

When Racism is Part of the Story

by Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg

When racism is one of the causes for an adoptive placement, it adds another layer of complexity to what is already a challenging situation. By naming racism when it is part of the story, initiating our child's understanding of it, and doing our best to interrupt racist activity through our own actions, we are giving our children skills they will need to face their personal experiences. Over the years, many Pact members have shared their post-adoption challenges with us. Sometimes they call on us for help; sometimes they simply enjoy having a safe place to talk about the complexities that affect their families with people who share some of their issues. We hope you will find useful these stories of dealing of racism's effect on adoption.

Barbara, Kate, John and Jasmine:

Kate begins: "The first time we met Barbara, she told Katie and me all about her parents and what phonies she thought they were. She could trace her ancestry as far back as the Mayflower but her parents were authentic bigots. They prided themselves because their ancestors had been members of Daughters of the American Revolution and the American Legion for generations, which they thought made them better than everybody else. On the night she finally got up nerve enough to tell them she was pregnant, and that the baby's father, Jamal, was African American, they refused to help her; they just kicked her out on the street. Every word that was said that night got etched into her brain. She repeated it to us word for word till the tears were running down our faces. 'The shame!' her Mama said. 'A mongrel! You'll not bring a pickaninny to this house and call it our grandchild. Get rid of it like you got it — on your own.' Barb said her dad just sat like a stone in front of their big old fireplace, never looking at her. She pleaded with them, crying, 'I want to keep my baby,' but they would not budge. But she was just sixteen; without their help, she couldn't support a child. Jamal, her friend, still a boy himself, said "t's not mine."

"Barb is just amazing," Kate continued. "We're so proud of her for being so brave. Somehow she took care of herself. She found the agency and made an adoption plan. We were thrilled when she chose us to adopt her baby even though we always knew how hard it was on her. We're an interracial couple; I'm white and John is Black, and we've always wanted an open adoption — that's why Barb chose us. She even said, 'One door closed, a new one opened.'"

"We know the only reason she placed Jasmine with us is because her parents would not accept the baby because of race. We've always felt sorry for them, missing out on the most incredible child in the universe, and terrible that Barb

had to go through so much. She never got back together with them. Now Jasmine is five; you've never seen a more wonderful child, and Barb's mama has passed on. Barb is in college. Jasmine loves her Barbie. We get together all the time. Barb told us today that her dad came to see her and said he'd like to see his grandbaby. For Jasmine's sake, we'd love to see that happen but Barb can't believe his nerve. She's so angry, she wants to keep him away from Jasmine forever because he didn't help her when she was pregnant. We're not sure what we should do. We'd like Jasmine to get to know her birth grandfather, but we can't go against Barb. People can change, we tell her, but she doesn't want to hear it. Race is the only reason we got to be Jasmine's parents, but we don't want her to think there's something wrong with her because she's part Black. We're hoping Barbara will change her mind and forgive her dad. It would be so good for her to have her father back in her life and good for Jasmine. We'd never want to hurt Barbara, but as Jasmine's parents, don't we have to put her needs first? On the other hand, if the guy's a racist, we sure don't want him to have a chance to hurt our daughter like he hurt her mother. This is really hard. What do you think we should do?"

"It sounds to me like Barbara's got a lot to let go of before she could consider letting her father back in her life. Would she consider trying to work things out with him with the help of a therapist? The fact that he sought her out so soon after his wife died may mean that turning Barbara out was more his wife's idea than his; and his desire to meet Jasmine could be a very positive step on his part. Maybe Barbara would feel more willing to give it a try if there was a supportive professional involved, to keep the meeting safe. Working things out between them would make it possible for Jasmine to meet her grandfather without it creating more conflict. What do you think Barbara would say if you suggested that?"

"Hmm," John replied. "I bet Barb would go for it. She told us she felt pretty good about the counselor she worked with during the adoption, said she thought it was really helpful. Maybe we could offer to help with the costs. What do you think, Katie? Think we should ask her?"

Kate agreed with his suggestion. When Kate and John suggested to Barbara that she could make getting therapy for them both a condition for possible reconciliation, Barb's dad agreed, too. Today Barb and her dad seem to be making progress, and Barb is feeling better about the possibility of letting Jasmine get to know her grandfather someday. Before she lets them meet, Barb wants to be sure that her

dad understands that Jasmine thinks of herself as African American and is proud of it. She has told him she won't let him near Jasmine, Katie or John if there is a chance in the world he'll say or do anything racist. It's up to him to convince her but she's becoming more open to the possibility each meeting they have.

Shawna, Malcolm, Ronnie, Margaret and Ted

Shawna and Malcolm had been together on again, off again for a year. When Shawna found out she was pregnant, they both were shocked and scared. Malcolm disconnected, at one point even questioning whether the baby was his. After her fourth month, Shawna's pregnancy started to become apparent. When she was really honest with herself, she admitted she didn't want to parent a part-Black child. This feeling only increased her shame — but it was the truth.

"I met Ronnie when I was only five months pregnant. He was the first person who didn't automatically judge me when he understood I was planning to place the baby for adoption. He was shocked when I told him the father was Black. He feels like all people are equal but it's for the best if races don't mix. I guess I do, too. I know this is my baby and I want to love him and give him a good home but I don't think I am the best person to do that. Can you help me?"

Shawna was more honest than many in being willing to admit her own biases. She chose adoption, settling on Margaret and Ted as the adoptive parents. They are both white, but they felt ready and eager to parent a child across racial lines. Johnny is now seven years old and their lives have expanded greatly since he arrived. They are moving to a more integrated school district and have many more friends of color than they did before. Shawna and Ronnie are now married and at their wedding, Johnny was a reluctant ring-bearer. They live about a day's drive from Margaret and Ted, so they see them about four times a year. They also occasionally see Shawna's parents, who live only 45 minutes from them.

"Seeing Johnny's grandparents has been fine but we aren't sure how much longer we can continue the relationship with Ronnie and Shawn," agonized Margaret. "His grandparents are 'very white,' if you know what I mean. They sometimes say things without thinking. But we have learned to make it clear what we will tolerate and what we will not and still give them room to the barber shop with us, I overheard her proudly explaining the culture of an African American salon to her friend. I was proud of her."

She continued, "But the problem is with Shawna and Ronnie. They don't get it — and Shawna is his birth mother. Now that he is older, they may say things I don't agree with. They have invited him for a weekend. He has had sleep-overs with other families, but I don't know if I can trust them. If they say something terrible, what would it do to Johnny?"

Margaret and Ted were doing a great job at acting as their son's ally in standing up against racial bias whenever possible. It's a fact of their lives that they have to deal with

white people, including relatives who don't understand the experience of being a person of color. This ignorance exists not because their family members are particularly dense, but because the lives of white people in America do not ordinarily enable comprehension of how racism works against people of color; to come to recognize those differences takes real work and self-examination. It is harder when birth parents themselves don't understand these issues as much as we wish they did, but this limitation is also not totally unexpected.

Our View?

Adopted children cannot afford to lose family members. They are bound to have increased sensitivity to issues of loss, because they have already lost so much through adoption. Even with an open adoption, they do not grow up with the same connection to their birth family members as if they lived with them. Therefore, adoptive parents need to be careful not to be too zealous in their "protectiveness" and end up shutting out essential people. After much consideration, Margaret and Ted realized that they were holding Shawna and Ronnie to different standards than everyone else. As a result, Margaret and Ted decided to speak frankly to Ronnie and Shawna of their concerns for Johnny's self-esteem, explaining as well their own journey to expand racial consciousness. They asked Ronnie and Shawna to monitor themselves in talking with Johnny about race. They even spoke with Johnny about this situation, simply explaining that Ronnie and Shawna had had little experience with people of color, except for him, so they sometimes made assumptions based on wrong information. Johnny understands that these attitudes are a big part of the reason for his adoption but can still benefit from an important and meaningful relationship with them.

Racism is an unresolved and difficult issue in this society. It is naive to imagine that our family members will be untouched by it. Adoptive parents face several important tasks: to become allies against racist practice; to help family members understand their own biases; and to instill in our children the strength to succeed despite racism. Birth parents must honestly assess their own racism (we all have it, giving birth to a child of color does not make you immune) in order to become their child's ally against the pressures that society will inevitably bring to bear. A birth parent's role of acceptance and support is particularly important since often children of color who have been placed for adoption across racial lines wonder whether their race made them unlovable.

It can be particularly difficult for birth and adoptive parents who are white to acknowledge that their own experiences are different from that of their child of color. This can lead to the feeling of being inadequate to the title of parent (a feeling to which each kind of parent is already susceptible). Race is something we are often afraid to talk about but for a child of color, it is important that we learn how. Only in naming their experience can they feel known and loved. Children deserve parents who are willing to acknowledge how race matters and support the child's journey to self-definition. Love is not enough but it is a great motivator. It drives us to be the allies our children need us to be.