

Director's Corner

Building Racial Identity: Strategies and Practical Suggestions

by Beth Hall

General Approach:

It is important to teach your children that race is a fact of birth, which no one has either chosen or earned; and that being a racist is both a state of mind and a choice. It is essential to train your children to recognize racism where it exists (not an easy task, since it also means training yourself). Talk about racism and point it out when you encounter it. Minimizing racism's place in life may unfortunately allow your children to feel responsible for racist behavior they have experienced; to believe that they have somehow done something to deserve it; or perhaps to believe that you think this could be the case.

Specific Strategies:

1. Look at the laundry list of your daily errands and life experiences. Whenever possible, choose to surround yourself with people of your child's race or with other people of color.
2. When choosing professionals such as doctors, dentists, lawyers, and so on, allow race to be a factor in your choice. It is essential that, wherever possible, you counterbalance our society's generally negative stereotypes of and expectations for people of color.
3. Schools are very important places for children. Whenever possible, choose a school attended by other children of color and by multiracial families, for this diversity always offers wonderful opportunities for familiarization and identification. When choosing extracurricular classes or lessons for your children, expose them to skills that will enhance their cultural competence. If they are learning to cook, then choose classes where they can cook the foods common to their ethnic heritage. Languages, art and sports: all can be chosen with an eye to building cultural competence and personal connections within your children's racial or ethnic group of origin.
4. When going to the mall, movies or a restaurant, drive those few extra miles if it means being somewhere frequented by other families of color. Your children benefit from every opportunity to observe and join in with others of their race, rather than always being the "only one" of color in a group; similarly, such experiences help to avoid

the possibility that the only people of color whom they know are other adopted children with White parents.

5. When taking vacations or sending your children to summer camps and other recreational activities, choose places and experiences where they can be exposed to people of their own race. Particularly if you live in a predominantly White area, they may offer some of the rare opportunities for your child to be with and around people of color.
6. Groom your children so they look good all the time. Because of their membership in your family, they may be watched more carefully and judged more stringently by other people, including those from their own racial group(s). To give them the armor to feel good about themselves, help them to dress and groom themselves according to the "mainstream" styles of their own racial context rather than of yours. Many opportunities can be found; to offer just two possibilities, African American girls commonly wear long hair (avoiding short afros), oiled and combed (or brushed) daily and either worn up, braided or well-coifed; Latina girls often wear pierced ears from infancy. These physical manifestations not only become vehicles of good self-esteem but provide connecting links between them and other children of their race who are growing up in same-race homes.
7. Expose your children early and often to the history of "their" people. Don't shy away from the negative aspects of their history, for they need to understand the whole truth. Don't just give them facts — point out why and how these facts relate to them personally. And make sure you not only teach them yourself; whenever possible, let them hear from people of their own race so they can understand the pride and importance of this shared history and experience.
8. Hold out high expectations for your children. Skill-mastery becomes one of the strongest building blocks of self-esteem. Children of color often need the protection of personal success and accomplishment to counterbalance society's lowered or negative expectations. Communicate to your children your belief that they can be excellent at things for which they have talent and strength and that

they can do well in all things to which they set their minds. They need to know that, while it takes hard work and great stamina to overcome difficult odds, this struggle is their legacy and they should not allow others' diminished expectations to limit their determination to achieve.

9. Give your children the social and interpersonal skills to act "appropriately" in their cultural context as well as in yours. In order to teach this lesson, you must first explore and recognize the differences between these two. Then you need to clarify for your children the difference between acceptable behavior within the home and safety of the family and acceptable public behavior. Children of color (and perhaps particularly those raised with White parents) are always scrutinized carefully and will be susceptible to harsh judgments from outsiders. If you and your children overlook this fact, then they will have a distinct disadvantage in their interactions with the world when you're not with them. Politeness and knowledge of appropriate social mores can go a long way to opening doors and relationships for our children.
10. Strengthening our children's sense of family identity and unity is essential to helping our children manage the challenges of transracial adoption. Developing and reinforcing family rituals is an important tool for creating this sense of family membership. Such rituals can help emphasize all the similarities among a family's members, without denying the differences. Seek opportunities to create rituals that clarify family membership. These family rituals, small or large, silly or somber, can become simple parts of your family's life and can come to define being a member of your family. They can involve things like eating family meals together at certain times during each week; having special family songs, inside jokes or conversations; or developing and maintaining ceremonies or traditions for certain events or holidays (innovative or traditional). There are millions that you can create together; whatever your family's special blend, they are important and essential tools to help both our children and ourselves feel like fully entitled members of our families.