



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Ask Pact

Responding to Racist Comments from Kids

This month we turn "Ask Pact" over to the many wise voices on our Pact Campers list-serve.

Q:

My Caucasian husband and I have an African American daughter, who has blessed our lives since her birth four years ago. We have struggled to find intercultural friends and connections. My daughter told me yesterday that a preschool classmate, a white girl, told her that white girls can't play with her. She was saddened by this. I tried to get more details—were there other kids or adults around when this happened, did she tell anyone, how many white girls were there and were they playing together at the time—but I couldn't get answers I was sure about. In any case, something happened, something upsetting, and it makes me sick to my stomach. I tried to tell my daughter that people say things that are unkind without thinking, or because they themselves have been hurt and don't know better, but I lost her attention—still trying to figure out how to talk to a four-year-old about abstract concepts! Does anyone have any suggestions?

Pat:

I would definitely talk to the teacher and ask him or her to talk to the parents. I'm hoping this isn't something the child got from her parents and they can talk to her about why it's not okay. My daughter hasn't experienced outright hostile remarks like that but a friend repeated a racist rhyme. I notified the teacher who talked to the parent and she was very apologetic. I felt it was important for the friend to know that it was not okay, for her own sake really. I presented it to the teacher as wanting to help the kid who was being racist.

Lisa:

I think it is good to tell her how you know it really hurts when people say things like that. She may not be old enough to process the why, but a good hug and something like "you must have felt hurt" might be good. I am still learning to do this instead of doing so much explaining (even though my daughter is twelve). I'm afraid this kind of thing is a sad reality for our children.

Sheila:

I hope your child is not the only African American child in her school. I can't stress that enough. My daughter gets a lot of support from her African American girlfriends at school whenever there are issues of any kind. They have a little sisterhood going that is a source of comfort and validation for her. We had to look hard to find a school with a substantial African American peer group for her. It's not convenient, it's not cheap, but that is a sacrifice we signed up for when we adopted transracially.

I remember that feeling of hurt on behalf of my child, and wanting to take away the pain! We just keep building her up as much as we can and don't let anybody's ignorance bring her or us down. There's a song on one of her CDs of African American children's songs called "Just Keep Going On"—the chorus is: "take every knock as a boost, every stumbling block as a stepping stone, lift up your head, hold your own and just keep going on." She likes to sing it.

Kristin: We had a similar incident in kindergarten: some boys told our son they didn't let "boys with brown skin play with their scooters." In this case I actually overheard the conversation. My son was stunned, and of course it broke my heart. I decided to write a letter to all the parents and have the school distribute it. I reminded parents that kindergarten is a transition period and brings children into contact with children that may look different or have a very different life experience from theirs, and I asked them to talk to their kids about difference, and adoption as well. I had to spend quite a bit of time getting my emotions under control to make it sound balanced. Many parents were really receptive and happy to get the heads up and reminder to talk about these issues with their little ones.

Sadly this is just another indication of the subtle messages of discrimination that children learn so early in life.

June: I had a similar experience with my daughter when she was in preschool visiting what was to be her kindergarten in the fall. A girl told my daughter that black girls weren't allowed to play in the room. My daughter came up to me (I was talking to the teacher) and told me tearfully what had happened. I relayed the conversation to the teacher and she talked to the girl immediately. The teacher asked the girl how she would feel if she were told that all blond girls had been told the same thing she had just told my daughter. The girl cried and apologized. The girl's parent found me the following fall and also apologized. But it was a bad first impression of kindergarten. Even though she is seventeen now my daughter still remembers that day.

John: I strongly recommend that parents read *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* by Deborah Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin. And give it to your kids teachers to read, if they are in denial that preschoolers know how to wield racist words as weapons. Van Ausdale spent a year observing a preschool to witness what kids say and do to each other when adults aren't listening. Amazing stuff she found that parents and teachers could not believe!

Also, don't forget to validate children's anger. It's more empowering for parents to allow them their anger than to just commiserate with their sadness. Sadness tends to be directed inward, leading to paralysis, depression, and other disorders, but anger can be directed outward where it belongs.

Dylan: We ran into a similar situation, where some boys on the bus were saying that our daughter couldn't be friends with white kids because she's brown, and that she could only be friends with brown people. We took it up with the principal, who responded by treating this as an opportunity to educate the whole school, with segments in each classroom.

At home we talked about it quite a bit with our daughter, who was understandably outraged. But despite her overt resistance we heard quite a bit from her in the subsequent months about how she could only be friends with other brown girls, and the like. So despite the fact that she disagreed with the boys' claim, she internalized some of it, and it took months for her to process through it.

Dylan: My personal feeling is that this kind of racist talk is incredibly common among small children. That means that all our kids are going to run into it, as all children of color do, and probably more than we know. The important thing is in how we handle it, which for us means talking about the subject of skin color and racism, a lot.

Mollie: I want to refocus this courageous conversation about race. To be blunt, I think the tree is obscuring the forest. What I mean by this is that the white racial framing of the problem highlights "racism as encounter."

Karen: To insure my daughter's safety and well-being it's not just the student body that needs to be diverse, it's also the faculty and staff. When she was four one of the boys in her class (biracial, being raised by a white mom) told her that "brown kids" couldn't play in a game that was underway. (Clearly, he didn't think of himself as brown.) Fortunately one of the male teachers, also biracial, heard the comment and talked with him about some of the pressures placed on Black boys and men, and the importance of being supportive to others. I also let my daughter know she can play any game she wants to. We discussed that sometimes people have been hurt and try to feel better about themselves by making others feel bad. She learned how to tell other kids, "It hurts my feelings when you say that – and I don't like it!"

Michael-David:

Our youngest daughter's school was not very supportive and our attempts to organize (mostly white) parent discussions to alter the school culture went nowhere. The First R...I can't tell you how important that book was to me to give context and an ability to articulate to other adults both the ways in which my daughter's situation was the norm and how it needed to be transformed. In our case, that meant leaving the school. Pact Camp a couple of years ago was super-important for us coming to that realization—including making our daughter comfortable enough to communicate clearly what her expectations/hopes/needs were.

Karyn:

When something like this happened with our daughter, the timing happened to coincide with an interview I heard with one of the Little Rock Nine—one of the first black students at Little Rock High. She felt that probably only ten or fifteen percent of her classmates really wanted her out, but that the rest of the school was silent. They allowed the bullies and racists to single her and the others out.

With this in mind, I made a point of talking publicly to our daughter's principal, teachers, and adult friends with her there—I didn't name the other child except to those who needed to deal with the child. I talked about my daughter's experience and what the woman from Little Rock had said. Responses were very supportive of my daughter and she got to see that those people were all on her team and she came through it having gained confidence in her place in the school and community. It goes some way to offset the difficulties of dealing with personal bullying when the result is not isolation from your group but being embraced by it.