

Raising Kids Multiculturally by Ann Freeman

Most people who become parents through interracial adoption are aware of the need to incorporate the cultural heritage of their children into the day-to-day events of their family life. When family heritage includes that of several cultures, unique challenges can arise. As a European American parent of two multiracial children, I know firsthand that life in a multicultural family brings a unique mix of joy and responsibility.

When we chose to adopt interracially, we carefully considered what parenting children of color would mean for us and our future kids. We wanted to provide our children with natural, ongoing contact with people with whom they shared cultural identity. We wanted our kids to be in an environment where friends, neighbors and other community members included many people of their ethnicity. We envisioned our kids playing with neighbor kids who looked like them.

So for us, adopting African American children was the logical choice. Our city in the Midwest is predominately white. But our neighborhood included many Black neighbors, and the people of color whom we counted as friends were African American. We could see possibilities for real connections with Black people and Black communities. We thought it would be difficult to find similar connections among the Latin, Asian or American Indian families residing in our community.

When we adopted our son, who is of mixed European and African American heritage, it was relatively easy to find friends and community resources to support and guide us. Minneapolis is home to many African/European American families of all configurations, and within a few years we had settled into a wonderful community of friends. We were pleased that we were providing our son with daily opportunities to develop his cultural sense of self and that we had so many chances to gain the insights and skills we needed to nurture him effectively as he grew.

When we adopted our daughter, her arrival brought a new cultural reality to our lives. We saw her Latin/African American heritage as a gift. We wanted to honor the Mexican American part of our growing family, but admittedly had few connections with anyone or anything Mexican American.

We know that both our children would be identified primarily as African American. We enthusiastically made efforts to instill a proud sense of that heritage in each of them. However, that reality did not diminish in any way our belief that they had a right to participate in and identify with all parts of their

cultural identities. We were worried about making meaningful connections with Latin people and Latin communities.

Fortunately for us, we have become friends with several families of mixed European and Latin heritage. We are grateful to those families for including us in their lives, and for doing so because they care about our daughter and her need to know her cultural self. We have been part of celebrations of Las Posadas and had chances to spend evenings at gatherings where the language of choice was Spanish.

Our public school district includes a choice system with options for many different types of curricula. So when our children entered school, we were able to send them to a school that emphasizes Spanish and the cultures of Latin American people. That school draws many Latin, multiracial and Black families. It has provided more chances for our family to connect with a richly diverse community of people. Our connection to Latin culture is not as strong as we would like, but our hope is that the steps we have taken will lead to more opportunities.

Even as I feel positive and optimistic about my family, our experiences leave me with a lingering sense of loss for my kids. I believe the multiracial facets of our family and our life are gifts. Yet when I look at photos of our large and loving extended family, I see many, many white faces surrounding just a few that are brown. When I see huge family reunions of African American families all wearing "Smith Family" T-shirts and the like, or when I pass Latin families speaking Spanish in the grocery store, I am reminded my kids are missing the chance to grow up surrounded by people culturally like them. And I know my daughter is further from that chance than my son.

Loss is part of who we are, part of adoption and part of the rich mosaic of our lives. Accepting limitations and loss does not diminish how good I feel about the family we are. Our multicultural life has given each of us skills and opportunities we wouldn't have had without our family identity. My kids have an amazing ability to be bicultural, traveling comfortably in many circles of kids. At ten and seven years old, their sense of justice and fairness is strong and passionate. And my husband and I have had the opportunity to expand our identities and actively engage in a multicultural way of being in the world.

Each of us who live in multiracial families brings strengths

and challenges to our roles as parents. Part of our journey is to keep at it, to build on opportunities, and at the same time to face our limits and be willing to move through them as best as we can. When we are more fully aware of what we can and can't be for our kids, we know better when and where

we need to ask for help and can accept the importance of continuing to broaden our circles of support. As families, our journeys are ever changing, ever expanding. We are rich with possibility.