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Building Racial Identity

by J. Todd Chas

Assuming that we all agree about the importance of fostering positive racial identities in our transracially-adopted children, we can move on to a discussion of the strategies and resources we have at our disposal. While it would be nice if we all lived in fully integrated multicultural environments, the reality is that we don't. This presents us with numerous challenges but nothing that is insurmountable. We should always keep in mind that loving our children relentlessly is the strongest message we can send them.

So what can we do to help promote our children's healthy racial identity? Well, our approach has been to focus on two strategies simultaneously. First, we have tried to surround our children with evidence that we value and respect their African American heritage. No matter where you live, you can get books, music, dolls, and artwork that celebrate your child's racial identity. This can be a positive experience for the whole family, even when it is difficult. My mom can attest to this; she was amazed to discover how hard it was to find a birthday card featuring an African American boy in her hometown in Florida (especially considering how many African Americans live there!). She made it a personal mission to open people's minds and now both her local card store and her favorite bookstore carry more diverse products.

The second aspect of our approach is more difficult. It is not always easy to provide personal connections with members of an African American community, even in a diverse place like the San Francisco Bay Area. Fortunately, there are myriad events (such as concerts, holiday celebrations, church services, parades, and protest marches) and businesses (such as hair salons, clothing stores, and restaurants) which provide access to positive African American role models.

More importantly, there are other African American kids. We have found that the quickest way to make a connection with African American parents is through their kids. So how did we start this process? Well, working in the local public schools has made the task much easier (and schools are always looking for volunteers!) but there have been other approaches that have been successful as well. One of our favorite things to do is to take our kids to parks. Inevitably, a number of kids will come to see our baby or play with our toddlers. We consciously choose to hang out in playgrounds where it at least some of those kids who approach us are African American. This philosophy can apply to any number of different environments including libraries, grocery stores, and restaurants. While we don't always get the response we hope for, we have been able to develop positive connections that will benefit our children.

A final consideration which I think is important has to do with the big picture. I believe that encouraging a respect and appreciation for other minority cultures will enhance my children's African American Identity. Developing an affinity with other historically disenfranchised groups is one way to combat the sense of isolation that a transracially-adopted child might feel. Attending a Chinese New Year Celebration, Cinco de Mayo festival, or a Gay Pride Parade not only encourages these cross-cultural bonds between natural allies, but also opens up a whole realm of possibilities for White parents looking to foster their children's minority identities.

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