## Helping Your Child Develop A Positive Racial/Ethnic Identity

## by Jeannie Lin

What are the particular risks and challenges that transracial adoption presents to identity development for the child? What challenges does the adopted person's identity development present to the transracial family system? What specific kinds of issues and conflicts might arise and, importantly, what can we do to handle them? In asking these questions, I am specifically referring to families in which at least one parent is Caucasian and the adopted child is a person of color.

I should begin by saying that I am not a parent, nor am I an adopted person. I am a clinical psychologist who has long been interested in the issue of racial identity development. I had the opportunity recently to attend a workshop sponsored by Pact on transracial adoption and was particularly intrigued by the spirited discussion among workshop participants who described their experiences with race issues, race differences, and racism as parents of children of color.

One of the participants, the adoptive parent of a three-year-old African American child, shared a recent experience he had had with his son. The father, a Caucasian man, described his reaction when his son turned to him one day and said, "Daddy, when I grow up, I want to look just like you." The father was immediately alarmed. Was this a sign that his son was ashamed of his own skin color? That he wanted to be white? How should he handle this? But it then occurred to him that perhaps this was not so much a racial issue as a normal developmental one (i.e. wanting to look like one's Dad). He then wondered whether parents who adopt transracially are so alert to possible problems in racial identity development that they at times pathologize what is essentially a normal developmental process.

This father made what seemed to me to be a rather astute observation. That is, that our concern about optimal racial identity development may at times obscure our awareness of and distort our interpretation of normative developmental processes. This is an important and often overlooked point. However, is there more involved in understanding this scenario?

It does seem natural, on the one hand, for a child to wish to grow up to be "just like Dad" in every way. In fact, one could argue that for the adoptive relationship, this identification is not only natural but highly desirable, for it signals that an important attachment bond is being established between child and parent. However, what this child expressed (and what seemed to be the cause for initial concern) was his desire specifically to "look just like" his dad. This may seem at first to be a small distinction, but there are reasons to think it not so insignificant.

We might note that, in addition to developing an attachment bond, this child is also developing a powerful identification with his father. It should be pointed out that a positive identification with a same-sex role model (typically, one's parent) is optimal if not essential to developing a healthy concept of who we are.

But what does it mean for this African American child to become identified with his Caucasian father? The racial difference between them is no small matter. Even if one chooses to deemphasize this difference, it is one to which others will frequently react. The very physical nature of race differences make it difficult to ignore.

"Race," and to a lesser extent "social class," are two highly salient dimensions on which we make distinctions between people in our culture. In fact, children demonstrate an awareness of racial differences as early as two and three years of age. Depending on their experience, children may also be aware very early in life of power differences that exist between racial groups. So what is the impact of this knowledge on a transracially-adopted child? That one particular race is more highly valued and privileged than another is a condition all people of color must grapple with. How one develops a healthy self-esteem in the face of this knowledge is a critical developmental issue for children and adolescents of color, regardless of parental history.

Thus, identification with one's parent may produce highly positive fruits for a child's self-esteem (assuming of course, a positive role model). At the same time, the reality of their race difference poses a more complex and challenging task to the child as (s)he approaches the developmental steps of integrating his or her own racial identity.

Consider for example, the Caucasian adoptive mother of a Latina adolescent who shared a particularly painful experience which had recently ensued with her daughter. Her daughter was beginning to identify with her Latina roots, spending her time exclusively with her Latina friends and participating in more cultural activities. The mother had been very supportive of her daughter's interest and encouraged her connections with Latino culture throughout her childhood. She was, then, especially hurt when her daughter began verbally castigating her mother for being white. The mother felt both hurt and confused, since she had been very supportive of her daughter and wanted to continue to be so, but understandably did not appreciate being treated as "the enemy."

Models of racial (minority) identity development describe a developmental process that begins with identification with and conformity to the values of the host culture. This may include belief in the negative stereotypes about one's own group. As one begins to identify with the experience of being part of an oppressed group (i.e. to comprehend experiences of racism and discrimination and identify with that experience), an attitudinal and conceptual shift occurs in which one begins to grasp the full import and weight of what it means to be part of an oppressed

group. Anger and resentment toward members of the dominant group are common, as are polarized feelings about "us" and "them" and a rejection of things associated with the dominant group. Only later, as one begins to live within life's "gray areas," so to speak, does one begin to confront the inconsistencies of this perspective. Grappling with such inconsistencies will ideally foster the development of a more nuanced world view.

As children approaches adolescence, they may become increasingly aware of the consequences of race. For example, they will have to determine how they will experience the fact that, in our society, important distinctions about people are often made on the basis of their race. That is, race matters. And what will they do with the knowledge that their race/ethnicity is one about which many negative assumptions are made? How will they understand the fact that their parent not only does not share this racial status, but that the parent belongs to a group which, as a group, oppresses members of the child's racial group? Or the fact that, as a member of that group, the parent is accorded privileges the child will not have?

If it is painful to read these questions, imagine how it must feel to be an adolescent and to live with them. Anger, envy, loneliness, and confusion are all normal and expectable responses. In fact, the feelings that this knowledge evokes can be so uncomfortable that some individuals defend against feeling them by denying that racial differences matter at all. "Why do people make such a big deal about race? People are just people." "The only race I'm a member of is the human race." This reaction can occur for the parent as well as the child.

When adolescents begin to understand the impact of race differences, they may have very rigid views of one race vs. another; that is, seeing all whites as racist, or all members of their own ethnic group as trustworthy. This acknowledgment of the negative aspects of race differences may threaten the family bonds the transracial family has worked hard to achieve. Parents as well as children may feel alienated, rejected, confused, and misunderstood. In such an event, trust, patience, and communication are sorely needed, but are often in short supply.

In the latter stages, adolescents begin to grapple with experiences which do not conform to their previously constructed schema. In doing so, they ideally develop a more integrated understanding of race differences and of themselves. For example, if "we" are the victims and can trust only one another, and "they" are the oppressors, how do we make sense of the experience of being betrayed or injured by someone from one's own group? Further, how do we make sense of our relationship with our parents? How do we understand our loving feelings toward people who resemble those who hurt us?

## What parents can do:

Do try to make clear your commitment to your relationship. This is especially hard in the face of rejection, but especially crucial to your child that you are able to do so. It may help to remind yourself that your child likely feels as confused and uncertain as you do.

Do acknowledge the pain behind their anger. If you are a Caucasian parent of a child of color, you have been granted a privilege in this life that your child will never fully share, and it seems reasonable to expect that there will be a certain amount of pain for both of you as you comprehend this difference between you.

Do acknowledge and accept the anger that may come with the pain. This does not mean that you tolerate unacceptable behavior. Acknowledging that they have a right to be angry, validating the reasons they are angry, and commiserating with them about injustices they observe and experience will go a long way toward helping them to work through their feelings and to strengthen the bond between you.

Don't try to deny, explain away, or make excuses for what they experience as racism. "I'm sure he didn't mean it." "I don't think she would consciously do something to hurt you." These may be true statements, but they are not what your children need to hear from you. Instead of being reassuring, such statements will only convey that you can't possibly understand their experience, or worse, that you don't believe them.

Don't get caught up in feeling guilty for your race. If your children are hurt by a racist comment or behavior, try to help them make the distinction between humane and respectful vs. abusive behavior, rather than using a racial generalization to explain why this occurred. Especially when you are Caucasian and the person who hurt them is, too, it will be important for your child to hear you acknowledge that some white people really do abuse their power to hurt others.

Do model appropriate reactions to racism. A friend who adopted a child of East Indian and Native American heritage recently took her eight-year-old daughter to see the movie "Pocahontas." Her daughter complained about the fact that the movie referred to the Indians as "savages," whispering to her mother, "Isn't that rude?" whenever they made that reference. The mother laughed half-apologetically as she told this to me ("Oh, God, she can't even enjoy Pocahontas!") and said she shouldn't be surprised at her daughter's reaction, since she and her husband "make comments like that all the time."

In fact, by this model, her mother was helping her child to externalize racist remarks rather than to internalize them. It is they who use such demeaning words who are rude, rather than she who is a "savage." This is a critical coping skill to develop for children of color to handle the onslaught of negative messages they will likely encounter in their lives. It is through the observations and modeled anger of their parents that they will be able to do this.

Of course, no one can know the perfect way to respond to insensitive remarks all the time. In fact, my most frequent response to racist insensitivity is shocked disbelief and stunned silence. It is only later that we gnash our teeth and think up clever ways to handle the situation. Giving yourself permission not to handle racial insults perfectly is to acknowledge your humanness. Don't be ashamed. It's not you or your children who need be embarrassed. Use whatever reaction you had to process the event with your children. "Wow. Can you believe he said that? My jaw just dropped open; I didn't know what to say!" Make a game out of all the things you wish you had said. Sharing and processing these experiences is an important way to externalize racism.

Don't expect yourself to have all the answers. You have spent your life understanding the world through your eyes. As you share your life with your children, you will see life through theirs. Don't be afraid to talk about your fears and concerns and share your experiences with other families. You have a very special and unique life experience, but you are not alone.