pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

How Do We Measure Potential for Success in Adoptive Parents?

By Beth Hall, Director.

I've noticed a trend recently among pre-adoptive parents who contact Pact to learn more about our placement services. Many seem to view adoption as a process whereby they decide what makes them comfortable in terms of the child they want to adopt, and then start interviewing service providers to determine who can best meet their needs. I call this a consumer mentality. In the face of an adoption industry that allows for-profit entities to charge fees related to the placement of children, it would be unfair to blame these prospective parents entirely for falling into this "shopping" mode. On the other hand, there is something inherently flawed in a system that treats the fate of an infant as a consumer choice.

At Pact, we believe the focus of adoption must always be responding to children's needs. We think it is reasonable to expect adoptive parents (including pre-adopters) to aspire to a standard of parenting that adopted children need and deserve. None of us has an inherent "right" to be a parent, instead it is a monumental privilege. For this reason, we expect each pre-adoptive parent to prove their commitment to being the best possible parent to an adopted child of color before we accept them into our placement program.

So how do we measure how prepared pre-adoptive parents are to successfully meet the needs of their prospective children? Over the years, working with hundreds of adopted children of color and their families, we have identified specific attitudes and abilities that are needed in order to provide the parenting that adopted children deserve. We call these the "markers of success." Some are relevant to all adoptive parents, while some apply only to those who are transracial adopters (where neither parent shares the race of their child and are usually white themselves). In our counseling sessions and workshops, we ask pre-adoptive parents to consider their strengths and weaknesses relative to these qualities, then help them build up the skills they need to best serve their children. If you are committed to being a successful adoptive parent, here are some essential questions to consider:

Markers of Success for All Adopters
(Both Same-Race and Transracial)

• *Can you put your child first?* Ultimately, as the parent, your job is to privilege your child's experience of adoption over your own ("it's not about you"). From the beginning, this means thinking about your child's story as theirs rather than yours, and planning for future contact and information-sharing in the context of what is best for them in the long term, rather than what is most comfortable for you.

• *Are you able to live with complexity?* Adoptive parents must be able to hold in balance the joy of welcoming a child into their family with the grief and loss experienced by the birth family and eventually the child, who is losing one family in order to gain another. Joyfully celebrating a relationship does not mean pretending no losses have occurred. Adoption is inherently complex for those who are adopted because to gain a family they must first lose another. Whether that loss is something that is inherently "in their best interest" or not, it is nevertheless a loss. If parents cannot model acceptance of the inherent complexity of adoption, we cannot expect children to come to terms with their own multiplicity of feelings.

• *Can you offer your child absolute love without demanding it in return?* Adoptive parents need to understand that a complex response to the experience of being placed for adoption is not a measure of the love felt from or towards a child's adoptive parent. Gratitude cannot be demanded, only earned. Adopted children do not owe "more" gratitude to their parents than children born into their families. Adoptive parents must also be careful not to subconsciously look to their children to "replace" or fix their own losses, such as those related to infertility.

• *Can you see that you are the lucky one?* Too often society labels adopted children as "lucky," with the subtext that adopted children require more "saintly" parents because they are "less-lovable." Successful adoptive parents are those who recognize that even in the face of the challenges and pain that sometimes are part of parenting, they are lucky to have the chance to forge an intimate relationship with a child and fill the role of care-giving parent in that child's life.

• *Can you be generous in the face of "competition"?* Adoptive parents must understand an adopted child's connection to at least two families as a gain rather than a threat. It is not children's job to take care of their parent's feelings. Fear of a child's interest in their birth family or birth heritage (because it might somehow take away from their love towards the adoptive parent) sacrifices the child's natural curiosity to the parent's need for validation. Supporting this connection generally results in the closest of all adoptive family relationships.

• *Are you ready to tell the truth?* Make a commitment to speak the truth about adoption with your child–no exceptions. There is no adoption that does not include some painful truths, and is easy to convince ourselves that it's our job to protect our children from

pain. But we must tell children the truth, including the hard stuff, so they can understand that adult decisions and circumstances were the reasons for their adoption. Children understand the power of the secret and the unspoken (the things "we just don't talk about" are usually bad); if you don't tell your child about their adoption–all of it–then you are risking them feeling ashamed, guilty, and unworthy.

• *Are you ready to make an unconditional commitment, in good times and bad?* Bravery is needed, a willingness to take on whatever comes up without regret or second thoughts. Many children give their parents trials, and adopted children have even more reason to question and act out based on the history that resulted in their placement. Adopted children have already lost at least one family—maybe a country, a language, or other families. They are very sensitive to whether or not a commitment to being family is unconditional, and are more likely to test that. When children test, adoptive parents have to be prepared to show their children that they will stick with them under all circumstances. It takes bravery to hang in with your child no matter how bad it gets, but it also creates a closeness that is powerful and rewarding.

• *Can you embrace differences?* You must understand that becoming an adoptive family means being on a different track than other families. Rather than trying to act "just like a family built by birth," strive to be the best kind of adoptive family. This means being comfortable with and honest about the fact that your family is different than others. Be truthful in acknowledging that many people think adoptive families are second-best or not as strongly connected as those formed by birth. If we can't articulate those truths, then children will often assume that their parents don't realize that they are different and become anxious that any mention of their difference might somehow threaten their solidity as a family. Strength comes from acknowledging and embracing the differences.

• *Can you live with your choice?* Recognize that you, as the parent, have/had a choice about whether to adopt or not. It is important to acknowledge that your child did not "choose" adoption (in almost all cases) and therefore their process of acceptance and resolution is inherently different than yours. It is not their job to justify your choice or make you feel like it was a "good" or "right" one.

Additional Markers of Success for Transracial Adopters

• *Fundamentally, do you recognize that race matters?* Every day, all the time, race matters for people of color and for white people. For white people who have grown up in racially homogenous environments and whose personal and professional relationships are primarily with other white people, this can be hard to understand. Racism is real, and parents cannot help their children combat it if they refuse to acknowledge their own participation in a system that is built on race-based privilege. Privilege is a benefit we receive that is not necessarily earned but simply given to people of a particular class. White people are often presumed to be smart, safe, or trustworthy not because they demonstrate those traits but simply based on racial stereotypes. Transracial adoptive parents need to begin with self-assessment that acknowledges internalized privilege, then work to change the racial landscape of their lives—cultivating intimate relationships with adults of color, at least some of who share their child's ethnic heritage. Success in this direction is measured not by our casual acquaintances but rather who we eat dinner with, worship with, or otherwise engage with intimately.

• *Will you commit to being in the minority rather than asking your child to be in the minority?* Adoptive parents need to be willing to live in such a way that they are not asking their child to adapt to their world, but rather are making changes themselves so that their child learns to live with them as well as among others who share their race and ethnicity. This takes honest recognition that isolation is painful and it is unfair to ask children of color to suffer something that parents are not asking of themselves. Children need role models, adults (not just children) who mirror their experience and show them how to walk the walk and talk the talk in a world that is not always fair or friendly. When parents live in largely white areas and want to adopt a child of color, they often say that they believe that race shouldn't matter and doesn't matter to them. But if in fact they celebrate differences and multiculturalism themselves, they need to ask themselves how it is they have ended up living a life that is so monoracial/white. It may work for them, but research and anecdotal evidence make clear that it does not work well for children. If our focus is on the child, then it is the adult who must change, the adult who must stretch, the adult who must accommodate the needs of the child. If their lifestyle does not work for a child of color, then they should be invited to adopt in-racially, rather than asking or allowing children to bear the burden of the adults' unwillingness or inability to provide the role models, peers, and mirrors that they so desperately need to thrive.

• *Are you ready to become an ally?* Transracial parents need to have their children's back. They need to believe their children when they question racial fairness and equity, they need to support them in their struggles, and they need to exhibit zero tolerance when it comes to racial slurs or slights. It does not help to respond, "Oh, I don't think Mrs. So-and-so meant it that way." Comments like that don't help child learn to trust their own antennae regarding who is safe and who is not. There are no exceptions when it comes to racism–not even for beloved Mrs. So-and-so.

Yes, you can!

I have had the privilege of being the sister of an adopted sibling as well as the adoptive mother of two, now young adults, who have filled my life with joy and pride—as well as the pain and frustration that is an inevitable part of parenting. I can say from experience that whenever I have succeeded in moving beyond my own needs to be there for my children and my sister I have always received more than I have given. I invite you to take this path if you are brave enough to let go of yourself and put your child's needs first. It is not for the faint of heart but it is perhaps the most exhilarating and meaningful journey that you will even have the chance to experience. It is humbling beyond measure and thrilling in a way that exceeds words. Make a pact with yourself, your God, and most importantly your child—that you will be the best parent you can be, for your child's sake.