pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Transracial Adoption: A Response to Jim Mahoney

by Theresa Hughes

As a member of the Pact Board of Directors, I would like to respond to an article by Jim Mahoney, M.S.W., published in the Summer, 1992 issue of Pact Press, entitled "Transracial Families." As an African American woman, as a mother of a biracial child and as a professional, I found the article offensive.

The first sentence stated that White parents should know "how" White they are. Maybe it's just me, but I doubt very seriously they didn't know they were White before they adopted their child of color. And I'm sure they will be White forever. I'm not sure that knowing how White you "are" is as important as understanding and appreciating your role as a parent: that is, becoming the most influential person in your child's life; being the person your child comes running to; the person who wipes away the tears; the one who listens over and over again to the knock-knock jokes. You are the person who will shape your children's world and guide them into adulthood.

It is your responsibility to make sure they understand that their worth is not based on how others see them, or to allow someone to define or limit their future goals and aspirations. It is from you that your children will learn that their worth should be measured by what is inside their heads and hearts, not by the color of their skin. It is your primary responsibility to make sure your child feels valued and important.

Raise your child to be an individual, allow your child to make mistakes and support your children in all they do. Be proud, so damn proud, of your child. Give them the love and support that they need. Make your child strong and full of self-esteem.

All of these things are important for all parents, not just for parents of children of color or transracial adoptive parents.

I am willing to guess that most White parents, prior to adopting their child of color, thought they knew a little something about racism. But by now they have gained a new understanding of racism. They have developed that sixth sense with which we of color are born - that far-ranging antenna which allows us to see, hear and spot a racist in a second. While once you might have tolerated a racial joke or racial slur, you no longer will. You have found a new backbone and courage few Whites will ever need to acquire.

We are witnessing the decline of the "dominant culture" theory. Those of us of color who are presently classified as minorities are fast becoming the majority. By the year 2000, two out three new workers will be women or people of color. What for too long has been acceptable behavior for the good ole boys is being challenged.

In 1967, less than 5% of African Americans could be counted as middle class, but by 1987 the figure had grown to 36%. If professional occupations, status, and influence are barometers to gauge shifts in power, then the shifts have been dramatic indeed. African American baby-boomers are found in positions of power and influence just about everywhere in the American workplace: board rooms of major corporations, heads of labor unions, the halls of Congress, state legislatures, and in charge of major cities. No other generation of African Americans has come so far so fast.

Our children will be adults in the 21st century; wouldn't it be wonderful if the ugliness of racism that has plagued this country for over 400 years would finally end? Our children should not have to fight the same battles fought by their grandparents and great-grandparents. Racism has been a festering boil for too long and it is time to cut it out.

We as a country can no longer afford the evils of racism. Our country has been ravaged by racism, poverty, dysfunctional families, broken homes, single parents, and homelessness. It has taken a terrible toll on our children's generation.

Our children are the lucky ones, because we have the means to provide them with a good education, good homes and loving families. Our children also have the advantage of multiracial families which will help them move freely among all peoples. Regardless of their color, they will be their generation's golden ones because they will have the tools, education and means to move easily into 21st century.

Don't allow race or racism be your driving spirit or keep you in a constant state of fear in raising your child of color. Don't allow race to paralyze you in how you respond to the wrongs your child will undoubtedly do. As a society, we must stop attaching race to every act.
Don't allow color to blind you if your child steals candy from

the store, or won't eat those vegetables, or struggles through potty-training. And when your loving child turns into a teenage monster, remember it's not race that's causing them to act that way, but raging hormones and the struggle to become independent. Your child will test you in ways that you cannot believe. If one night you're fighting about breaking curfew, not studying or all the other wonderful things teenagers do, and all of a sudden your child turns and says, "You can't understand me because you're not Black," remember the fight was not about race but about breaking the family rules.

A White mother told me her biracial teenage daughter was trying to find her Black heritage by spending time in a drug-infested part of town. And the mother said she had to let her daughter find and accept her heritage. I was horrified. Drug dealers are not her heritage. This same mother would not allow her daughter to walk down the middle of a busy freeway, but she allowed this destructive behavior to continue on because she was too afraid to be seen as a racist.

Look for role models early on. Remember they come in all shapes, sizes, colors and gender. Don't allow an opportunity in which you can point out an accomplished person of color to go by unnoticed. If you live in an area without a lot of people of color, make an effort to get out and mix. Your children are depending on you.

Teresa Hughes is an Economist. She serves as Treasurer on the Board of Directors for Pact, An Adoption Alliance.