

Supporting Transracial Families: Start From Where They Are

by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall

"Stop stealing our children and calling it adoption. Take back our children!"

After eight-year-old Timothy read this poster in his neighborhood he woke up screaming in the night. In his nightmare, monsters stole him from his mom and dad, the family he has belonged to since he was born. The monsters were African Americans, the same as Timmy. Timmy's parents by adoption are white. After he saw those signs, Timmy started to show fear of people of his own race. He thinks his mother is crazy because she wants to keep going to the local African American church. When she wanted to welcome a new Black family who moved in down the street, he hid under his bed. Timmy thinks the man who put up the sign wants to take him away from his family. Though he and his family have many friends of color, night after night, Timmy's nightmares keep returning.

Debate about transracial adoption and foster care is old news in the child welfare community. The National Association of Black Social Workers has not changed its 1972 position that transracial adoption is a "form of genocide." Others argue that while there is no empirical research providing evidence that transracial placement is harmful to kids, there is no doubt that growing up without permanence is damaging.

Like it or not, transracial placements continue to be made. Children *are* being raised by parents of different races from their own. These children can't wait for the debate to be resolved. How can we support these children in a way that doesn't force them to choose between their family and their race?

To understand how to support children of color who have been adopted into white homes, we must first understand what these children face in a society that is biased about both adoption and race. We are witnessing the decline of the "dominant culture" theory. Those who are now classified as minorities are fast becoming the majority. Still, we are bombarded by racist values, no matter our skin color. A quick

look at our national heroes and at the people held up by the media, advertising, and academia makes the point. African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Native Americans, and people of mixed racial heritage in positions of power stand out as exceptions to the European American norms, in spite of the fact that their numbers are growing. A child growing up with parents of another race must learn the skills that are necessary for survival in times of increasing racial tension. In a racist society, being both comfortable and aware in one's own skin is a life and death matter.

Children cannot choose between their family and their race without negating integral pieces of themselves. The goal is for these kids to be comfortable in all the worlds they populate. Every adopted person has a dual identity: one based on his or her genetic family system, the other shaped by the experiences within the family that raises the child. Children in transracial placements live with two racial realities as well.

Parents must help children to feel part of the race with which society will identify them. To learn to walk the walk and talk the talk, these children must have role models within their race. No one who is white can know what it is to be a person of color. If white parents love their children, they must be willing to sacrifice their own comfort, which often includes forgoing living in a lily-white neighborhood or always being in the majority. They must choose friends, business partners, and the professionals who populate their lives to include adults of their child's race. Picture books, ethnic restaurants and festivals are not enough.

Communities must welcome children from transracial families and allow them to participate on every level possible, regardless of who their parents are. We all must affirm and acknowledge these children's dual identities in both the European and African American community as well as within their birth and adoptive families. If we are successful, we will raise adults in a unique position to understand and access a society still White-dominated while standing with pride and power in their own racial identity and self-awareness.