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FROM THE CORNER OFFICE

In this issue of *Partners*, we're tackling a tough topic. We are talking about race and parenting children and youth transracially. It's a subject that can be challenging—certainly for us to write and talk about, and for many others to read about and live with.

Growing up white in America often leaves individuals like myself with little knowledge about the experiences of people of color in our country. We learn the basics of history—what happened to people way back then, during another time—while skimming over (or never knowing) the impact of that history on today.

So, why go here? Because it's critical. Because we know that, when it comes to foster care and adoption, children of color are disproportionately represented—both in care and adopted transracially (Zill, 2017). As an organization, the Coalition is committed to the advocacy that is required to lower the number of all children in care. Additionally, we have a responsibility today to the children, youth, and parents who are left to manage the dynamics of transracial parenting and transracial adoption. Many of the families we serve must not only navigate the challenges of adoption, but also those of *transracial adoption*. We believe parents need resources to support their children of color, promote healthy racial identity, and equip them with tools to be allies and advocates in the fight for racial justice.

We hope what we have shared in this issue gives you the opportunity to reflect, think, and explore more.

Best,

Oriana Carey

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WHY TRANSRACIAL PARENTS NEED TO SEE COLOR



As transracial adoptions become more and more common, many well-meaning adoptive parents raising children of color have proudly proclaimed, “I don’t see color!” It’s not hard to understand the good intentions behind those words. After all, wasn’t it Dr. King who dreamed of a day when his children would be judged by “the content of their character” rather than the color of their skin? So why wouldn’t parents fostering or adopting transracially want to be “color blind?”

Putting aside that it’s crucial to teach your child that his or her racial identity is to be celebrated and not ignored, there is an equally important reason to be keenly aware you are raising a child of color—the world in which your child lives sees color.

If we “don’t see color” in a transracial family, it may become very easy—dangerously easy—to dismiss the very real injustices and prejudices people of color are confronted with every day. When another report of an unarmed black teen being shot and killed during a traffic stop is on the evening news, the least frightening option for a parent is to see it as an isolated incident or try to rationalize a justification for it. If we acknowledge that people are treated unjustly simply because of race, then how do we not worry each time our children walk out the door?

This is a reality parents of color are faced with every day.

Once white parents commit to raising children of color, we owe it to our children to make sure they go out into the world every day knowing that we are a safe and supportive place for them—where their experiences will be heard and validated—particularly if we live in a community where our children are visibly in the minority.

When your child trusts you enough to confide in you that he or she feels they were treated unfairly because of race, it’s important that you validate those feelings and investigate further. An adult adoptee who was raised in an all-white community recently shared that, every time she would go shopping with her friends in high school, store clerks would follow her and watch her every move. She remembers tearfully telling her mom on more than one occasion about her treatment in stores and at school. Her mother would dismiss it as her “imagination.” “I love my mom to death, but she once even said, ‘I’m sure you’re just being paranoid. You’re the only one who’s so focused on your being black.’ I’ve never felt as alone as I did in that moment. I stopped telling her things, like when I was called the n-word at school or when I overheard a friend’s parents ‘joking’ at a slumber party that they hoped I liked pizza because they weren’t ordering fried chicken.”

Every child deserves a parent who will be their protector and strongest advocate—even and especially when it means confronting our own discomfort around issues of racism and racial injustice. This may mean calling out school staff who have singled out your child unfairly or the store clerk who said, “I hope you’re planning to pay for that” to your child. But it goes beyond advocating only when it’s been your child who has experienced racism. It means having the courage to speak up anytime you see someone being treated unfairly. It means calling out family members or coworkers who were, “just joking around” when they told a racist joke. In the words of the late, great Dr. Maya Angelou, it means saying, “Oh no—you will not demean in my presence.”

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE IN A TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE FAMILY:

One Mom's Story

I want to start with a quick note: I am, by no means, an expert about the best way to handle conversations regarding race in transracial families. I am, however, an adoptive mom who has had to learn how to navigate these conversations. Sometimes, they turn out okay. Other times, well, they are straight-up cringe-worthy. Regardless, they are so important.



My wife and I grew up in similar racial environments: mainly white communities. We moved to Milwaukee County where we became foster parents and then adopted three children, all non-Caucasian. We proudly called ourselves “color blind” . . . and quickly realized that being “color blind” wasn’t the thing we both thought it was. Like many, we believed that being color blind was the right thing to be and to express. To us, it meant we didn’t see race, and everyone, no matter their skin color, was the same. At the roots of it, I believe that we had the best of intentions when we would say the words, we simply weren’t educated. That education came quickly.

Interestingly, our schooling on not being color blind and the importance of having conversations about differences in race was taught to us by children, because they do see color. Children were the ones that asked the innocent questions, “You have peach skin, why does your baby have brown skin?” Later, the questions were asked directly to our children, “Is that your mom? Why is she white?” One afternoon, I was picking my kids up at daycare, and a child came up to my youngest and said, “You have a white mama!” My daughter looked at me then back at her friend and said, “Yes! I do!” Just like her peers, she was very aware of our differences from an early age.

We also knew that education had to extend to our families. We explained that, even though the statements of color blindness were coming from a place of love, that it is okay—preferable, actually—to talk about our differences. Denying differences between family members in transracial families is denying cultures. So, we talked about how, when our children point out differences between Nana’s white skin and their own brown skin, that it is okay to say, “Yes! We are different and we are all beautiful!”

As my children get older, our conversations continue to grow and evolve. Chats about our obvious differences of skin colors now also include famous people (current or historical) of their own race. Often, they come home from school with stories about who they have learned about, like Hank Aaron or Maya Angelou, and that opens up dialogues. Because of our children’s ages, their attention is fleeting. We talk about what we can, when we can. Even if it is just for 30 seconds before they are off again like the wind. It can be challenging to have formal “sit-down conversations” with many children, so we sprinkle in conversations when and how we can.

Knowing that it is important to have people in our lives and around our children who look like them, we were very anxious when it was time to make a move. We were moving from the City of Milwaukee to Appleton, Wisconsin. People questioned us and were not afraid to tell us that we were doing the worst thing possible for our kids by moving from a community of folks that look just like them. We took that to heart, certainly. However, because of new opportunities, it was a move we had to make. We very purposefully moved next door to my best friend, who is a man of color. We attend festivals, my kids attend a diverse school, they have friends from various cultures, and we are friends with families that look like ours. Their Nana has taken it upon herself to buy every book she can find with diverse topics and cultures

represented in them. We mindfully choose to watch movies and shows that feature transracial families and highlight different cultures.

We are far from having this all figured out, but we will not stop trying to get better at it. We definitely have had our challenges, from my daughter calling me “White Mama” for a solid six months, to each and every one of our children, at one point or another, telling us that they want skin like ours. Those are the moments you realize, as a transracial parent, that our education will never end. It is in those moments that you realize that our children need to feel comfortable, important, beautiful, and proud in the skin they are in.

We explained that, even though the statements of color blindness were coming from a place of love, that it is okay—preferable, actually—to talk about our differences.

We know that the conversations will not get easier. They will get sad and scary and hard. They will transition to include racism and what to do and what not to do when you are approached by law enforcement. We will talk about their future being limitless, but how it will not come without battles and having to go the extra mile to prove their worthiness. We will need to talk about uncomfortable things, and we will have to get real comfortable being uncomfortable.

My wife and I are very aware of the responsibility that we have as parents in a transracial family. It is an honor that I do not take lightly and I am here to walk with my children on their journey of self-discovery. Our children don’t have the perfect parents (by any stretch of the imagination) and they are surely becoming aware of this fact. They are also learning that we are dedicated to them, and that we may look different than many families, but it is our differences that makes us a really interesting, fun, goofy, noisy, silly, *beautiful* family.

ARE YOU READY TO PARENT—OR ADOPT— *Transracially?*

In the world of foster care and adoption, the chance that you may parent a child of a race different from your own is a reality that deserves thoughtful consideration. After all, statistically speaking, children of color make up the majority of kids in out-of-home care in Wisconsin.

You may have heard differing opinions about transracial adoption and whether or not children should be able to be adopted by families of a race different from their own. Some feel strongly that, in order to develop healthy racial and ethnic identities, there should be at least one parent of the same race. Others believe that, with the right supports and education, race and culture should not be a determining factor when building your family. Regardless of the thoughts and opinions of others, it is wise for parents to consider some key topics.

1. YOUR BELIEFS AND VALUES ABOUT RACE AND ETHNICITY.

Are there certain stereotypes that you believe to be true, and do you make assumptions about those of another race? Do you laugh at the slightly racist joke a co-worker or family member makes? Think about sayings or phrases you may use that may have a racial connotation. Each of these things may seem innocent or innocuous to you; however, if you are or will be parenting a child of color, you might want to consider how they may sound, seem, or feel to that child. Take time to reflect on how you were raised, assess your core values, and really consider how your personal history could have an effect on how you parent a child of another race.

2. YOUR PRIVILEGE.

From birth, children of color and white children are afforded either disadvantages or privileges. Think about how you grew up and the opportunities that were provided to you. Consider, also, the child's birth family. Is there a history of poverty? Were the opportunities for continued education out of reach or nonexistent? Was not being able to buy food, clothing, or other basics that we may often take for granted a daily fear and worry for the family? If you struggle to understand or identify systematic racism, white privilege, and the real dangers of being "color blind," the option of transracial parenting may not be the best fit for your family.

3. CHANGES TO YOUR FAMILY.

Consider how your family will change with transracial parenting or adoption. Will you be okay with receiving curious looks or inappropriate questions when you are out and about with your family? How will you react if your child is embarrassed of you or denies that you are their parent in front of their friends of color? Would you be okay attending events where you may be the only white person in the room? How might your child feel if they are often the only person of color in the room?

4. IMPORTANT LESSONS.

If you are a white parent who is caring for or will be adopting a child of color, there are important lessons—and difficult conversations—that you will need to have. Conversations, for example, about how your son should act—what he should say or do—if pulled over by a law enforcement officer. Or even in situations as simple as walking through a neighborhood or a store. How will you teach your black daughter about self-love and beauty? How might you respond if she comes home crying because she feels her skin is too dark, or does not see the beauty in her kinky curls? Will your children see you interact with other adults of color? Are you open to inviting those of color into your home, or do you have friends of color?

Being prepared to parent or adopt transracially is so much more than moving to a diverse city or neighborhood. It is more than finding mentors and role models for your child, understanding and embracing their culture better, and learning about hair care. Yes, all of these things are important; yet, before you get to these things, there are other steps to take—such as truly considering if you feel prepared to be an advocate for a child of a race or culture other than your own.

UNDERSTANDING RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT



When you adopt a child of another race or culture, you're making a lifetime commitment to exploring race, examining your own racial biases, and combatting racism.

For a child of color being raised in a predominantly white community, it's nearly impossible for the child to have a clear sense of racial or cultural identity. Yet that positive and affirming identity is vitally essential to a healthy adulthood, especially in the face of the racism people of color encounter. It is up to white parents raising children of color to do all they can to help their children develop that healthy racial identity—but how do we develop the necessary skills and aptitudes?

In a recent phone call, Astrid Castro, a transracial adoptee, Adoption Consultant, author, and national speaker on adoption, posed the question, **"What do you think when you hear 'white pride?'"** Most of us recognize this term as the slogan of white nationalists, white supremacists, and the Ku Klux Klan. Yet as white parents raising children of color, we want to instill in our children a sense of racial pride. Where do we go from there?

Astrid says that exploring how our own racial identities were developed and our own relationships with race are key to teaching our children pride in their own. **"We have to teach by example, and if we haven't experienced it, how do we teach it?"**

We'll be examining these questions and more at this year's "Transracial Adoption Workshop: Unpacking Racial Identity for All." This year's workshop presenter, Astrid Castro, says that understanding the development of our own racial identities is where many adoptive parents miss the boat.

Join us for a day of exploration at the Coalition's 3rd Annual Transracial Adoption Workshop, July 13 at the Alverno College Conference Center.

Register at: <https://transracialunpackingidentity.eventbrite.com/>

RESOURCES

Tip Sheets

- [Caring for the Hair of Your African American Child](#)
- [Helping Your Child Develop a Healthy & Positive Ethnic Identity](#)
- [Honoring Your Child's Racial and Cultural Identity](#)
- [Twenty Ideas for Keeping Connections to Racial and Cultural Identity](#)

Library Materials

- [Partners, Winter 2016](#)
- [Fostering Across Wisconsin, Winter 2016](#)

Library

- [EmbraceRace](#)
- [Lee & Low Books](#)



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