



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Listen

By Jane Brown

How can we help our children to deal with prejudice and to develop a healthy (and accurate) racial identity within a multiracial adoptive family?

We, as parents, need to learn excellent listening skills. We need to learn how to help our children recognize, understand and accept their feelings. We need to speak about OUR feelings — the negative ones, especially. We need to speak about taboo subjects so our children receive permission to speak about them, too. We need to acknowledge our children's feelings when they and/or we as families experience a difficult situation that makes us uncomfortable.

When we learn these skills, we are better prepared to recognize and make tentative guesses about how our children feel about all sorts of things — among them, the fact of being transracially-adopted. We are better prepared to send the message to our children that we acknowledge their feelings without attempting to deny, minimize, or cover them over. Thus, we help enable our children to accept and change them.

Our own children frequently struggled with racial identity issues and all sorts of feelings about being adopted. They are able to tell us now that it helped them to have parents who listened carefully (often reading between the lines of what they actually said) and who acknowledged in a tentative way how we thought they must feel. I emphasize tentative because no one likes to think that one's inner thoughts are an open book! Sometimes our children denied our description of their feelings when we felt sure we had hit the nail on the head. It was enough for them just to feel understood and say they wanted to deal with things on their own.

Listening skills helped our children outside our family. They often could guess at how others were feeling and why they said and did things. They felt empowered when they could express their feelings, as no one can argue with someone's feelings. They felt well-armed to defend themselves in verbal debates. They were more sensitive to others and perhaps avoided some of the taunts from peers that sometimes occur when someone is angry and race is an easy Achilles heel to target.

We could not prevent the lousy consequences of being a person of color in a race-conscious society, but I guess I believe that, whatever the societal problems and insensitivities our children have experienced, they have never felt alone. Their feelings did not have to stay inside and eat away at their self-esteem. Their feelings didn't come out sideways (as revenge, for example). They always seemed willing to share what they were thinking/experiencing/feeling and could move on after venting.

Two of our children have married Asians. They have had to explain their adoptions and their superficial knowledge of their culture-of-origin. They have had to deal with insensitive questions and attitudes in the families they've married into. It has been challenging. They are strong individuals, however. I think that paying close attention to communication skills in our family may have contributed in a very positive way to that.