation about the issue with anyone who is not white.

Talk with white people about racism. You may feel more open about expressing fears and doubts in a homogeneous situation.

Question meritocracy. Is trying hard or believing all anyone needs to succeed? Does excellence guarantee success or rewards?

Make it a family policy to encourage open discussion about racism.

Ask more questions. If more white American boys were ending up in prison than in college, would people be talking about building more prisons?

Take risks by openly taking a stand against racism in unfriendly situations.

Take risks by openly taking a stand against quieter, unintentional comments about people of color that are racist in nature even if delivered in friendly situations.

Don't try to make things easy; work to make them real.

Support anti-racist causes.

Write letters to the media in response to racial events.

Get actively involved in groups fighting against racism.

Name racism whenever you see it.



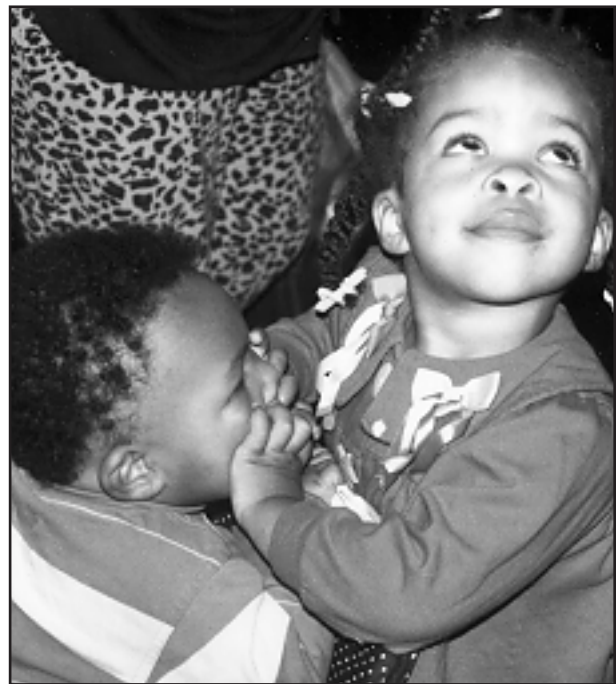
Code Words and Cover Stories

“What do you do with all those ‘supermarket strangers?’”

Code words and cover stories are intervention tools a family can create together to help children feel in control when they are experiencing invasive questions or racial/ethnic bias. A series of code words and cover stories may be developed around the kitchen table. The goal is to allow members of the family a way to communicate privately in public settings, which can be a quick device to halt the escalation of unpleasant situations while minimizing embarrassment to your child in front of peers or other adults. A child armed with a repertoire of code words known by his parents and siblings is a child who feels in control and part of a unified family team.

“Are you having a spike?”

The word “spike” is used in one family when anyone wants the others to know he is experiencing intense feelings and wants to end a conversation. Sometimes the parents use the word when they suspect that one of the children is having a difficult moment. One day, on a shopping trip to the local mall, this family ran into Mrs. Cipari, a woman they hadn’t seen for awhile who seemed to have nothing more important to do than to talk with each of the children about what they wanted to be when they grew up. She asked the oldest daughter who is Asian if she was planning to be an accountant, the youngest brother, a sturdy boy of African American and Asian heritage, if he wanted to become a golfer like Tiger Woods, and the third child, a Latina girl, if she would like to grow up and become a gardener. “Oh dear,” Dad interrupted, apologizing grandly, “I seem to be having a spike. Sorry but I just can’t stay and chat. I’ve got to finish my shopping then get out of here. Come on kids, please hurry. I’ve got to go. Say goodbye to Mrs. Cipari and we’re out of here.”



A ZERO- TOLERANCE POLICY TOWARD RACIST REMARKS OR BEHAVIOR.

MAKE SURE YOUR KIDS
KNOW THAT RACIAL SLURS
CANNOT BE IGNORED.
THERE ARE NO EXCUSES.
THEY SIMPLY CAN NEVER
BE TOLERATED.



Examples of responses to racial slurs:

Adult to Adult:

“I am not comfortable with what you just said. I’d appreciate it if you would never repeat it. Your remark is offensive because it says some people are worth less than others, which is neither true nor funny. The world has more than enough anger and pain, so how about putting a lid on contributions like that?”

Adult to Child:

“Talk like that hurts people’s feelings. I won’t let you talk that way here. What you said is not true either. I can explain more about it if you are interested.”

Child to Adult:

“What does that mean? I don’t think that is true. I thought people were supposed to treat others the way they wanted to be treated themselves.”

Child to Child:

“I don’t agree with what you just said. It hurts people’s feelings and I don’t want you to talk like that anymore. I will have to stay away from you if you are going to talk that way.”

When the journey
is challenging,
maps help us
know where we
are and how to
find our way.



We expect pilots and drivers to be able to follow maps, not forge a path en route. Children journeying through life sometimes get lost if they have to find their way alone before they are able. Maps based on other people's experiences can help them steer away from danger and find the good stuff more easily. But sometimes we are afraid to provide them with accurate maps.

Some parents think children should not be prepared for trouble because they want to protect them from the difficult knowledge that trouble lies ahead. They hope that if their child's needs are taken care of, then they might be protected from that future harm. Somehow, by not mentioning it or not acknowledging its existence maybe it won't really happen. Sounds like denial!! When, under the pretext of concern for their welfare, we keep our children helpless and dependent, we allow ourselves to appear big, powerful and protective in our own eyes and to our kids as well. Being the protector supports a parent's need to be needed. It does not serve the child's need to learn self-reliance and self-determination.

We cannot protect our children from life. We must support our children's sense of dignity and competence rather than our own need to rescue. Our children need our help to learn how to take events in stride rather than being protected from events for so long that by the time they happen we are not even there to help them handle the fallout.

Having good tools makes most jobs much easier.

I Know I Made It Happen

“I cried too much. That’s why I was adopted.”

When the youngest among us first begin to understand how things work, they imagine themselves at the center of all life. If something good happens, it is because they have been good. If something bad happens, it’s their fault. Claiming responsibility for a negative outcome can feel less threatening than admitting the scary reality that the grownup world is largely out of their control.

Children of color often decide that their skin color is the reason their birth family did not parent them. A child with medical problems or learning disabilities will often think that her birth parents couldn’t take care of her because of her special needs. Even little ones who suffer the worst forms of abuse at the hands of their parents often believe that they got hurt because they were bad children.

“I’m bad because I am different.”

Any sign of being different from other family members, — regardless of whether the difference is positive or negative — can be understood by children as “bad.” Young children believe that their parents are “good,” therefore being like parents is “good,” therefore being different from parents can be “bad.”

“All people like me are ‘bad.’”

Children who are in a safe family which is a different racial or ethnic background than theirs sometimes conclude that parents of their own race are not safe or “good.” Eventually this leads to the conclusion that all people of their race are “bad,” particularly if they have limited exposure to adults of their own race.

“Can bad things happen randomly?”

Sometimes adopted children, particularly those who have suffered difficult beginnings, conclude that bad things don’t happen to children who aren’t adopted or just anybody. The idea that bad things could happen without reason or cause is too scary to accept.



BEING
“BAD”
AND
IN
CONTROL
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“Daddy, when I grow up I want to be white just like you.”

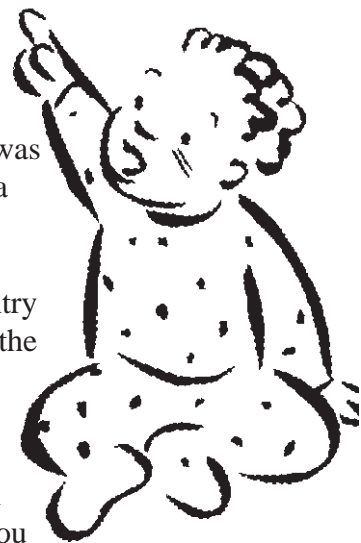
— Aaron, age 3

“I see all my students of color go through a stage where they try to reject their own racial identity. It’s what society teaches them. It doesn’t do the child any good to make him feel bad about it. Because from the child’s perspective, the perception that it’s better to be white is logically correct. When the kids look out on the school yard and all the teachers are white and all the janitors are not, they don’t need to be told which is better to be.” —3rd grade teacher



“I love to go shopping. When I was growing up, I loved it when my mother took my sister and me downtown to Marshall Fields, searching for bargains and then out to lunch in a sit-down restaurant. It was a special family ritual we all had fun doing. It makes me sad that I can’t follow the tradition with my daughter, but she dreads going into stores and would rather buy the things she needs from mail-order catalogues. She’s been followed around too many stores by suspicious clerks who don’t let her out of their sight and make her feel like a thief because she’s not white.” —Eleanor Rose

“My first-grader was confused. A girl on the playground had called, ‘Black boy, Black boy!’ to get his attention and the teacher said, ‘Stop that! You should never call someone names! Apologize right now!’ ‘Why was that name-calling?’ my son asked. ‘I am a black boy!’” —Suzanna Morgan



“It is essential that families who adopt a child from another country acknowledge, accept, and care a great deal about the heritage of the child they are adopting, not in a patronizing or condescending fashion, but in a manner that is genuine and born out of dignity and respect for the child’s birth country.... All of us who are adopted come to our families with histories behind us. That truth cannot be ignored. Instead, it is important to acknowledge that you are an adopted person forever. That isn’t good or bad; it just is. What is essential is to determine the best role of that fact in our lives.” —Susan Soon-Keum Cox

Self-Assessment

List people by names, numbers or percentages. Notice the people in your life and your child's life. What races are they? What kinds of roles do they play? Are there people you would like to model for your child?

Category	role-model? (yes or no)	African American	Asian	Caucasian	Latino	Multiracial
Work Peers Workers stationed above you Workers stationed below you Clients, customers, boards, etc.						
After work/weekends Friends People involved in activities						
Social Group Family Extended family Neighbors Family friends						
Group Functions Members of religious congregation Members of social organizations Members of other organizations						
School/Child Care Children in classroom Teachers/administration Supplementary (janitors, aids...) Nanny/baby-sitters						
Service Providers Professional (doctor, dentist...) Service (shoe repair, beautician...)						
Strangers People in locations you frequent (stores, restaurants...) Cultural events you attend						
Multi-media People/culture in books/magazines People/culture in movies/TV/video People/culture in toys/dolls People/culture in arts/crafts/decor						
Other						

Cultural Connectedness

There are many sub-groups within each racial and ethnic community. Some are easier to approach than others. Generally bicultural and assimilated sub-groups are more open to connections with transracial families.

	MONO CULTURAL	TRANSITIONAL	BICULTURAL	ASSIMILATED
CHARACTERISTICS	different from dominant culture	minority emphasis, primary identity with non-dominant culture	majority emphasis; primary identity with dominant culture	majority emphasis; primary identity with dominant culture
COMMUNITY	live in a homogeneous or segregated	live in high concentration of people of their own culture	live in dominant culture	intermarriage and integration has diluted identification with primary culture
LANGUAGE	use language of old country or dialect in everyday life	speak group's language as well as mainstream language — often more comfortable with language of group	dominant culture's language primary may not be fluent in group language	no clear understanding of or identification with cultures, language or rituals
SOCIAL CONTACTS	avoid or lack social contact with members of other groups	strong sense of interconnection with other members of the group	defense of group is important, but cultural traditions may be ignored mainstream culture is most important	may have vague nostalgic connection to cultural traditions may downplay aspects of identity
EXAMPLES	immigrants inner-city African Americans Latino migrant workers	children of immigrants living in other-ethnic neighborhoods	grandchildren of immigrants African Americans living in integrated neighborhoods	white Christians who have lived in the US for many generations some assimilated Jews
PRIMARY CONCERNS	economic survival discrimination protecting kids from the dominant culture	economic success education for kids working to have kids partially but not totally assimilated	fitting in finding comfort in increasingly mainstream identity over-emphasis of ethnic identity to solidify shaky self	maintaining position in society may perceive successes of minorities as a threat to their status

- ★ **Do your homework: know something about the cultural group prior to approaching.**
- ★ **Surround your children with evidence that you value and respect their heritage.**
- ★ **Read books.**
- ★ **Join a group on the Internet.**
- ★ **Seek a buddy family through a local organization or help-line.**
- ★ **Seek a mentor through a local university or organization.**
- ★ **Follow protocol: know and demonstrate respectful behavior based on the values of the cultural group you are approaching.**
- ★ **Be observant and take time to study, discover and, if possible, interview people who are part of the cultural group in order to understand them and their values.**
- ★ **Develop a relationship with someone trusted by the group who will be your guide.**
- ★ **Call before attending any public event and explain your interest. Find out if you and your family will be welcome at the event you want to attend.**
- ★ **In gathering information from the community, remember to give something back. Schools and non-profit organizations are always looking for volunteers.**



Feeling different makes us feel isolated from others. This is why group activities — whether social, educational or therapeutic — are so useful for adopted and foster children. In the company of others who have felt the same things, children can see that they are not the only ones.

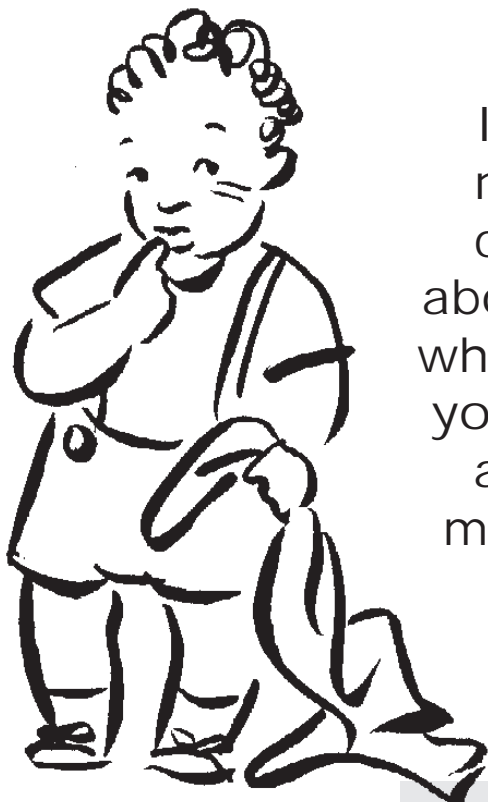
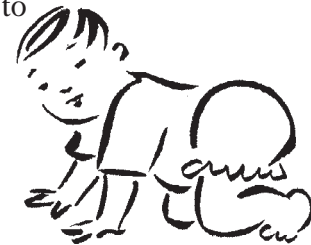


“A white mother said she would feel too uncomfortable in a situation where she might be the only white person. Her child is the only person of color all the time, but being a minority for a few hours was too much for her?”

— Beverly Daniel Tatum

Making connections with people living your adopted child’s culture of origin is not going to “solve all your child’s issues” or “be enough,” but it is a great place to start. A diverse environment makes connecting easier. Immersion is a key stage in the development of racial identity. Just as it’s hard to learn to swim without a deep-enough pool, it’s very difficult to immerse yourself in a given culture without ready and regular access to it.

If you are a multiracial family living in an area where the majority of people are white, you will need to stretch to your greatest possible capacity to find creative ways to compensate for your child’s loss of access to people living the culture of his birth. Bring him or her to experiences with those people as often as possible, no matter the distance. Consider culture camps, long vacations in communities where people of your child’s heritage live and other excursions to promote opportunities for your child to experience interactions and interpersonal relationships.



If you really cared about me, why didn't you think about moving?

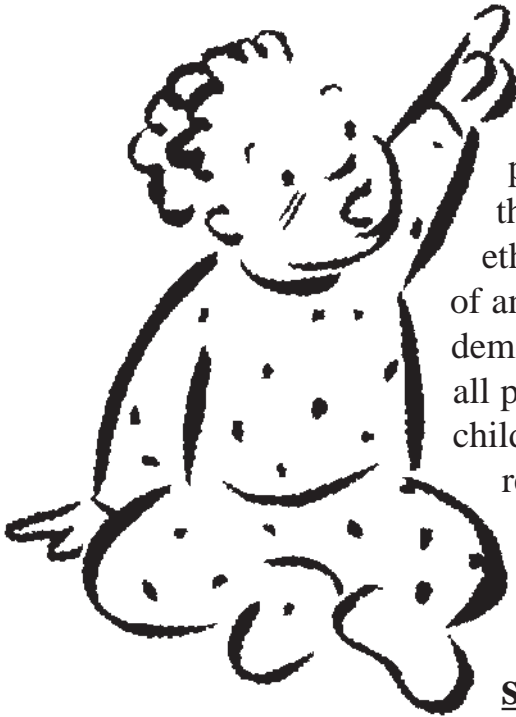
Can't Afford To...

“Yeah, yeah. You think it's so easy? What about my job or the family business? We can't afford not to have the income. What about our house? How can anyone expect us to start over?”

Can't Afford Not To...

Ask yourself whose needs are being served and in what priority. Moving is one of the most stressful of human activities for most of us. Even considering it is a big deal and you should feel good about yourself for doing so.

Birth families may be more important to transracial families than to same-race adoptive families.



Rejection of the birth family can look to transracially-adopted kids like rejection of the race of the child. Transracially-adopted children may suppose they were placed because of their race. They may think they were rejected by people of their race or ethnicity because they were adopted by people of another race. If they don't have friends who demonstrate otherwise, they may suppose that all people of their heritage abandon their children. This can then lead to an unconscious repetition of the pattern they have misperceived.

Don't minimize birth-family significance.

Adopted people have to resolve their dual family membership, whether they have ongoing contact with their birth parents or not. To minimize the role of the birth family makes the child's connection to the adoptive family depend on a lack of connection to the birth family — a recipe for disaster.

"Your real Mom didn't want you."

It's easy to acknowledge in theory that your child has birth parents. But look at the messages you are really sending. Do you speak of them as a fact of your child's life? Do you open the door to your child's questions? Who will your child go to with questions about his or her birth parents? Make sure it is you.

Create opportunities for dialogue.

"Gee, you are so smart, I'll bet you might have inherited that from your birth mother." If birth parents are not spoken of openly, children will assume they shouldn't be spoken of at all.



Why Do Birth Parents Of Color Choose White Families?

When birth parents of children of color choose to entrust their children to white parents in adoption, one common reason is a desire for openness after placement. Because white parents often have greater access to education about open adoption, they may find more choices among potential transracial parents.

Why Is Ongoing Connection With Birth Relatives Positive?

It can be of particular value to a child to have ongoing contact with birth relatives to help dispel any notion of rejection by her racial or ethnic group. Understanding why an adoption plan was made can help the child resist the misperception that the adoption was based on person-rejection. Having connection to birth family will increase the child's sense of entitlement to his cultural heritage.

What Are The Challenges Of Ongoing Connections?

Neither birth parents nor adoptive parents may have previously developed relationships across racial lines. The high-stake situation of adoption adds extra sensitivities to the stresses of learning how to interact positively with someone who may be living in a very different cultural or economic group.

Birth Parents Should Not Be The Child's Only Racial Role-Model.

Though the birth parent shares with the adoptive parents the responsibility for connecting the child to his heritage, all too often the task falls to the birth parents alone. This can feel like a betrayal to the birth parent who thought the adoptive parents had made a commitment to connect their child themselves. Relying solely on birth parents for this connection can become a source of resentment between families.

During middle childhood, children begin to have the ability to think about their birth parents in new ways. The way that your child views her birth family and the reasons for her adoption become extremely important to mental and emotional development. They are thought by many to be an indicator of how well your child will adjust to life as an adopted person (Brodzinsky). Encouraging honest talk about birth parents, race and ethnic heritage helps children explore their feelings and untangle their misconceptions.

When adopted children have a more positive view of their birth parents,



adjustment is enhanced. When birth parents are viewed negatively, emotional well-being is undermined.

Gather as much information as possible and share it with your child. Challenge claims by professionals that

there is “no information available” by asking more questions. If the child was found abandoned, exactly where was she found? On what street? Was it in a safe place where it was highly likely someone would find her quickly?

Many times it is a great act of courage to save a child by separating from him. A child with minimal information can be helped to reframe the circumstances of her relinquishment in order to see her birth parents and her racial/ethnic community in a positive light.

A youngster from Korea cried when she said she didn't know her age, her birthday or her race “because there were no records. I was found on the street,” she says. “My mother threw me away. My parents say I am Korean and I am just like everyone else, but I know I'm not because they all look different.”

Connection is a by-product of feeling part of a group. Visual cues like hair-style and dress can be one way children can feel connected to members of their cultural or racial group.

Transracially-adopted children often want to be middle-of-the-road because they feel uncertain about whether they really fit in or not in the first place. Pay attention to cultural style and give your child the extra piece of armor.



Community connections begin with claiming. Giving our children the “language” to claim their heritage is extremely important, but the language isn’t all it takes for our children to feel established within their racial community. Membership involves all the senses.

Eyes

Physical Characteristics

Dress Styles

Hair Styles

Ears

Music

Vernacular

Language

Mouth

Foods

Language

Nose

Smells

Body Products

Touch

Social Customs



Raise you child on the delicious foods of his or her birth culture. Not just for special occasion; include authentic cooking in your every day lives.

Tasting your way through a culture is a delicious way to learn something about it. The important thing is not to reduce your child's sense of heritage to mere food sampling.

If your child's primary experience with is or her birth culture is through visits to "exotic" restaurants or street fairs in "other" neighborhoods, or even a short visit to his or her country of birth, your efforts to instill racial and ethnic pride are likely to result in a limited tourist passport or even worse something akin to a trip to the zoo.



Show Respect Through Food

Break bread with friends to whom the food of the culture is everyday fare.

Relish their stories of childhood memories about delicious traditional foods.

Learn about food preferences within the culture and the broad range of foods that are typical.

Expose you family to traditional foods, not Americanized versions — ie. Mole vs. Taco Bell.

Learn how people in the culture rate food products. What kind barbecue sauce is considered best? What brand of Mexican staples would Mexicans typically purchase?

Look for restaurants with native-culture clientele. Become regulars.

What are the traditions around:
offering food to guests?
food taboos?
use of utensils or fingers?
helping yourself?
making eating noises?
cleaning your plate?
leftovers?
food as medicine?
hot/cold?
sharing food?
drinking from the same cup?



For white parents of Black children (full or biracial), doing your child's hair is totally different from doing your own. It's something most white people never had an opportunity to learn about, but it is essential to your children's sense of identity and self-esteem that they are given the opportunity to look like they are well-cared for and groomed; this is particularly true for transracial families, already subjected to unusual social scrutiny by others who aren't quite sure you are really a family. How your children look can shape the conclusions outsiders draw. Children notice others' assessments and often interpret them as evidence of their own inadequacy. Young children are very concrete. They need to feel beautiful and handsome to contribute to a sense of pride in who they are. If their hair is a source of frustration and unhappiness, not just for them but for you, they may begin to develop low self-esteem.

Questions to ask yourself: how hair-educated are you? Remember, there are no absolute answers. The ideas we offer here are common but are not universally held within the African American community.

- + How often should you wash your child's hair? Probably not daily; maybe only as often as once every week or two. Water is a drying agent. Most African Americans have to be very careful about keeping enough moisture and oil in their hair. Frequent washing may dry out the hair, preventing the natural oils from moisturizing.
- + How often should you comb or brush and style your child's hair? At least daily. Children may be tender-headed and may dislike this process, but if you don't do it consistently, their hair will begin to mat, making combing impossible. Very often, parents tell us that they feel bad because their children cry while having their hair combed, but many children cry at first when having their hair done, even when they have same-race parents. Nonetheless, they are still entitled to look and feel good about themselves. And with daily (or more frequent) brushing, the hair will have fewer mats and thus hurt less with time. Natural-bristle brushes are often softer and easier to use than synthetic brushes.
- + What is a relaxer? Should you press or straighten your child's hair? Relaxers are chemicals which straighten hair. These should not be tried without professional consultation, and they are rarely suggested for children under 6 years old. To press hair means to heat it, making it straighten. Again, very young children do not usually have the patience for this kind of procedure, which should be taught by a professional the first time.
- + Do you know what ashy skin is? Ash is excessively dry or flaky skin. It is important to use lotion all over your child's skin, using mostly natural lotions like cocoa butter.
- + Should you use the same products on your child's hair as your own? Probably not. There are special products designed specifically for Black hair. These tend to be re-moisturizing, which is important. It is also essential to use some kind of hair moisturizer (cream or oil) at least once a day and after every washing. Make sure you use enough, so the hair looks shiny but not greasy.
- + Are there specific styles that are appropriate or not for African American children? Yes. Generally, for boys, close cuts are considered attractive. Be careful about trying to have young children look too hip. Girls' hair is generally allowed to grow long and kept tied or braided every day. Since we don't want our children to have any extra burdens, we should be very cautious about choosing styles that suit your own personal preferences rather than what is common among Black American families. African American children in white homes already stand out and often need the comfort of looking like mainstream African American children while still maintaining a bridge to their daily community.
- + Should I take my child to a professional salon or do it at home? It is a very good idea to go to a professional salon that specializes in serving African Americans, where you can learn how and what to do with your child's hair. We recommend asking African American friends, others who would know, or Pact, to recommend salons open to helping white parents of Black children. A wonderful side benefit of this activity is the experience it gives you of being the only one of your race present in the salon or barber shop, while your child is one of the majority. Further, it offers you a chance to connect to new people who are the same race as your child. Also, it speaks volumes to your child about how much you value them within the context of their race. Nothing is as nice as to see your children leaving the salon with an extra strut in their step because of the fuss and attention they have just received. It's easy to feel great about yourself when you look great!

Personalizing Culture

Our children respond to the things in our homes as part of the background noise: *Grown-Up Stuff*. So be sure to point out people, music, art, etc. that is specifically part of your children's cultural history as something that is special for all of you but that has particular importance to them. Giving your children permission to own their cultural heritage is an important part of making sure they don't hold back out of some false sense of loyalty or duality.

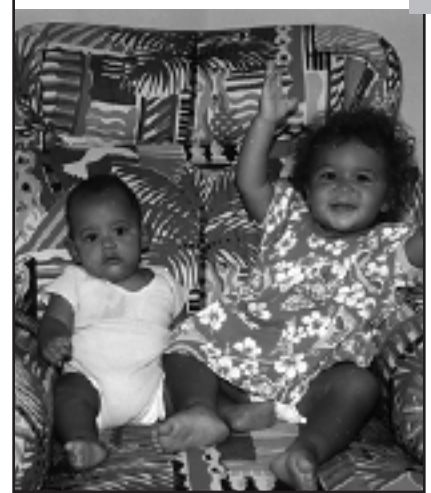


Personalizing culture means letting your child know, in a clear and direct way, that the wonderful thing, person, idea, sound or food you're discussing, watching or experiencing was created by or reflects a person who is the same heritage as he or she. Sometimes parents work very hard to incorporate culturally appropriate music, art, literature, food, activities and people into the lives of their families but then forget to point out to their children the link between the children and their heritage.

TRY THIS

How Diverse Is Your “Stuff”?

Most of us have “stuff.” In your mind’s eye, take inventory of the objects in your household. List specifics of what you have surrounded yourself with, room by room. For each item, ask yourself if it comes from your culture, your child’s or some other culture. Does your child understand where the “stuff” comes from? Consider changes to stretch your household environment to include your child’s heritage or to honor diversity.



Items	Child's "Stuff"	Parent's "Stuff"
Books & Magazines		
Art, Handicraft, Sculpture, Posters		
Souvenirs, Photographs		
Decor		
Food		
Clothing		
Fabrics		
Furniture		
Music		
Miscellaneous		



Sometimes, when white parents of children of color become fully convinced of their need to embrace their child's culture and to fold that culture into the family to balance the European values and models that have set the tone previously, they overcompensate and become racial "wannabes." To be a wannabe means trying to pass as racially unmarked or as an exception to being white, hoping to escape the responsibility that comes with identifying oneself as white. Whiteness can seem a source of shame, leading some of us to strive to deny our connection.

If It Looks Like A Wannabe (*as in want-to-be*)...

In distinguishing between valuing your child's birth heritage and becoming a racial wannabe, the key feature is that the person is so focused on embracing another race that he excludes the race he is. A racial wannabe finds it difficult to recognize her own culture because she is making such strong efforts to identify fully with the race of her child.

- ☆ A racial wannabe wears only tribal or ethnic clothing or jewelry, cooks only native or ethnic foods, chooses only hair styles clearly associated with the race with which he is trying to identify and listens only to music and reads only books written for or about people of the race of culture with which he wants to be identified.
- ☆ A racial wannabe talks only about things related to the culture she wants to be identified with, to the exclusion of her own culture — sometimes even speaking in the language or slang of the culture she wants to be identified with.
- ☆ A racial wannabe makes little distinction in his own mind between his connection to the race or culture he wants to be identified with and a person who is a member of the group by birth.

This overcompensation seems unnatural and contrived to others of the wannabe's own race and often offends those of the race they are trying to imitate.

When self-esteem is at risk, having a skill or talent to fall back on can make all the difference. Pay special attention to nurturing your child's special talents and skills. This is different from applauding normal developmental tasks or milestones. Finding comfort in that one thing that your child can do better than or knows more about than anyone else can make a big difference.

Early childhood educators agree that children feel good about themselves when they have experiences of accomplishment and attainment. Young children love to acquire new skills. As parents, we can help by encouraging skill-mastery in an organized way.

Authentic success contributes to strong self-esteem. Be sure to provide your child with the tools and resources to develop real skills.



“Why is my child acting like that?”

Parents of transracially-adopted kids often ask, “Why is my child acting like that? Is it because of development? Adoption? Race? Something else?” In a society which values whiteness above all else, parents must help their children deal with the reality of racism without becoming victims to it. Their child needs to deal with loss and anxiety caused by adoption while at the same time fighting for the legitimacy and enduring status of the family. Given these demands, parents often wonder where to focus when confronting the usual challenges of life with children.

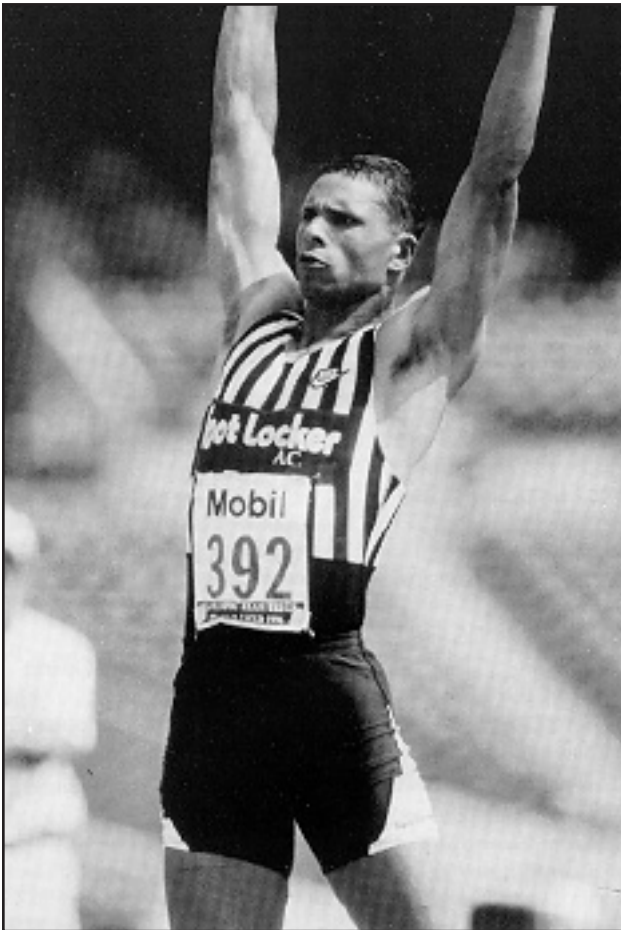
There are many layers to every family issue, each one essential to the whole. The danger comes in minimizing or over-emphasizing any one. The benefit of embracing the larger picture is creating families and children who are learning to handle a world growing ever more complex. The very fact of existing as a family can empower the children to view life from a position of strength and comfort rather than fear and retreat.



Parenting transracially has many layers. Each one is an essential part of the whole. Nothing can be either over-looked or over-emphasized without risking the integrity of the whole.

The World's Best Athlete

The World's Best Athlete: Dan O'Brien
Interviewed by Gail Steinberg, Reprinted from Pact Press



BACKGROUND:

Dan O'Brien, the first American since Bruce Jenner to win the Olympic decathlon gold medal (1996 in Atlanta), was adopted transracially when he was two years old. Daniel Dion O'Brien was born on July 18, 1966, in Portland, Oregon, to an African American birth father and a Finnish birth mother. He was adopted by Jim and Virginia O'Brien, a white couple from the rural town of Klamath Falls, Oregon, and grew up on a farm with seven brothers and sisters, five of them adopted across racial lines: Karen is Native American; Patricia is biracial; Tom is Latino; and Sarah and Laura are Korean. Dan's talent at sports earned him a scholarship to the University of Idaho, but when he got to college he discovered that he liked partying more than the rest that school had to offer. Unprepared for the lack of structure of life on his own, as he moved into his twenties he remained a rowdy teen. He flunked out of school, got into a couple of minor brushes with the law, and received second—and third and fourth and fifth—chances from his parents and coaches until he finally got back on track.

But by early 1992, Dan, then 25, was the reigning world champion in the decathlon, the grueling, two-day, 10-event test of speed, power, endurance and will that historically determines the world's greatest athlete. He and his rival Dave Johnson became nationally known that year as the focus of Reebok's entertaining twenty-five million dollar advertising campaign that asked, "Who is the world's greatest athlete...Dave or Dan?.. to be settled in Barcelona." But with the world's attention focused on him in the qualifying trials in New Orleans, Dan missed three times in the pole vault ("no-heighted," in track talk), failing even to make the U.S. team. Here, we offer Dan's account of his story, with a special focus on the role played by adoption and race in his life.

MESSAGE FOR KIDS:

Try everything! Don't give up!

Q. Sometimes adopted kids struggle with low self-esteem and have a bigger struggle than most when things don't go right. More than anything, you've proven you have the ability to look forward, not back — to turn failure to success. You picked yourself up and didn't quit when many others would have. Where do you think that resilience comes from? What gave you the strength to fail and yet not give up?

A. Through everything I've gone through— and I've been everywhere, at the top of the world, in jail, hung over drunk — I never gave up my dream of winning a gold medal in the Olympics. There was never a day I didn't think I could do it. If there had been, I might have quit. But I figured, hey, if I want it bad enough and I decide to get off the couch and go run, I can do it. When I "no-heighted" in New Orleans in 1992, I felt like I was in a bad dream. It was just total disbelief. I couldn't comprehend it. I felt lost and left out. I was thinking, What am I going to do with my life? I had reached a dead end, lost everything. I finished the events and didn't make any excuses, but I was dying inside. I didn't want to look bad. For a week or so afterward, I didn't want to be near anybody. When I came home, I had 35 messages on my answering machine saying, "I feel really bad for you." I wanted to scream, "Shut up! I don't want to hear it." But after talking to my coaches and sponsors and having a good cry, I came to understand something important: that's just the way it is in athletics. The failure showed me how committed I really am. I'm a

person who looks forward, not back. I knew I had to work harder, that's all. All I want to do is get better as the days go by.

My resilience comes from wanting to be a happy person — everything I do is always about trying to find a solution. As a young child, I was never a crier. I never cried to get my way, or even when I was in pain. I always wanted to stay out of trouble, but as an adopted child, I was constantly trying to find out who I was. What was I going to be when I grew up? I was never sure which way to turn, and I wanted to take charge of a life that wasn't mine from the beginning.

One thing that helped me a lot as a kid was that I tried everything because I wanted to challenge myself. I played music, played sports, tried to be a politician. That's my advice: Try anything! If you never give up, you'll be successful. Take pride in exactly what it is you do and remember it's okay to fail as long as you don't give up.

I like to read about adverse situations. If I were a politician, I'd want to find a way to stop all wars. I do whatever I can to resolve conflict, and I can't sit still. There are things in life I want and I've never given up on them. I want to have a family...a nice home.

MESSAGE TO PARENTS:

Teach the work ethic.

Q. How did your parents help you?

A. I think what my parents did was perfect. They were strict, concerned about my safety and held me back just a little. Without them, I might have ended up conceited. They taught me to try harder and that hey, you have to work for it. It wasn't until I was in my early 20s that I really began to see what kind of person I was going to be. I knew from the beginning I didn't want to live on a farm like my parents. Our family seemed to work harder than other families. I wanted to live in a city. I wanted to do sports. My Dad worked extremely hard. I looked up to my best friend's dad, who was an airline pilot.

But when I played sports, Dad was very interested. That helped me get better. Sports was a place where I could give it everything and not get into trouble. I would go out and run and run and run on the farm. When I was seven or eight, Dad got me a pitch-back machine. When I was little, I wasn't allowed to put sugar on my breakfast cereal because it made me so hyper. Now I take medication for ADD but back then, before I learned to focus, I could get too wild. I learned from my Dad the benefit of determination and giving it your all.

Mom would tell me, Not everyone can make it. She'd say, Hey, be careful. She didn't want me to get my hopes up and get disappointed. I used to tell her I was going to be a professional athlete and she'd ask me what kind of real job I was going to get. I remember saying, "What do you expect me to do? Work for the rest of my life?" She did — but I always knew I was going to be a professional athlete. I liked fitting in with the team. Throughout my entire life, things have happened that kept me working toward the goal. I learned to try harder and to accept that I've always got things to work on. When I lost in 1992, Mom sent me a letter. It was really important. I knew I could face anything in my life after that. If I'd won then, it would have been too easy.

I think my family is my first concern after myself. I'm very close to Mom and Dad and to my brother Tom. We are the two closest in age. Not that it was always smooth sailing. When I was a kid, I internalized everything, kept my feelings to myself. My Mom says that when I first came to the family, it was like somebody had taught me not to cry. I'd make noises like I was crying, but no tears would come out. I didn't feel comfortable hugging and expressing affection. Now that I'm older and have a soul mate, someone who understands me truly, I can express what I'm feeling when it's happening. Her name is Leilani Sang. We've been together three years. We both grew up in Oregon. She's not adopted but she grew up in a step-family situation.

Q. Do you think of yourself as a competitive person?

A. I'm very competitive and always have been, but I'm learning to work my hardest instead of putting in minimum effort to succeed. I used to look forward to Little League games, high school basketball, and softball. It was all I could think about. As a young athlete, it was first about having fun; then it was about winning. Now it's about pushing myself to the limit. I've learned it hurts just the same, whether you're pushing a little extra or not. That's what's preserved me. The more focused I get, the more I can compete well under stress. Athletes have certain inclinations; one is to fail at any cost. You don't know why: you just have to lose by maybe only a point or two. I want my inclination to be performance-oriented — if you do the performance correctly, suit up and go through all the right moves, you've got to succeed.

Q. What made you chose the decathlon as your event?

A. I've always been very good at all sports. I played football in the fall, ran cross-country. I always wanted to be everywhere at once. Maybe I wanted to be the center of attention, or wanted not to be left out of anything. Since the decathlon is not so dominant in the United States right now, I saw a chance to be successful. The decathlon includes ten separate events and they all matter. You can't work on just one of them. You don't have to be the best in all ten disciplines; instead, you need to work at being steady and consistent steady. Rick Sloan, one of my coaches, says it's like juggling balls, keeping them all up there at the same time.

No other competition requires as much speed, strength, versatility and focus. You need to become more than one type of athlete. You have to be a sprinter, a weight man and a distance guy all in one.

I like total fitness. I take pride in being in the hardest event, knowing so well how it works that I can do it on a rainy day, without thinking about it, without feeling pain. You have to be able to be a good loser. You have to be okay knowing you're going to fail every day in something without getting mad and upset. That hurts you. I was a late bloomer, so thirty is a good age for me to peak. I have more aches and pains now, but I'm able to manage them better. What motivates me is feeling good about myself. I love the bouncy feeling when everything is going great. Sometimes I feel so good; other times nothing works. And there is such a thing as a decathlon high. It's like a rock rolling down hill, picking up momentum. You get better and better. There is nothing better than having a personal-best day, being in shape and pushing myself beyond my own limits.

MESSAGE TO THE COMMUNITY

"I call myself a chameleon."

Q. Can you talk some about your feelings about race and culture?

A. I'm interested in all kinds of culture. When I went to Hawaii, I was very impressed with the culture. When I met Mohammed Ali and his family, I was really interested in their history and culture. I'm also interested in Native American history. To me, the decathlon is its own little society and I am part of that culture.

In college, people thought of me as African American, and I tried to fit in, but it didn't work out. I failed. I wish I'd learned more about African American culture growing up. Over the last five years, I've become me. I feel a special connection to mixed-race kids. It's important for me to think I'm mixed-race. I found strength in others who are mixed-race or adopted, like Greg Louganis and Scott Hamilton. At one meet, a father brought over a four-year-old and said, "Look, this is Dan O'Brien. His mom was white and his dad was black and he's okay." I guess his son was being ridiculed for being mixed. I want to try to understand what kids like me are going through. Part of my curiosity is understanding why I am not being accepted: "too black to be white; too white to be black." I'm more accepted in the white community than in the black. It's confusing, more than anything. I didn't date Black girls until four years ago. Now I have close black friends.

I call myself a chameleon. I can always give people anything they want. That's been one of the goals I've had for a girlfriend, to find someone able to fit into every situation the way I can. Once, when a waitress came up to me, I knew in five minutes that she was adopted. She wasn't afraid to talk. She was able to really listen and get what I was thinking and she was mixed-race. It was really interesting. If you're adopted, you need to be a good communicator. It's a strength that comes from growing up adopted. You have to be able to get your message across and you have to know how to listen.

Q. Do you have any role models?

A. It's really important to me to have people I look up to. I'm on a mission to find and fulfill my destiny and it's a mission I can succeed at because I've come to realize the fabled heroes are just normal men. Meeting people like Milt Campbell, Mohammed Ali, Bruce Jenner, Rafer Johnson, Bill Toomey, Bob Mathias — it's a great honor which has made me realize something important: I can do this; they're just like me. It took me time to realize that the men who won Olympic gold medals in the decathlon are just men, just like me. They feel pain. They have fears and make mistakes. They don't have to be Superman. They just have to want it really bad. Just like me.

MESSAGE TO THE FUTURE

Encourage Kids!

Q. What are your goals? Is there anything you personally hope to do to make the system change?

A. My personal goal is to be the first to break the 9000-point barrier in the decathlon and I won't stop until I succeed. It's very important to me, because I feel I wouldn't be reaching my potential if I didn't. You just don't do any higher than being proclaimed the world's greatest athlete. It really means a lot that I won the gold medal — but I woke up the next morning expecting to feel different. I felt the same. That was really interesting. It wasn't until recently that I felt I was doing everything I could for myself. Everybody was always helping me because of my talent. In the beginning, I wanted to compete because I didn't have anything else. Then I really asked myself, Why am I still doing this? I realized I want to do the best I can. I know that other people want me to succeed as much as I do, but they have too great a stake in it. Now I'm fighting for control of my time, my money, my appearances.

I established the Dan O'Brien Youth Foundation to show kids it's cool to get your work done instead of goofing off and being a jerk. There are three programs: The Citizenship Decathlon, a ten-week program modeled after the decathlon; the Work Hard In School Program for at-risk kids; and the Summer Decathlon Challenge. They all offer programs that provide strategies to "turn failure into success." I'm doing all I can to encourage kids to get interested in the decathlon. Anybody who wants more information can write to me at: Dan O'Brien, PO Box 9244, Moscow, Idaho 83843.

Understanding cultural cues means first understanding that the cues differ in different groups and then learning them. Children and adults can be judged harshly in one culture and applauded in another for the same behavior. Talk about the differences between family ways and other ways, giving particular value to helping your child understand what is expected of them and by whom.



Give your child the social skills to act appropriately in their birth culture as well as in yours. To do this, you must first explore and recognize the differences between the two. Consult with people who are living the culture.

Read.
Find a cultural guide.
Find a mentor.

It is likely that you as a white parent will experience some values conflicts with the child-rearing traditions of your child's birth culture. Much of white mainstream culture emphasizes and

esteems

individualism: each person's "right" to lead life in his own way and to express himself as he chooses. Along with this emphasis comes mainstream white America's belief in self-determination and meritocracy: good talent rises to the top of its own accord, the presumption that



excellence is rewarded fairly and always valued. Many cultures of color place higher priorities on taking care of the group. If our children are to straddle both cultures, than they must practice behavioral dualism — knowing how to act depending on the circumstance.

Those of us who believe in the merits of adoption — who care about the future for the thousands of children who, were it not for an adoptive family, would never know family at all — must pledge our solidarity to making adoption more “real,” by helping internationally- and transethnically-adopted people retain both their personal memories and their cultural familiarity.

— Susan Soon-Keum Cox

1. Don't Make Waves

The child is subdued, compliant and “contented” or responsive but noticeably well-behaved.

2. Good Morning, America

The child is curious, perhaps fascinated. She is “waking up” to the new world and beginning to make connections.

3. When Will You Give Me Away?

The child begins to recognize that the world's expectations are in conflict with those of her old culture. She is frightened, defensive and defiant.

4. It's Not So Bad. I Guess I'll Stay

The child begins to acquire the skills necessary for coping with the new environment. With the acquisition of these skills comes an increased sense of comfort.

5. All-American Me

Kids in this stage don't want to talk about their pasts. They describe themselves as regular kids. The child takes on all the surface qualities of a “normal” kid born in the US.

6. I Am All That I Am

The child finds a way to balance who he is and who he was.



Listen More. Talk Less.

Don't be the last one to talk with your child about slavery, racism or why girls from China have been placed for adoption. Tackle both the tough stuff and the wonderful accomplishments. Not talking about it doesn't keep it out; it simply leaves your child alone to figure it out. Be an ally.



The key is talking *with* your child; not talking *to* him or her. Listen and ask questions. Understand what your child thinks and feels before you begin your well-rehearsed answer to the wrong question!

Conversations about movies, TV, stories in books, news events and the like offer opportunities to get her opinion. Parents who pay attention to patterns and themes their children play out in everyday life get additional information about how their children view their own positions in the world.

The best way to understand what your child thinks about race is to play with him. Your child's stories, "let's pretend" roles and the games she makes up are the cues about what is going on inside.

Dr. Stanley Greenspan describes "floor time" as a tool to help you tune in with young children. Set aside 20 minutes — no phone calls allowed! Get down on the floor and play, just you and your child. The child gets to be the total boss. Your job is to follow her lead. And notice what's going on. What kind of story does he choose for you to enact together? Hope to be surprised about what happens. If you can always guess what your child will do or say, you may still be directing the play. Enjoy being the actor. Let her be the director.

- ☆ **Let your child end her story her own way; don't push for a happy ending.**
- ☆ **Wait for his cues. Let the silences be and wait for him to speak.**
- ☆ **Be patient. Don't ask too many questions.**
- ☆ **Answer all of your child's questions.**
- ☆ **Be happy to do anything your child suggests during floor time, as long as it is safe.**
- ☆ **Enjoy being surprised. Resist trying to guess what will happen next.**
- ☆ **Have fun. Don't over-analyze your child's play or try too hard to interpret what it means.**



“... and the truth shall set us free.”

It's great to be an American — but our history is a mixed heritage, filled with pride but also with shame. Your child of color deserves to be introduced to both sides of every story, particularly the stories surrounding national holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas and Independence Day, which are generally celebrated throughout the country from a white, Christian perspective. If they are to become informed and critical thinkers, children must learn both sides, preparing them to stand up for what is right and to resist repeating or continuing the injustices of the past or present. Schools and parents must help them understand that although the truth is not always pretty, we are strengthened when we know the broader truth and can talk about it.

THANKSGIVING

Tell the story of Thanksgiving from the perspective of Native Americans as well as from that of European immigrants, as Louise Derman-Sparks suggests: “Suppose you live in a house you love. Every day, your parents tell you that the trees, streams, mountains, and animals around you are your brothers. They teach you never to harm any living thing. One day, some strange people who look nothing like you come from far away on big ships. They have long sticks called guns that kill your brothers, the animals. You are afraid but your parents invite them in because all living things are brothers. Mom and Dad teach the strange people how to grow food and how to live in your house until one day the strange people make your family leave your house, taking it from you and keeping it for themselves. Every year after your family has left, the strange people have a big party in your house. They call it Thanksgiving, and it celebrates taking your home away from you. How does this make you feel?”

CHRISTMAS

Children should know that although Christmas is celebrated as a national holiday, it really reflects a Christian religious belief system which excludes Jews, Native Americans and other belief systems.

FOURTH OF JULY

Let your children know that one out of every five Americans was a slave in 1776 and that America's declaration of independence from England did not change their lives.

Be the first to talk to your child about slavery.

WHAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS TO KNOW:

It's wrong to own another human being.

African Americans survived slavery because they took care of each other, even if they weren't family members. Their own strength, faith and courage saved them.

White slave owners in the South were not able to survive after their slaves were freed. They could not make their plantations work without the free labor and strong spirits of the African American slaves.

We can change things that are very bad. We changed slavery and it is very bad.

You were never a slave and you never will be one.

African Americans have a lot to be proud of.

Some white people understood that slavery was wrong and helped the African Americans.

Test Your Knowledge

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Read each section carefully
2. Answer all questions
3. Time is limited to four hours
4. Begin immediately



HISTORY:

Describe the history of African American people in the United States from its origins to the present day, concentrating especially, but not exclusively on its social, political, economic, religious, and philosophical impact. Be brief, concise, complete and specific.

MUSIC:

Write a race-awareness hymn. Orchestrate and perform it with flute and drum. You will find a gospel choir under your seat.

PUBLIC SPEAKING:

2500 riot-crazed white supremacists are storming your living room. Calm them. You may use any language except English.

POLITICAL SCIENCE:

There is a red telephone on your desk. Let the President know how to end the war on racism. Report at length on the sociopolitical efforts, if any.

BIOLOGY:

Create life. Estimate the differences in subsequent human culture if this form of life had developed 500 million years earlier, paying special attention to its probably effect on the American democratic system. Prove your thesis.

PSYCHOLOGY:

Based on your knowledge of their works, evaluate the emotional stability, degree of adjustment and repressed frustrations of the following: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Miriam Santos, Woody Allen, and Amy Tan. Support your evaluation with quotations from each person's work, making appropriate references. It is not necessary to translate.

ETHICS:

Take a position for or against brotherhood. Prove the validity of your stand.

SOCIOLOGY:

Estimate the sociological problems that might accompany the end of the world. Construct an experiment to test your theory.

PHILOSOPHY:

Sketch the development of human thought, estimate its significance. Compare with the development of any other kind of thought.

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE:

Describe in detail. Be objective and specific.



The more we learn...

the more we learn we need to know.

Despite the losses. Despite the conflicts. Being a transracial adoptive family is not merely survivable — it can be profoundly enriching and deeply gratifying. We must not allow ourselves or our children to believe that our families are marginal. Though we rarely acknowledge it, WE ARE TRAILBLAZERS.

ADOPTION IS A METAPHOR FOR THE HUMAN CONDITION, SETTING US FORTH ON THAT MYTHIC QUEST THAT WILL PROVE WE ARE CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER AND TO ALL THE CREATURES OF THIS WORLD — AND, IN THE PROCESS, REVEAL TO US WHO WE REALLY ARE.

— *Betty Jean Lifton*



We can...

- * take apparent contradictions in stride;
- * accept our shifts in position without getting defensive;
- * look at situations from more than one point of view;
- * be more creative in developing solutions to problems;
- * be more effective in working cooperatively;
- * put more effort into the construction of self than the presentation of self;
- * personalize and customize meanings rather than accept somebody else's scripts;
- * judge oneself by measuring the overall self, rather than by assessing a particular ability;
- * value flexibility;
- * be guided more by self-evaluation than by the opinions of others;
- * make choices that require negotiation and cooperation.
- * act effectively within a group setting



adapted from "Between Cultures, Recognizing Complex Selves", 1996