



pact's

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The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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# Biracial Children and the Emperor's New Clothes

## by Gail Steinberg

### The Problem

"That's not your Mom," Jamey teased Meg on the way home from school. "Why are you black when your mom and dad are white?"

Later that night, Meg's father soothed her as he tucked her into bed. "It's nice to be different, honey. People are all different. Tell him you're adopted. If everyone was exactly the same, how would we tell who was who? Besides, you are half white, just like me and Mommy. Tell Jamey to zip his tongue. Now, off to sleep, Princess. I love you!"

Reassured, Meg giggled and drifted off to sleep. Jamey was stupid. Her parents weren't white, not even. They were pink. Flesh-colored Band-Aids blended right into their skin. And she wasn't black. Meg hated the color black. Her black crayon was lost anyway.

Barbara and Tim, Meg's parents, wanted their daughter to be happy. When Meg was happy, they felt successful as parents. Meg was so pretty anyway; her features were so fine. She wasn't going to have problems with race, not while they were around. They were raising Meg the same as they would had she been born to them. They loved her so much.

### The Psychological Dangers

- An adopted child looks into the mirror and sees a brown face.
- She is told she is like her parents because she is half white. (Her parents accentuate the similarities and deny the differences.)
- Her white parents teach her that she is biracial, not black.
- Her parents want the best for her. In their estimation, this means ensuring a place for her in white society.
- The child wonders, "What's wrong with being black? What's wrong with me?"
- In this way, white parents are separating their child from her racial identity.
- The child, like the Emperor wearing invisible clothes, is being asked to believe the opposite of what her eyes (and society's eyes) can see.
- In spite of the fact that her skin is brown, she is led to believe she will be treated the same as if she were white.
- Reality and self-image have to split.
- The child must hide half of herself behind a white mask.

Can anyone wear a mask all of the time and maintain his or her pride?

### The Antidote

White parents often feel it is more acceptable for them to adopt a child they identify as "part white." The category "biracial" provides a legitimacy that adopting a black child would not have. They believe they can offer more to a child who is partly white than they could to a black child.

But make no mistake: This idea comforts parents, not children. As soon as the children leave the shelter of the family, society's first reaction will be to note the color of their skin. Letting children of color think there are no differences between them and their white friends is like playing "let's pretend," is like applauding the Emperor's new clothes. We may be color-blind within the confines of our families, but racism exists outside the front door. We must not pretend it is otherwise.

Failure to tell our children that many people in this society discriminate on the basis of skin color will leave the child unprepared for the first time he experiences racial bias. These children must be given the strength that comes from an unambiguous African American racial identity.

In the United States, African American people have been a racially-mixed people since the beginnings of slavery. If this were a perfect world, descendants of more than one race could claim their full racial identity, but in the United States, white is an exclusive club. Society is racist in attitudes and distribution of opportunities.

Biracial children need to feel comfortable and proud as African Americans or they will be role-handicapped. If the child is not given skills to relate to black people, he may be rejected by those who feel he is not black enough in culture and attitude. He may also be rejected by white society. Children of ambiguous race may have the hardest time because they are constantly asked to identify themselves racially. Even if they're not asked, they may still feel called on to take a stand in order to be true to themselves.

The child will not always be in the protective care of their white parents. If the child is surprised when identified by others as black, his ability to trust will be compromised. He will wonder what else his parents were wrong about. His white mask may rapidly disintegrate, and he may put on a black mask to survive the loss.

Children deserve a clear, unambiguous racial identity. To best serve the children, let them know they are African American. Children must be taught to appreciate the beauty, strength, worth, and rich heritage of the racial group with which they will be identified. Adults must tell it like it is.