



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 1992

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Transracial Adoption by Jim Mahoney

One of the most important things White parents can do for their adopted children of color is to learn how "White" the parents are. What is the worst thing a White person can be called in school? Honky? Affluent? Upwardly Mobile? Let's get real. Unless a White person is a member of a minority group such as Lesbians and gays (who comprise perhaps 10% of our culture), the worst a White person can be called is the "F" world or the "L" word. In school, this hurts. If you are White and a member of the dominant culture, you can say "Sticks and stones will hurt my bones, but words will never hurt me." Maybe if you experienced abuse as a child or your parents were alcoholic, mentally ill, or couldn't hold down a job and you were ashamed to have your friends over to your house and you know a secret shame - perhaps then you may be able to have increased sensitivity to your children's feelings.

If you are a member of the non-dominant culture, you know the rhyme better. It goes, "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will break my heart." For White parents of children of color, it is vitally important to keep in mind that your children are members of a world you do not know. As a White person, you are not scrutinized routinely whenever you enter a 7-11 convenience store. Your children of color are. As a White person, you have benefited, regardless of your politics or beliefs, from racist institutions ranging from where freeways are located to banking and loan privileges not made available to persons of color. As a White person, you take for granted the existence of a higher level of health care than that generally available for people of color. White babies receive better medical care and have a higher infant survival rather than African American, Indian, and Hispanic infants. When your babies of color have babies, they will be exposed to that ugly reality.

Now that you are adoptive parents of children of color, you have entered the multi-dimensional world of racism and discrimination. As your children grow, other professionals will feel as entitled to comment upon

your adoption choice as mothers and aunts feel entitled to pat their daughter's pregnant belly. Your right to boundaries and respect are compromised.

You have entered the wonderful and surprising world of unconscious incompetence. In spite of the wonderful welcome of your neighbors and family, your adopted child of color will likely make less money than your White child. Your adopted child of color will be more likely to die from homicide and violent death than your White birth or adopted child. Your adopted child of color will likely experience more unemployment, layoffs, and vague depression than you did or your White children will.

All the while, caring White dominant-culture providers - teachers, therapists, physicians, nurses - will be available to offer assistance to you and your family. They mean well and have been useful in the past. The trouble is, in this regard they are incompetent! Do they have specialized training in cross-cultural studies? Or do they feel that "all people are alike"? If they are White and have not experienced shame, they will misdiagnose your adopted child of color's behavior as depression, the "blues," and will say "It's just a phase." They won't know that your adopted child of color is struggling with a hidden dual role expectation. Your adopted child of color must function as a member of the Smith or Jones family when with you. When without you, in the dominant culture - at the mall, store, library, McDonald's - your children of color must be culturally competent and know how to deal with being participants in the culture with which their skin color identifies them.

Your question now, while your beautiful dark-skinned adopted children of color are two and three years old, is "How will I teach my child to succeed in a dominant culture that names housing projects, schools, and neighborhood avenues after people and cultural groups only after the person or culture has been severely compromised or exterminated?"

As a White person, you will have to reexamine your basic questions: who did discover America? As a father, you will have to ask yourself, "Would I want to be a woman in my business? Or in any business? If I would not, how am I helping my White daughter or my daughter of color to succeed in her career outside the family?" As a White woman, you will have to examine how difficult it has been to be taken seriously, even when you are a full-fledged member of the dominant culture.

How will you prepare your beautiful child of color to carry on where you may have left off? Being a woman is a full-time job, held in addition to any other job you choose to take on. How are you preparing your daughter or son of color to cope with the daunting challenges of just growing up and being decent, let alone dealing with discrimination in housing, jobs, and health care?

You have already adopted your children of color. The question is not, "Is this the right thing to have done?" Of course it was the right thing! Your heart wouldn't steer you wrong! This is your child. You are entrusted with the care, nurturing and education of this child for the next 216 months, from birth to age 18. Then you are entrusted for their care and their children's care until your children are 50 years old. Then it goes the other way. Parenting never stops.

Part of the joy of transracial parenting is coming to discover that we must understand what it is to be White before we can step outside of our White perspective and understand other cultural viewpoints. Difference must be celebrated. Our difference must be celebrated.

Support - who needs it? We all do.

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