

Prepare In Order To Protect

by Beth Hall

To prepare: to provide a person with the necessary equipment for an expedition or journey, to defend, to guard, to keep, to look after, to care for, to shield, to shelter or to watch over.
To protect: to prevent somebody or something from being harmed or damaged, means to get ready, to train, to set up, organize, plan, practice and put in order.

I relish my role as a mother. It was after reading the children's book *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman (1994, New York, Dial Press) when my own children were young that I began to articulate the mantra "prepare in order to protect." The main character, Grace, wants to play the part of Peter Pan in a school production, but her classmates tell her she can't because Peter Pan is a boy and "he isn't black." Moments when I can step in to protect my children tempt me, because those moments allow me to feel like I am a "powerful" parent. Rather than rushing into school to talk to the teachers or administrators, Grace's mother and grandmother focus instead on boosting her ambition and confidence. They remind her she "can be anything she wants," introduce her to the inspiring achievements of a black ballerina, and help her prepare for the auditions. By giving Grace the inspiration and ability to go back into the classroom where she was hurt and try to overcome bias, Grace's family offers her the opportunity to shine and succeed (as indeed she does when she amazes everyone by winning the role of Peter Pan), rather than taking the opportunity for themselves to shine as Grace's guardians and protectors.

My own white middle-class background taught me the romantic vision of an innocent child at play, unaware of even the smallest difficulties in life. The problem with this vision is that too many times it has more payoffs for parents than for children. Whether consciously or not, under the pretext of concern for their welfare, we keep our children helpless and dependent upon us and allow ourselves to appear big, powerful, and protective in our own eyes and, for a time, in our children's eyes as well. Isn't it a good feeling to be the protector? It supports a parent's need to be needed. Yet being the protector does not always serve the child's need to learn self-reliance and self-determination.

To help our children be strong and capable of exploring and understanding the world they live in, we have to prepare them in order to protect them. Life will dole out harsh lessons to our children when we are not around to shield them, and if they are not prepared we risk them taking these experiences personally. We have to prepare them to handle new challenges so they can

feel strong and powerful when they do so successfully. If we protect them from all the tough stuff, we deny them the opportunity to feel the pride in themselves that will later protect them from internalizing negative messages like those Grace's classmates tried to give her. The antidote to negative experiences lies far less in the world we allow our children to experience than it does in the internal strength they develop when we give them the opportunity to find it within themselves. Victims are bred by the belief that they do not have choices and cannot control their own destiny; survivors are born out of a belief in their own value and their ability to control their own reactions to the world rather than allowing the world to control them.

Because of the circumstances of adoption and race in America, adoptive parents of children of color often hope to "keep their children innocent," enjoying a "loss-free" childhood for as long as possible, in the hope of building self-esteem and "making up" for any losses that may have hurt them in the past. If we try to protect our children from difficult life moments, we risk the possibility of leaving them unprepared to identify and push back against the adoptist and racist situations that will inevitably impact them. Even in the most protected environments it is possible for bad things to happen. In a racist society, even the youngest among us will sooner or later have a negative experience relating to race. In a world where many people believe that "real" parents give birth to their children and adopted children should be eternally grateful (translate: never curious or sad) because they were "saved" from their first family, country, culture, or "bad" circumstances. If we are not careful, our children will come to believe that there must be something wrong with them that caused them to be adopted or causes people to react to them in negative ways.

Often parents ask if it isn't too negative for young children to have adults portray the world as scary or dangerous. Shouldn't we protect them from the harsh realities of racism or adoptism until they are older, until they are ready? I wonder sometimes when these parents think that time will come. Perhaps many of us have secretly wished our children would never be old enough to not need us, and in truth, they will always need us—not because we are their great protectors, but rather because we are their greatest allies, the way Grace's Mom and Grandma were. To support children's sense of dignity and competence, we must curb our need to rescue them from every possible harm or danger, face our fears about addressing racism or adoptism, and focus on being allies for our children.

No parent would let their child learn how to cross the street without clear tools for avoiding getting hit by oncoming traffic. It's easy for us to understand that we must discuss the dangers of cars and the street, even though we risk scaring our children or giving them a negative attitude about the world. We understand that navigating traffic is truly a matter of life and death. Issues

of identity, adoption and racialization are no different. Children must be taught how to anticipate and cope with social bias. They need to be able to identify and give language to prejudice about adoption and race in order to understand the differences between the principles we are teaching them and those they may encounter in the world outside our homes.

Children need adult help as they grow in order to develop and maintain their own values. Complex value-laden issues (like understanding right from wrong, what adoption really means, how race and culture impact peoples lives, where babies come from, how family members are connected) are learned in stages. The values children learn best are those that are supported and affirmed by their parents, the people they trust most in the world. They will only be able to embrace your values in a personal way when they see and understand that the whole world doesn't agree with your family morals and ideals, and are then given the chance to make choices for themselves based on the information and experiences that you have given them.

Even when our children are very young, we can begin to introduce the concept of values by pointing out situations in books or in real life that give us the opportunity to explain that we don't agree with other adults on certain issues. For instance, we might talk with a child about a parent who was yelling at a child in the grocery store. Once we are back in the car, we can say, "I noticed there was a mom who was talking in a yelling voice to her child in the store. Remember, children never deserve to be yelled at, even when they make a mistake. That is not behavior we agree with in our family." Or "did you see this TV commercial about puppies that don't have a family to live with? Sometimes people don't take care of their pets and they leave them on the street. That is something we don't agree with in our family."

Later, these moments can evolve into more sophisticated discussions. "Remember at Thanksgiving when Grandma said that she doesn't think that Chinese people should be allowed to drive? We love Grandma and she will always be part of our family, but we don't agree with her about this. She probably doesn't know very many Chinese people so she has ideas that aren't true or accurate. It's kind of sad for Grandma, because she won't be able to make friends with people if she thinks she knows things about them just because they are a certain race or look a certain way. This is what people mean when they say racism or prejudice, when people judge others because of their race or religion or gender or something else about them that just is. That's why we don't agree with that in our family." Or as a way to balance between the belongingness that comes with the declaration of family values and the personal integrity that comes with having an opinion and taking a stand, a parent could say: "When Grandma talked about Chinese drivers, I was really uncomfortable with the way she was judging a whole group of people based on one person's driving or a stereotype about how Chinese people drive. I talked to Grandma about it yesterday and told her that I disagree with her. What did you think about what she said? What do you think I should say to her? How does it make you feel when she says stuff like that? I

wonder if we want to hang around her as much if she keeps saying stuff like that?" This allows room for disagreement even within our own family about values and handling these kinds of difficult situations.

Eventually our discussions with our children will go even further, talking about the actual strategies for interacting with adults with whom we disagree, including Grandmas, teachers, and other folks in authority, while maintaining a respectful tone. This is an essential navigational skill. Discussions about institutional "isms" and social justice will emerge directly from this base. Each new stage and interaction gives the child an opportunity to develop an identity as survivor and self-advocate, rather than a victim attitude. This will allow them to push back against targeting and recognize that "isms" are the disease of the racist or adoptist or homophobe rather than the fault of the individual who is being targeted.

When we teach our children to identify bias when it comes up in books or on TV, we make it far easier for them to recognize and respond to it when it comes up again. Parents need to model as well as strategize in advance with their children appropriate responses to adoptive, racial and other types of bias.

Often hardest for parents is preparing children for the hate-words that might be used against them. But won't it be easier for them to hear it at home first, where the words will still hurt but the sting of surprise will be minimized? A parent could say: "Sometimes people use mean words to hurt people because they have a problem with certain kinds of people. Like sometimes people don't like people who are girls or people who are boys so they call them mean names... Or sometimes people don't like people who are one race or another so they call them mean names..." Eventually when they ask you what some of those names are you can begin by asking your child if they have heard any and then after they share some (because they may well have) you can begin to share some too. Tell them specifically that these are names that you don't want them to use because they are meant to hurt people and they are targeting people because of who they are not how they act and that is wrong. This gives you and your child the foundation of a relationship that makes it clear that together you can handle these discussions and this pain; they don't need to "take care of you" nor will they need to question if you are in-the-know or have their back.

When we encourage our child to value his or her own ability to deal with challenging situations, then we are truly preparing them for life. By becoming actively involved in tolerance-promoting and difference-validating activities, we can model an assertive way of dealing with difficult events and practices. When we stimulate and encourage open communication within the family about social issues that have strong, emotional impact on our children, we are preparing them to handle the issues that arise when we are not there to protect them.

Preparing in order to protect our children is critical because in the end that is the only protection that will work!