

## **Pact's Position on the Multi-Ethnic and Inter-Ethnic Placement Acts**

**by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg**

The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and its companion Interethnic Placement Act (IEPA) make racial matching an inappropriate criterion for the placement of adoptive children. The law applies to agencies which receive Federal assistance and prohibits using race, color, or national origin of either a parent or a child as the sole basis to deny (or delay) any opportunity to become an adoptive or foster parent. With each step the bill has taken in its political journey, the press has called on us for comment regarding racial matching. As Pact places children in both same-race and transracial homes, many involved expect that we will support MEPA/IEPA, standing opposed to racial matching. But our position is not so simplistic; our principal goal is to educate the public about the complexity of the question and the naiveté of the bill.

The proponents FOR racial matching argue that if children are placed in homes that are ethnically or racially different from their genetic heritage, they are at risk of losing that cultural legacy. This loss can have multiple and diverse effects, ranging from pervasive psychological consequences like low self-esteem to specific (and potentially dangerous) social effects, like an inability to recognize and anticipate behaviors and reactions in racially-charged situations. Those who argue AGAINST racial matching as a criteria for placement site evidence that children whose placements into permanent families are delayed are at risk for serious negative consequences like attachment disorders or psychological disorders related to lack of permanence.

By mandating more timely placements, MEPA/IEPA addresses the important attachment problems faced by waiting children but ignores the potential benefits of racial-matching. We believe that, in declaring that racial matching should never be considered the primary issue in deciding children's placement into new families, MEPA/IEPA paints with too broad a brush. The elimination of race matching as a relevant criterion will not help further the goal of providing the best possible homes for children of color. Such broad policy hampers the best efforts of social workers and other professionals in their efforts to make appropriate plans for children. In making the best possible match for a given child, social workers and others attempt to create an ideal balance from the many factors of family life. Considering race as one relevant element is no different from considering myriad other factors: the ages of other children in the home; parental preparedness for the introduction of a new child; family flexibility regarding visitation and contact with

birth relatives. Any of these may prove primary in creating the best plan for a particular child. Just as no single suit of clothes will fit every child, in designing the pattern for family life, the child's needs must be carefully measured and the plan tailor-made.

### **Stories From the Field**

#### **Glendora**

Family life had been unstable for over a year for Glendora, a 28-year-old African American woman, and her four children. Child Protective Services had been called three times; finally, all four children were removed from Glendora's custody. She kept trying to make a better life for herself and the kids, but somehow always slipped back into her old one. The children were separated and all were placed in foster homes with white parents. After nine months, Glendora began a new program that seemed to be working. She was granted visitation with each of the kids. Of the four kids, only the baby was really adjusting in a foster-adopt placement. The other three — four, six and eight years old— had been in three different placements already, because they repeatedly ran away or tried to hurt the other children in the home. Every police officer, every social worker with whom Glendora had contact was white. Not one of them understood what she and her children were going through, even though they liked to say they did. These children had been raised in a world in which African Americans were the people you could trust and whites were unfamiliar and intimidating. Being placed into a white family increased the difficulties of the transitions that were confronting them. Under MEPA/IEPA, these children might be permanently placed with a white family despite their intense feelings and prior experience with relationships across racial lines. Whenever possible, adoptive placements should strive to reduce, not add to, children's burdens in their search for a home and family.

#### **Annette and Gerald**

Annette and Gerald have lived in a small town of 8,000 all of their lives. Like this couple, the town's population is mostly white, with a small percentage of Mexican Americans. Annette and Gerald had always wanted to offer their love to a child in need of adoption. They brought home the twins, Ashley and Amber, when they were just 8 days old; two years later, Bettina joined the family. All three of their children are African American. Annette did the best she could with the

girls' hair. She could see that they looked nothing like the kids in magazines, but she just cut their hair short each summer to spare them the awful fuss of combing after bath-time each night. One day, when the twins were five, the twins came home from kindergarten in tears. It was Gerald who finally got the truth out of them: they "hated" their color and they "never wanted to go back to school again" until Daddy could make their skin and hair like his! Annette and Gerald loved their children; recognizing now that there was a real problem, they renewed their efforts to find help.

A friend referred them to Pact, where they finally began to get the education and information they so desperately wanted. Annette now drives the girls over sixty miles every two weeks to get their hair done. When they return, the girls' beautiful braids are the envy of their friends. They now attend school in the next district, which contains three other African American families and one African American teacher as well. Now, they are learning about their own proud heritage not only from books but also from their new friends. When you ask them today what color skin they prefer, they talk proudly of their mocha and coffee tones.

### **A Racialized World Requires Race Conscious Parenting**

Annette and Gerald aren't bad people, neither is Glendora. But they could not know what they did not know. They needed education and support to understand the aspects of race that affect their children's needs and issues. White parents who come to adoption with the belief that being "color-blind" parents is a positive strategy will fail at the challenging task of instilling a positive racial identity in their children of color. Race-consciousness pervades American society; adoptive placements should recognize and accommodate this truth. MEPA/IEPA has made no provisions to help families evaluate whether they are ready, willing, or able to provide for the needs of a child of color, nor does it help them create the tools and support to do so competently. Lacking a mandate to educate and support parents in transracial adoptions, this bill is incomplete and irresponsible.

Whether or not anyone approves of transracial adoption, transracial families need help. The government needs to do more: it's not enough to create these families and then abandon the effort to help them succeed; Federal funding