



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in *Pact's Point of View* © 2005  
Do not reprint without permission.

# Ask Pact

## Hair Is an Adoption Issue

### Hair Comments

*I've just come from the store and seen a white family with a black child who's hair was dry and matted. I wanted to mention to the family that they needed to do something about the child's hair but chickened out because I didn't want to offend them.*

*Parents, please put an oil moisturizer on your black children's hair and comb it everyday. You don't need to wash it everyday as it will dry out badly.*

*Please don't put a relaxer on young children's hair. Wait until they ask for one and are able to maintain their hair on their own. This includes moisturizing and combing everyday.*

*Parents, please provide your children with positive black role models. Speaking as a young black woman, it is hard enough to foster a positive self-image surrounded by black people. It is next to impossible for black children who are surrounded by NO ONE who looks like them.*

*I got the book and video as well as some products from Pamela Ferrell's website, [cornrowsandco.com](http://cornrowsandco.com). I love doing my daughter Angel's hair, but there's always more to learn!*

*I wanted to share that we've worked out a good system so that Angel doesn't mind sitting still while I do her hair, even though she is a very active girl. While her dad is washing her hair in the tub, I set up her little table in the living room with some snacks, coloring books, dolls etc., lay out my combs, detangler, clips and towel, and put on some fairly mellow and long kid videos. She is happy to sit while I do her hair and we take breaks whenever she asks, but I make sure to turn off the video during breaks so she has to sit again if she wants to watch more. Sometimes she wants a turn doing my hair at the end...*

*If I'm doing a style that takes longer like cornrows, little twists or microbraids, I'll do half in the morning (the front) and put the back in a pompom or single braid until the evening or the next day. It looks good that way and saves time. I can't comb her hair dry, so I use a spritzer bottle to re-wet the rest of her hair before I work on it again. Those styles last about two weeks, with a touch up on the weekend if necessary (for sand removal, for example). With braids, we can wash her hair with the braids in. I spray oil on it every few days while the braids are in. I have to trim her ends about every two months so it stays easy to comb out. Blowdrying it definitely made braiding much easier, but it made her particular hair type so dry that I was afraid it would damage her hair so we went back to wetstyling.*

*Angel loves having new hairstyles and it really makes a difference to her to feel that her hair is pretty. So for folks who struggle with home hair care, I recommend finding a braider. Professional braiders are much faster than us amateurs and their braids last longer. If you feel overwhelmed and frustrated by their hair, your child is bound to sense that, no matter how well you try to conceal it. And braiders can do things like beads (which I still can't) and patterns that your kids will love!*

*Word of mouth seems to be the best way to find good braiders. I often ask other mothers at the playground where they get their daughters' hair braided. If anyone needs a braider in the SF Bay area, I know of a few.*

*That's all and good luck!  
Sheila*

For white parents who have adopted kids of African descent, hair care is a big issue. Pact gets more questions from these parents about hair care than about any other topic. Take a look at the messages we have received in the boxes alongside this article, and you'll see how complex it can be.

Hair can be an adoption issue from the point of view of transracially adopted kids. If their parents don't know how to care for their hair, it can affect how kids feel about themselves, and mark them as

outsiders in the African American community. For these kids and their families, hair care is about a lot more than cosmetics!

There are several good books available to help parents learn how to care for hair. Some are: *Good Hair*, and *Plaited Glory*, by Lonice Bonner and *Let's Talk Hair*, *Kids Talk Hair*, and *Where Beauty Touches Me*, all by Pamela Ferrell.

There are also some wonderful books for African American kids

## Hair Comments

*"I take my daughters' hair very seriously.... In the black community, the care and maintenance of hair means more than just barrettes and ponytails; hair reflects pride and care, and neglected heads display a serious lack of mother's love.... Years ago, I met a woman whose mother refused to style her hair. I remember the hurt in her voice when she described it, and I thought about a mother's rejection reflected in tangles and neglect...I'm just grateful for conditioner... Rosette is tender-headed, and the slightest tugging at her scalp makes her cry. I'm willing to be patient, because this is what we do... Most white women do not know the kitchen, the snarls at the nape of the neck. Many white women I know express shock that I spend this much time on my girls' hair...The women who don't have to do this miss out on hours of touching, talking and closeness... My fingers weave and weave, and I know what is braided into each minute we spend there. ...don't think it doesn't matter. Because it does."*

—Susan Straight, Salon

*"I plan to call a hair salon. I have called them before, but all I ever got was an answering machine. I don't like waiting for people to return calls. But I'll leave a message if I have to. If they don't do kids' hair, maybe they can refer me to someone who does. There aren't a lot of African American beauty salons around here. I guess I could go to the city, but that's sure a scary thought"*

—Kim

*Oh no, we can't get together on Saturday, that's hair day for us. The girls wouldn't miss it because they want to look good for school next week.*

—African American grandmother

*I used to ask myself whether making a 3 year old sit still for hours was fair to her (or me), just so her hair could look good. Maybe when she is older we will set our expectations higher. We had so many things to do with our weekend together besides spending half of it doing Shayna's hair. Now I am so grateful that I didn't give up. I have formed some instant bonds with older African American women when they learn that I braid my daughter's hair myself.*

—Becca

that can help instill pride by celebrating the beauty of African American hair, or by just giving kids new ideas for how to style theirs. Some examples are *My Hair Is Beautiful Because It's Mine*, a board book by Paula deJoice; *I Love My Hair*, by Natasha Tarpley, *Wild Wild Hair*, by Nikki Grimes, *Nappy Hair*, by Carolivia Herron, *Palm Trees*, by Nancy Cote, and *Corncrows*, by Camille Yarbrough.

Grooming black children's hair is not an easy matter if you have no experience doing it. Learning usually requires hands-on help from someone familiar with what is needed. And combing out and styling – especially for younger children – takes time and patience. In black families, spending this time is taken for granted, because there is little tolerance in the community for not taking care of a child's hair. White parents may have great difficulty devoting the time it takes, and avoid doing it, having little idea of the importance of looking good. But, as some of the emails we've included show, the end results of their efforts will be judged by the high standards of the black community.

**How hair-educated are you?** For white parents of black children, doing your child's hair is totally different from doing your own. Most white people never had a chance to learn how. Young children need to feel beautiful and handsome to take pride in themselves. If their hair is a source of frustration not just for them, but for you, they may begin to develop low self-esteem. There are no absolute rules, any more than with white hair-care. The following ideas are commonly, though not universally, accepted within the African American community.

**Growth: My child's hair is not growing. What should I do?** Each child's hair and texture is different. If your child's hair is not growing as fast or in the direction you'd like, have a professional decide if there is a problem. Likely you are not seeing length due to curl.

**Combing: How often should I comb or brush my child's hair?** What kind of comb should I use? Are there special techniques for combing? How do I comb out tangles? What styles minimize tangling? It depends on the hair type. With daily (or more frequent) brushing, the hair will have fewer mats and thus hurt less with time. A very fine-toothed comb removes scalp build-up. A wide-toothed comb or pick is best for combing through the hair to minimize breakage. Natural bristle brushes are often softer and easier to use than synthetic brushes. Always comb the ends first. Spray with detangler and then massage in moisturizer. The hair will be easier to comb. Don't try to comb through the roots until the ends are tangle-free. Braiding will minimize tangling.

## Hair Products: Can my child and I use the same products?

Probably not. Products designed for African American hair add moisture to the hair. It is also necessary to use some kind of hair moisturizer (crème or oil) at least once a day and after every washing. Make sure you use enough so the hair looks shiny but not greasy.

## Shampooing: How often should hair be washed? Which shampoo should I use?

Only wash once or twice a week. Water is a drying agent. Most African Americans have to be very careful about keeping enough moisture and oil in their hair. Frequent washing may dry out the hair, preventing the natural oils from moisturizing. There is no single shampoo that suits every hair type. Try several kinds that are made just for African Americans to find the one that works best for your child. Alternate shampoo brands during the year. Hair condition changes with the seasons and the environment, so what works well in the summer may not work as well in the winter. Scrub the scalp to remove build-up of dead skin cells. Use the pads of your fingers or a scalp brush. (You can find one in the baby department of stores.) A mixture of two well-beaten egg yolks and 1/4 tsp. sea salt can be massaged into the scalp, then shampooed out for deep cleaning.

**Dry Hair: Moisturize, Moisturize, Moisturize!** Dry hair feels hard, brittle and looks dull. It is caused by under-active oil glands. A dry scalp is often flaky or looks as if it is cracking. Find a moisturizing product or conditioner for extra-dry hair. The leave-in type is better. Leave-in conditioner usually has humectants, which help bring moisture to the hair. Avoid using too much leave-in conditioner because it will make the hair sticky, flat and difficult to style. Too much grease will attract dirt and dust. Deep conditioner is a heavier cosmetic such as cholesterol or mayonnaise that is enhanced by body heat or an electric heat cap. The heat dilates the cuticles, causing the conditioner to penetrate the cuticle layer of the hair shaft. Hair oil has been used in Africa for centuries to lubricate, stimulate and keep moisture in the scalp. Massage hair oils into a clean scalp once or twice weekly using circular motions to help stimulate the blood flow. A moisturizing treatment should be done once or twice a week; a leave-in conditioner can be used. Follow the instructions on the label about how much of the product to use. Check your intuitive assumption carefully, which is probably based on your own hair type, not your child's. Use enough so the hair looks shiny but not greasy. Conditioners provide a protective coating to the hair, make the scalp and hair supple, and give luster to the hair shaft.

## Hair Comments

*"If I put my daughter's hair in cornrows, she would stick out like a sore thumb. There are no black families in our town. Next year we intend to send her to preschool in the next town. They had a black teacher last year and I hope they still do, but we don't live close by—fifteen minutes. I believe God gave our child to us, and I'm sure that He will guide us in raising her to be what He wants her to be."*

—Jane

*"I don't like to, but I wash and comb my daughter's hair once a week and rebraid it in the middle of the week. I say her hair is her crowning glory, that it is beautiful and I'm going to make sure that it stays nice. She complains the whole way through and grabs the nape of her neck when I get to that part (there is just no way to avoid pulling those little tiny hairs back there) but we get it done. What I want to know is when can she take over her own hair care? She is 10 years old. I keep reminding her that this is her hair and she is going to have to learn to deal with it because it's with her for life. I'm not that good at it anyway and I feel like it should be her job."*

—Esther

### **Tender-Headed: What if my child hates to have her hair combed and brushed?**

Your child may not like the comb, but if you don't do it consistently, her hair will begin to mat and can reach a point where it can't be untangled. In fact, this is how dreadlocks are formed. Very often, parents tell us they feel bad because their children cry, but many children cry, even when they have same-race parents. Don't use this as an excuse. Your child will get used to it and their scalp will become less sensitive over time. Grooming must be done daily. There is zero tolerance in the African American community for an unkempt transracially adopted black child.

### **Talking About Hair: How do I talk about my child's hair?**

Avoid negative terms such as good-hair, bad-hair, knotty head, even if you hear them from African American friends. As you are grooming, comment on specifics that he or she can see, smell, or touch such as "Your hair is so shiny today!" "Just smell your hair. I love that smell when it's first oiled, don't you?"

Techniques for braiding: How do I braid my child's hair? Use lotion or oil while braiding. If you don't like grease, use lanolin and lighter products. Some people prefer the smells of coconut, olive or jojoba oils. Braiding is done by sectioning the hair, paying care to make straight parts. Braid one section at a time. When you take the braids out, comb the hair out thoroughly before you wash it. It will be easy to handle because the braids will have kept it from getting tangled. Wash, condition and rebraid. Don't make really small children sit for long periods of time to have their hair elaborately braided. The younger the child, the simpler the braiding style should be. Work to avoid breakage. Don't pull the hair too tight with rubber bands, braids or barrettes. Use cloth bands, bobby pins or clips.

**Frizzies: How do I control frizzy hair?** Use a styling gel to help control the frizzles but be sure also to moisturize because the styling product can dry out the hair. Frizzies also means breakage.

**Sleeping care: How should my child be sent to bed?** Have your child sleep in a satin scarf or sleep cap. Satin is soft and stops the ends from breaking. The "do" will last longer and break less.

### **Cradle cap: How can we get rid of severe scalp build-up?**

Children of any race can have cradle cap, which is a thick, scaly build-up of dead skin cells on the scalp. Cradle cap is especially an issue for children who have full heads of hair when born and especially children whose hair is very tight and curly. Hair-care products are culprits when used incorrectly, but mostly it's just a function of how the scalp is taken care of. Treat by combing oil through the hair to soften the build-up. A really fine-toothed comb helps. Pure vitamin E can be used instead of oil. When the build-up has softened, wash it out.

**Lint: What is that white stuff in my child's hair?** The "stuff" in your child's hair is lint or dust. Too much grease will attract it. Some types of hair can be like Velcro and will pick up lint no matter what you do. There is no preventive technique. You simply must pick it out. Sometimes parents confuse cradle cap with lint.

### **Straightening: Should I straighten or relax my daughter's hair?**

Relaxers are chemicals that straighten hair. These should not be tried without professional consultation and are rarely suggested for children under nine years old. To press hair means to heat it, making it straight. Straightening is done with a hot comb and can make the hair easier to manage but should also be done only by an experienced professional. Again, very young children do not usually have the patience for this kind of procedure. The chemical used for straightening is sodium hydroxide which is lye. It changes the molecular structure of the hair by breaking down the bond which creates the "S-shaped" curl. Once this bond is broken, the hair loses much of its natural resiliency. Children's scalps are more sensitive and prone to irritation, burns, and hair loss. Avoid putting chemicals on a child's scalp before age nine and never do it at home. Let an experienced professional handle it. The percentage of chemical is adjusted for the texture of the hair. Assessment of how much is honed by experience. Should I give my child a curly perm? Kiddy perms chemically straighten the hair and then use other chemicals to produce a "loose" curl. They are no different from the chemical products for adults, even though they are marketed for kids. Some consider it advisable to hold off on perms until young adulthood. Unskilled parents have produced second-degree burns. Braids, twists and cornrows are far safer to manage.

**Professional care: Where can I get help?** It is a very good idea to go to a professional salon that specializes in serving African Americans to learn how and what to do with your child's hair. We recommend asking African American friends or others who would know to recommend salons open to helping white parents of black kids. A wonderful side benefit of this activity is the experience it gives you of being the only one of your race present in the salon or barber shop while your child is in the majority. Nothing is as nice as to see your children leaving the salon with an extra strut in their step because of the fuss and attention they have just received. It's easy to feel great about yourself when you look great! Find a black hair stylist who is good with kids!!! Drive as far as you need to. Get your child's hair professionally washed, conditioned and styled. You'll learn a lot, it will look great, and everyone will have time to relax about hair issues. Once you locate a stylist that you like, go regularly and stick with it. Help your child look great and feel part of the community of the barber shop or salon.

**Boys: What about hair care for boys?** Be careful about trying to have young boys look too hip. Boys need oils and conditioners too, even if their hair is kept short. The first time a barber cuts your son's hair with a razor may be scary. It may help to practice at home first, teaching your child how to sit still and not be afraid of the razor or the buzz. Brush hair forward, toward the face instead of back, going against the grain. Use a light pomade for daily use. Many African Americans do not cut their children's hair, even boys, until they are one year old. Braiding your son's hair along the back of his head can help manage it at night (or even during the day) if it is long.