

# **Director's Corner**

## **Seeking Solutions**

**by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg**

We live in a racist society. Our challenge, as adoptive parents of children of color, is to raise kids who feel good about themselves as individuals, as members of their families and as members of their race. At the same time, we must provide them with the skills to function against racism. Our job is to help them feel safe and useful.

These responsibilities mean we must protect them against attitudes that are dangerous and destructive to their growth, safeguarding at all costs their ability to have faith in their own dreams. The best way to begin is to explore our own racial attitudes and emotional responses. Children learn first about the world from our actions and attitudes as parents.

### **Looking in the Mirror**

One of the most common questions we are asked is: how can I effectively parent a child of color if I find racist attitudes in myself? First and foremost, whether our skin is white, black, brown, yellow or tan, we must come to see and accept that in a racist society, we all assimilate racist values.

What color are the people held up by the media, the courts and academia as experts in most fields of interest? What color are your personal family doctor, dentist, lawyer and other professional providers? What color are the people who are presented as appealing and upstanding in the advertising you encounter day in and day out? What color doll would your three-year-old pick as the prettiest, cleanest or nicest? Who are our national "heroes"...our political leaders?

The truth is that, despite their growing numbers, the African Americans or Latinos who are on top still stand out as exceptions to the European American norms of our culture. This, of itself, is racism, the kind of racism that acts as a barrier to self-respect for children of color.

### **When to Start - Now**

As parents, we must educate ourselves and take inventory of the racist stimulus around us and understand its impact on us and our children. We must be prepared to answer, honestly, questions concerning how and why this has happened. We must acknowledge the truth - that all of us participate in the perpetuation of racism by "simple" actions, like watching TV shows in which African American men are portrayed solely as comic figures, rather than as romantic or heroic leads; or by subscribing to newspapers and magazines in which racial stereotypes are perpetuated or racial differences simply ignored.

We must acknowledge and appreciate that differences in skin color exist and that they make a difference most of the time. Telling our children that all people are treated equally just isn't true. It's more valuable to be straightforward, helping them to anticipate the stereotypes, to focus on positive differences among races. They need to understand and feel pride in who they are. Then, once the groundwork has been laid, they can anticipate racism and be able to do something about it when it comes along. Being able to stand up to racism is difficult and not always possible, but worth the effort. What better way to build self-esteem?

There are no easy solutions. In spite of the fact that people of color have not yet been accepted as fully-entitled members of this society, keep working to expand the solutions. Each moment of success builds more self-respect. Each solution enlarges the potential that greater solutions will emerge. Fighting stupidity, racism and bias takes a lot of energy, but there really are no choices. It must be done, for the sake of the children.

### **Reverse the Golden Rule**

In his book *Water Bears No Scars*, David Reynolds tells the story of Nita, who woke up one morning to find that everyone in the world looked exactly like her. What a surprise! Her mother, the President, the homeless man - everyone's skin was Nita's shade of toffee, not to mention that everyone shared her face, her moves, her faults, her hopes and her sorrows.

She found that, with this change, when she thanked her friend for a favor, it was as if she were thanking herself. When she went to help Gramps, it was as if she were helping herself. And most amazing, when her brother was stupid, bossing him felt like bossing a mirror. She felt herself softening instead.

Nita grew up to be one of the most beloved people in her town. Everyone who knew her felt close to her. She kept insisting that everything she did for someone else was not really different from doing the same thing for herself, that anyone else's problems really felt like her own. She was the most selfish person of anyone she knew, she said. And she meant it.

This is not the Golden Rule. Being able to see ourselves in others helps us grow.