

Pact Camp Offers Parenting Insights

FCC Northern California, Summer 2006 by Annie Stuart

As my family and I wound our way through the redwoods, I popped in my daughter's favorite High School Musical CD and smiled at the lyrics: The Start of Something New suddenly took on new meaning. We'd just left Pact camp in the Santa Cruz Mountains—a five-day gathering for adoptive families of color. Located in Oakland, Pact has provided adoption-related education and services for the past 15 years. This year's family camp—the fifth of its kind—brought us many new nuggets of knowledge and emotions filled to the brim. We'd shared experiences with and learned from 41 other families; several adult adoptees; and world-class adoption, race, and parenting experts. . . it was almost more than we could take in.

While we listened to speakers and panelists or took part in small-group discussions, our children hiked, swam, created films, wrote poetry, and participated in workshops to explore their feelings around adoption and race. They soaked in the rare experience of hanging out with children whose families were similar to theirs. Our daughter was one of only a few Asian Americans among a largely African-American group of children. Yet being at camp seemed to bring her (and us) a palpable sense of relief. She later commented, "At school or other places, people will talk about their families, and I have to say, 'I don't know—I'm adopted.' Then, they'll say, 'Oh yeah, that's right,' and change the subject." Here, our families were normal, "but with a twist," as one speaker later put it. No explanation needed.

It's impossible to completely convey the transformative power of Pact camp, but here are just a few information highlights from the speakers—each cutting edge in their fields.

On the Development of Racial Identity

Early in the week, Barbara Solomon, PhD, professor emerita at the University of Southern California (USC), provided a framework for a discussion about race. The first African-American to hold a deanship at USC, Solomon started by addressing the myth of a generic American culture. The problem begins, she said, with white parents of white children believing they have no racial or ethnic identity. "If you look closer at American society, you see contributions from other cultures," said Solomon. "An American culture is a hyphenated culture." And its strength comes from its diversity, she emphasized.

Race identity develops early, with children as young as 4 or 5 detecting differences and putting a value on them, said Solomon. In the middle years, kids start to categorize and associate with those they think are more highly valued. How do they learn whom to join? "You don't even need to say, 'Don't play with black kids,' because you're not 'playing' with the black mothers," she said, recounting the image of white mothers and black mothers waiting in separate circles outside their children's schools. We make it the kids' problem, but instead, it is ours. Then comes adolescence, the stage of identity crisis. The worst thing you can tell this teen (or adult) is that "race is not important—we're all the same," said Solomon, whose own son challenged her about her emphasis on race: "Mom, you're always quoting Martin Luther King and his dream about people all living together equally as brothers," he said, to which she responded, "Yes, but he was telling you what ought to

be—we're telling you what is!" Race does still matter.

Solomon cautioned that if we don't deal with racial or ethnic identity, society will do it for us. It is not sufficient to wait for our children to bring it up—we must do what we can to promote a sense of self-worth. Advocating an attitude of inclusion, not exclusion, Solomon admitted that our children may face pressure to choose one group over another, and we can't count on schools to be an integrating agent. It means we must get creative about making connections, and not just for our children of color since we all live in a growing multi-ethnic, multiracial community.

What are we prepared to do as parents of children whose culture of birth is different than our own? It is about making connections to mainstream culture, as well as their culture of birth, through personal relationships, said Solomon, and not just by paying a visit. She challenged parents of Chinese American adoptees to give less priority to the country of China and more to connecting to Chinese Americans and their culture here. There are many ways to do this, she said, including joining boards or political organizations—but it needs to not be peripheral.

In a follow-up discussion, a participant commented, "Seeking [out connections with our child's ethnic] community as whites feels forced and artificial because we have the luxury of having lots of whites around. We need, instead, to think of it as a necessity for our children." If they become too isolated, our children are more likely to become the target of stereotypes and racist comments.

Korean-born Ji-in, who contributed to a panel of adult adoptees, grew up on an Iowa farm near a town with a lily-white population of 100. "My parents couldn't have taught me my ethnic identity, but they could have helped to facilitate it," says Ji-in, who grew up wanting to blend in. Ji-in advises that finding role models and making cultural connections is critical. "If your child resists, persist," she said, recalling how her parents took her just once to a picnic where other Koreans were present. "Don't just dip your toe in. Perhaps your child will find value later on, if not now." (Check out Ji-in's blog at <http://twicetherice.wordpress.com/>.)

On Parenting and Power Struggles

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka, best-selling author of *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles: Winning for a Lifetime*, helped participants understand better some of the fuel sources behind children's challenging behaviors. These include temperament, stressors, and normal development. A licensed parent educator and early childhood teacher, Kurcinka reminded us how exercise, food, and sleep provide the foundation for acceptable behavior and that it is also important to understand the temperament of the child who has come to live with us. Introverts and extroverts process information and recharge in different ways. Extroverts seek interaction and stimulation, while introverts need space and quiet.

Kurcinka used the concept of "green zone" (I'm safe) and "red zone" (I'm not safe) to illustrate different types of behavior. Red zone behaviors, said Kurcinka, fall into one of three categories: If your children are striking out, they may hit, throw, yell, name call, or tantrum. If they're

shutting down, they can't tolerate stimuli or accomplish things and may feel completely overwhelmed. If they want to be "gathered in," they are whiny, clingy, or anxious and seek contact with us. They may go through all three stages in one episode.

What are the best ways to help them? For starters, don't follow them into the red zone or push them further into it. Kurcinka prompted peels of laughter when she said, "Well, if your partner had a crummy day and was in the red zone, would it help to say, 'I'm taking the keys to your car,' or 'Go to your room until you rot'?" Of course not. Instead, we need to find ways to manage the intensity of our emotions. It helps to recognize that, behind anger, are other emotions such as rejection, sadness, or fear. Simply naming those emotions helps to slow down the heart rate, said Kurcinka. You can ask your child questions like, "Did I surprise you?" "You may be guessing," she said, "but asking the question pulls them into the thinking part of the brain, the neocortex."

Identify which mode your child is in, and act accordingly. If your child is in strike-out mode, don't touch her. Instead, have her move—play basketball, jump rope, walk. Bring back a child who's shut down by cutting down the amount of stimuli: stop talking or turn off the television, and provide space but stay nearby. If your child seeks contact, use a calm voice, deep breaths, hugs, warmth, and humor, said Kurcinka. After your child has been in the calm green zone for at least one to two hours, you can "redo." Review what happened, say why the behavior was not okay, and set goals for next time. Kurcinka suggests writing these down to ensure they get "heard."

Kurcinka underscored other ways to encourage positive behavior without pushing our children into the red zone. These included being clear about rules and getting back-up from partners and other trusted adults. "Discuss with your partner ahead of time what needs to be done and what the consequences will be for not complying," said Kurcinka. Then be clear and upfront with your child.

Emphasize with your child that you are a "problem-solving family," she said, and come up with concrete ways to accomplish goals. If your goal is to not rush through transitions, for example, use color-coded lists to help identify what needs to be done and what would be nice to do. Connect with your child using key phrases such as, "I'm listening." Or identify needs by asking, "Do you want to be alone or with people?" You can also help with transitions by asking questions such as, "You have five minutes left. What else were you planning on doing?"

On Attachment and Difficult Feelings

Holly van Gulden, director of the Adoptive Family Counseling Center in Minneapolis and co-author of *Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child*, helped further explain difficult feelings and behaviors through the lens of attachment and adoption. Van Gulden gained early insights, growing up in a home as one of six children born to her parents, with five joining by adoption and 127 by foster care.

Van Gulden described the two key building blocks of attachment—permanence and constancy, which form early in response to sensory contact with few caregivers. Permanence is the child's awareness that the parents (and self) exist and will continue to exist across space, time, and emotions. Constancy is the ability to perceive others (and self) as whole across space, time, and emotions. "I believe—personally and professionally—that all adopted children are vulnerable with regard to permanence and constancy," says Van Gulden, yet she offers an optimistic view about children who display problems with attachment. "Don't panic," she assured the parents. "It's fixable. We can reprogram the limbic brain." The oldest person she's worked with to build permanence was age 72, "and she got it."

Without a sense of permanence, though, our children don't feel safe and may experience obsessions, anxiety, or hypervigilance. (A weakness in permanence might explain our daughter's daily, heart-wrenching mantra as a preschooler: "You'll always come back, always come back?") At

Pact camp, a parent tearfully celebrated her child's progress with permanence. "He was able to share things this week," she said, then recounted how just a year ago, he thought his mother was dead when she hid behind a tree.

Without a sense of constancy, our children may not perceive the disciplinarian "witch mother" as the same one who provides comfort and joy—the "breast mother." And a weakness in constancy might explain why even gentle admonitions can send some of our daughters into full-fledged rages. Why? "Because without self-constancy, what your child is experiencing feels at that moment as though it is everything," said Van Gulden.

Van Gulden contends that we need to put back what our children missed before doing other types of therapy. "All the talk therapy in the world won't build attachment," she said, because attachment is sensory, not cognitive. "That doesn't mean we don't have to validate and talk about difficult emotions." Without permanence, though, our children can't hold the big feelings. In her work with children, Van Gulden draws on training by the first woman horse whisperer and on her own experience in working with abused and neglected dogs. The ability to read body language and to respond with appropriate sensory cues—touch, tone of voice, smells—works with children, as well.

"Watch your children's bodies and see how every tone you use brings them down or shoots them up," said Van Gulden. "Accept that this is their programming, and know that we are the ones who need to shift." At the last Pact camp we attended, a wise parent tried to tell me how my body language—my eyes—might be triggering my child. I didn't really hear her. This time, however, it got through to me with Van Gulden describing how she successfully used "child whispering" to help a child who'd been tortured before he came to live with her at age nine. Van Gulden also suggested that we parents provide an "alpha presence" in our homes by being present and busy, but not demanding or mentally preoccupied. Her father took up needlepoint for this very purpose.

Van Gulden offered many practical tips for helping build permanence—from limiting the number of caregivers early on to giving children pieces of our unwashed clothing to wear while away from us. Peek-a-boo is a game of parent permanence, she said, and you can adapt it even for older children by peeking around a corner and checking in several times a day with, "I'm here." Two other techniques that can help are creating portable transitional objects, such as laminated pictures of you with your child (one parent on each side) and by using "parts language" to describe the good, the bad, and the innocuous parts of ourselves. ("That's the stingy part of me." "I really appreciate your cooperative part today.") This helps a child learn to create and hold a holistic sense of themselves and us.

And as for that witch parent? Well, Van Gulden doesn't give us carte blanche to become laissez-faire parents. Instead, she advises to discipline by flipping back and forth quickly between breast parent and witch parent and to end with a hug. "This helps build constancy," said Van Gulden, "by telling the brain that it's all the same person. Then your child comes to truly sense that mama is still here."

Wonderful, challenging, exhausting—Pact camp was this and much more. Many parents saw their children "take wing" at camp. One mother marveled at her daughter's transformation: "I can't believe she got up in front of everyone and spoke," she said. And another mother said, "Look at my introvert moving around the dance floor!"

One Pact participant overheard a teen saying, "I thought I was the one coming to camp to learn and work, but my parents did, too—my mom even cried." * Yes, it was work, but worth it. My special thanks go out to the speakers who taught us so much, the adult adoptees who bared their souls, and the parents and children who shared this incredible week with us.