

Jigsaw Puzzle: Adopted Children of Color

by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg

Johnny is supposed to start preschool in two months. He needs to be potty trained. Playing in the backyard with some other kids and parents, he suddenly pulls down his pants and sprays urine all over the fence and the plants, shouting all the while to make sure everyone has seen what he is doing.

Letisha comes home from fourth grade with her assignment to fill in her family tree. She asks for her mother's help. When her mother suggests that maybe she should speak to the teacher and try to change the assignment, Letisha falls apart into tears and despair. "But Mom, everyone is supposed to do it. And, it has to be this way."

Maria was dropped off by a car full of kids with blaring music at 11:30. She was supposed to be home by 10:00. She was supposed to be at the library studying. Once confronted, she gets furious, storming off to her room. Her parting shot: "I can't believe that you don't trust me. I thought my own parents would at least understand."

One of the challenges of parenting is trying to sort out issues in the day-to-day experiences of our families. When can we identify our child's behavior as relating to their issues of development? of adoption? of race? of something else? As parents, we have something short of twenty years in which to help our children develop strong positive self-esteem while learning to live independently and productively within society. For all parents, this charge sounds daunting and sometimes scary. For adoptive parents of children of color, the issues are even more complex and intricate. There are issues of race. In a society where it is better to be White than anything else, issues of self-esteem and opportunities to become productive loom very large. Parents must help their children deal with the reality of racism while trying to develop strategies so they don't become victims to it. There are issues of adoption. "Blood is thicker than water": we all know that this belief places our families in a second-best status. Parents are trying to acknowledge their child's need to deal with loss and anxiety caused by adoption and at the same time to fight for the legitimacy and enduring status of the family unit.

With all of this on our plates, where do we focus when we are confronting the normal challenges of life with children? How do we identify the underlying issues in each of our child's experiences and challenges?

Let's look at the examples. Potty training: when you're fully engrossed in potty training, you wonder if it will ever get solved. Will your child be the one who is still in diapers at age

ten? Probably not. This is clearly an issue of development, right? A milestone that every child passes through? Erikson identifies this stage as exploring issues of autonomy vs. shame and doubt. The positive outcome is internalization of control; the negative outcome is internalization of shame and the questioning of worth. Adult and child in a battle of wills: this transcends adoption and race—or does it? Certainly there are different cultural expectations for this milestone that are related to race. If Johnny is Black rather than White, it may make a difference in what the preschool expects from him and how comfortable his family and their friends are with his behavior. And then there is adoption—nothing here, right? What about genetic impact on the physical ability to control oneself? And then there are issues of differences, always a factor for adoptive families. Finally, there is the tendency for many adoptive parents to be very sensitive to public opinion about their parenting. What if the other adults are watching Johnny with horror? Because of their own sense that maybe they are not such "good" parents, it may be harder for the adoptive parents to stand up for their personal belief that this behavior is acceptable. And let's take another issue: how about gender? Already Johnny is playing at flaunting his male prowess and aggressiveness by shooting his penis in all directions and calling for attention. This is boy behavior—girls simply can't do this.

The point of offering gender as one of these many factors is to underscore our belief that no single factor is alone in its impact on the child's behavior, nor on the parents' response. In fact, it can be a real mistake to undervalue the importance of any aspect of our reality as families to our parenting styles and outcomes.

And now Letisha and her family tree assignment. This one's easy, right? We have been waiting for this since we first decided to adopt. It's clearly biased for traditional biological families, thus raising adoption issues in adoptive families. Children's development at this stage is focused largely on acquiring skills and accomplishments. Letisha is devastated by the thought that she will not be able to complete this task, just like all of her peers. She wants more than anything to be just like everyone else. Letisha may also be affected by her gender. She may have heightened concern about family and thus may carry a sense of failure if she cannot succeed in the assignment, because she has perceived society's conviction that family and adoption is more of a female concern than a male one. On the other hand, she may be able to talk about it more easily than her male counterpart, because she feels

that it is more okay for her to express her feelings than if she were a boy. Finally, Letisha may be affected not only by her adoption and questions of which family should be chronicled, but also by her race. If her culture has honored kinship models rather than the nuclear family, it can become impossible to try to make everyone and everything fit into the rigid structure of a family tree. If she doesn't fit then perhaps that means there is some shame in her inability to conform.

If we as parents try to focus on only adoption or any other one of the four parameters we have evaluated above, then we are not really helping Letisha deal with her problem. She will end up feeling frustrated by our failure to understand, and we will feel frustrated for exactly the same reason.

Finally, let's explore the issues raised in Maria's behavior. This seems like fairly typical behavior for a teenager. We all expect to lose our sanity during our children's adolescence. But take a closer look. Maria is clearly working on her own identity and her ability to be independent. So are you: the problem is, you don't see things in quite the same way. Gender may come strongly into play here. We are often far more tolerant of this kind of behavior with boys than we are with girls. We may also worry more about our girls because we feel they are more vulnerable. Does this mean we may also be communicating to Maria that she is not able to care for herself and make her own decisions? Will this mean she has a harder time becoming independent than she would had she been a boy? Race is certainly present. We know it is more dangerous for Maria, as a person of color, to be driving around with other rowdy teenagers, especially if they are also non-White. If the police should stop them, they are much more likely to get into serious trouble than if they were White. Will Maria and her

friends know how to act in a way that will not threaten the police officer or bystanders into action that could harm them? And even if they do know how to "behave," can the person of authority be relied upon to be non-racist enough to give them a fair chance to explain and resolve the difficulty? And of course adoption has a place here as well. How much does Maria's need to act out reflect her inner need to make up for the loss, grief and anger she feels over her own adoption? And what about your response to her stinging reprisal of you and your lack of trust? Are you perhaps more susceptible to her negative judgment of you as a parent because of your own fear that you are not legitimately her parent, or that she may abandon you for birth parents or family where she feels a better "fit"?

In the end, identifying the issues of parenting in the lives of our families is like peeling an onion. There are many layers, each one an essential part of the whole. Nothing can be either overlooked or overemphasized except at the loss of the integrity of the whole. Our children require our vigilance and honesty regarding the impact of all the issues that go into our makeup as families. We, as adoptive parents to children of color, must keep track of even greater layers of complexity than other parents. The danger: we will either minimize our differences or emphasize only a few, neither of which will reflect reality, and ultimately abandoning our children to work through the issues on their own, without our help. The benefit: we as families and our children as people can be equipped to handle a world growing ever more complex. The very fact of our existence as families can finally empower our children to view things from a position of strength and comfort rather than fear and retreat.