Promoting Healthy Cultural Identity for Children of Color Living in Transracial Families

Have you ever asked yourself if you're doing it right as a transracial parent? Have you ever been too embarrassed to ask questions about culture because you are afraid of saying the wrong thing or are embarrassed about not knowing the answer? Do you feel like you are falling short in helping the child in your care connect to their culture while still feeling a sense of belonging in your family? Do you question how to prepare your entire family to become anti-racist in words and actions? If so, you are not alone.

Perhaps you have immersed yourself in the child's culture, history, and food. Maybe you've advocated for the school district to include more multicultural stories in the library and classroom curriculum. You may have already had talks with the children in your care about microaggressions regarding stereotypes for different ethnicities. The myth of "love is all you need" isn't true. "Love has no color" can be dangerous because it fails to teach children how to live in a world defined and shaped by race. Navigating life through the lens of a white family brings its own difficulties for children of color.

Whether a family through adoption, foster care, or kinship care, transracial families are familiar with certain comments and questions everywhere they go. Noticeable racial differences elicit bold inquiries that most people would not usually ask someone they hardly know. *Are they your real kids? Were your kids born drug-addicted? Are their parents in jail? Does he speak English? Can I touch her hair?* The underlying message to kids is that you look different than your parents or siblings, so you must not belong.

Being a parent or caregiver of a child of another race requires vigilance, compassion, an open mind, strength of character, and a willingness to educate yourself continually. One place to start is understanding terms that are often used interchangeably for identity but have different meanings.

Defining Culture, Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

We hear the above words used frequently and sometimes incorrectly in discussions about identity. So, what do they really mean?

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The concept of **culture** is broad and encompasses many areas of life. Culture is taught by other human beings. In general, we learn culture by speaking with and learning from our elders. These people pass down and share information from generation to generation. Culture guides language use, how we dress, and our views of the world. How does culture impact children in a transracial family? Magalie Knopf is a social worker specializing in the placement of children from diverse cultures. She shared that she notices a correlation between a loss of culture with feelings of not belonging, failure to understand oneself, lack of self-esteem, anger, and poor mental health.

The definition of **race** is a bit more in-depth. References to race often fall into two camps: a *biological* versus a *sociopolitical* construction of what it means to belong to a particular racial group. A *biological* construction of race claims that "pure" races exist and are distinguished by physical features such as eye color and shape, skin color, and hair texture. However, this biological theory of race has been disproven by numerous scientists. In addition, there is no scientific connection between racial identity and cultural traits or behaviors.

Let's look at the *sociopolitical* construction of race, broken down into three concepts: racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racism. In the book Interracial Communication: Theory Into Practice, researchers Mark Orbe and Tina Harris provide the following definitions for these concepts.

- **Racial prejudice** refers to holding false or negative beliefs of one racial group to make another racial group (usually one's own) appear superior.
- **Racial discrimination** is the outward manifestation of racial prejudice. Racial discrimination happens when people act upon their negative beliefs about other races when communicating or setting policy. It is possible to be prejudiced without acting upon those beliefs, and all races can discriminate against other races.
- The final concept, **racism**, combines racial prejudice with social power. Racism is institutional rather than individual, meaning it occurs in larger contexts. For example, racism may be seen in how the media represents particular groups. Another example may be that racial minorities do not have equal access to educational or legal opportunities. Racism often involves unequal access to resources and power.

Two other concepts that are often confused with race are *ethnicity* and *nationality*. **Ethnicity** refers to a person's heritage and history and involves shared cultural traditions and beliefs. For example, a person may identify as Asian-American racially while their ethnicity is Chinese. **Nationality** refers to a person's nation-state of residence or where they hold citizenship. For example, an individual could have been born and raised in another country, but once they migrate to the United States and have American citizenship, their nationality becomes American.

Interacting with people from a culture, race, ethnicity, or nationality other than one's own can create

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discomfort and anxiety. It seems easier to interact with people of one's own culture because of the sense of belonging that comes with it. Think about the unease being in a different culture may bring to the child in your home who feels disconnected from their own culture. To talk openly about race and culture, you may need to confront your own discomfort, hidden biases, and stereotypes you may have collected over the years. It will be easier to have open discussions wherein conversations can flow freely and without judgment when you can do this.

Identity Formation Skills

A child's identity is influenced by immersion, exposure, and encounters with those around them. They internalize what they see and what they experience. Every child is on an individual journey to form a racial identity. For example, a child adopted as an infant and a child adopted when school-aged will have different connections to their birth cultures. Early memories may be positive for some children. In contrast, others may feel a disconnection that creates pain and confusion surrounding identity. Following are some tips to help you navigate challenges to support a child's quest for identity.

- **Acknowledge difference.** Rather than teaching children that we are all the same, acknowledge the many ways people are different. Emphasize the positive aspects of our differences, such as language diversity and various types of music and food. Be honest about historical and current events when people have been mistreated because of their differences. Encourage the child to talk about what makes them different and discuss how that may have helped or hurt them at times.
- **Challenge intolerance.** If the child in your care or someone in the child's presence says or does something indicating bias or prejudice, don't meet the action with silence. Silence indicates acceptance. Just stating, "Don't say that," is not enough. Dig deeper and try to find the root of the action or comment. For example, you might ask, "What made you say that?" Listen to understand the other person, then explain why the action or comment was unacceptable.
- **Seize teachable moments.** Look for everyday activities that can serve as catalysts for discussion. School-age children respond better to lessons that involve real-life examples rather than general discussions about issues. For example, if you're watching TV together, talk about how certain races are often portrayed in stereotypical roles.
- **Stay involved.** Messages about racial and cultural differences exist all around us. They can be found on the Internet, in songs, music videos, reality shows, ads and commercials, and in friend groups at school. Take time to familiarize yourself with the YouTube channels, social media influences, music, and TV shows the children in your care enjoy. Then discuss the messages

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they send. Ask about the group or groups they most identify with at school. Discuss the labels or stereotypes that are associated with different groups.

- **Find other parents to talk with about raising a child of the child's race in your community.** We strongly encourage you to seek out connections and other parents who are parenting children born to them. For example, if you are a white parent caring for an African American child, talk with African American parents of African American children. While it is true that foster and adoptive parent groups provide great benefits, it is still important not to limit your connections to those parents only.

Microaggressions and Identity

People of color are often burdened with daily insults, invalidations, slights, or attitudes that communicate hostile racial judgments. Microaggressions can be intentional or unintentional and can focus on race, culture, and even adoption or foster care status.

What are some examples of microaggressions?

- *"Wow, you speak English really well."*
- *"That's so ghetto."*
- *"Is that your real hair?"*
- *"You're so articulate."*
  "I can't say your name. It's too difficult. Do you have a nickname?"

In her book, So You Want to Talk About Race, author Ijeoma Oluo states that microaggressions are a serious problem beyond the emotional and physical effects they have on the person they are perpetrated against. They normalize racism and make racist assumptions a part of everyday life. In a recent study, one adult transracial adoptee from Columbia shared that she had many experiences with microaggressions while growing up. Unfortunately, she did not see her parents as supportive. Marta shared, "My parents invalidated these—they would

say, 'oh, they didn't mean it that way,' or 'You're being sensitive.' I started questioning myself, especially since I had no support from other people of color."

In a 2021 Transracial Adoptee Panel Discussion, adult adoptees shared the following advice for parents:

- Don't dismiss racism, especially microaggressions. "Let's pray about it" or "Just ignore them" are not solutions.
- Teach children that their voice is their power. Advocate for them and teach them how to advocate for themselves. Self-love and strong self-esteem will make them powerful.
- You may need to distance yourself from certain family members or friends who continue to be insensitive to race and culture. Your kids will notice.
- You make your own definition of family. You have chosen the child. You must find a way to become a true ally.

Do your best to make engaging in discussions and sharing experiences about race and culture in a transracial family a regular part of everyday life. When engaging in discussions of family and kinship talk (for example, discussion of relatives and inherited traits), remember to openly acknowledge the child's birth family in those conversations. Don't relegate these topics to isolated experiences

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like culture camps, field trips, and other activities outside of regular family life. Rather, live these experiences of diverse environments and friendships yourself! We can all learn from one another in so many ways.

Finally, **avoid the assumption that your experience of transracial foster care, relative care, or adoption is the same as the child's experience**. For example, parents who adopted transracially may feel that the adoption was a success because they love the child, the child has appeared to do well in life, and the family has never faced significant issues related to racial or cultural challenges. However, the child may have always felt a sense of loss and alienation from their own culture but did not feel they had the right to express it. Or perhaps the child experienced microaggressions or other forms of racism that they did not share because they wanted to protect their parents or because the incidents made them feel ashamed or humiliated. Encourage the children and youth in your care to openly share with you by working to avoid feeling defensive during conversations centering on topics such as white privilege or racial biases. Every parent's job is to protect and advocate for their child. In transracial families, parents also need to be allies. Allowing the child in your transracial family to connect to people of their own racial identity or ethnicity can minimize feelings of loss from being separated from that culture. And while uncomfortable conversations may need to take place often, stay firm in believing that you are working to be the best parent for the child—whether that be for a short time or a lifetime. Your diligent efforts will go a long way in helping the children in your care feel as though they belong in your family. Together, transracial families have a richness of diversity and experiences to celebrate.

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Resources

From the Lending Library

- *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, by Jane Lazarre
- *Growing Up Black: Teens Write About African American Identity*, Youth Communication
- *Inside Transracial Adoption,* by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall
- *Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man*, by Emmanuel Acho
- *So You Want to Talk About Race*, by Ijeoma Oluo

From the Champion Classrooms

- Transracial Parenting Series

Additional Resources

- How to Talk to Your Transracially Adopted Child About Race
- Tips for Parenting Your Transracially Adopted Child
- Transracial Adoption — What Parents Need to Know (Part One)
- Parenting in Racially and Culturally Diverse Adoptive Families
- Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family

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