



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Ask Pact

Taking Risks and Making Connections

by Martha Rynberg

Q: *As the single, white adoptive mother of an African American boy (my son is now five), I am painfully aware that because most of my friends (people I've known since college, people I work with, neighbors) are white, I am not providing my child with everyday adult role models who look like him. I understand that I need to diversify my social circle, but it feels awkward to reach out to people based solely on their race. I mean, if I felt that someone was interested in getting to know me solely due to my ethnicity, I don't think I'd feel like they were truly interested in me as a person. How can I reach out in a way that is authentic and not exploitative? Any advice, tips, or success stories would be greatly appreciated.*

A: We get to know new people all the time. Our first-year college roommate. Our partner on a big project at work. The neighbor around the corner with the phenomenal garden. Our lives overlap with others' all the time but we don't necessarily think about it as "looking for friends." We just show up at school or work and, just by showing up, we have something in common with everyone else. But we don't make friends with everyone. We connect with a few people, and if we have enough in common, it can compel us to spend more time together—and that is how friendships grow.

But here's the thing: we tend to make connections with types of people who we have the most practice with, people who reflect our family and already-established friends. They look and sound familiar. We understand their references and mannerisms and slang. Their accent, even if not our own, may remind us of our grandma's. We seek out people who reflect back our values or interests, even if they are not like us in many other ways.

Lots of people struggle with this issue of making friends with someone just because they're Black, or Chinese-American or Latino. By lots of people, I mean everyone. And I also mean me.

When my eldest daughter was young we lived in a very white state. Certainly there were people of color, but white was in the 90th percentile majority. When my wife and I came to understand that our family NEEDED friends across color lines (turns out other white lesbian moms with transracial adoptive kids were not a diverse enough friend pool), I had a mission and I was steadfast. I went to playgrounds and parks. I went to events and celebrations. I went wherever I thought lots of people would be, therefore increasing my chances of meeting African American folks—folks who were of the same ethnicity as my daughter. I wanted to make friends with adults and kids and elders and teens. But boy, was I awkward. I stared. I stammered. I invented reasons to cross rooms and introduce myself.

The grocery store was my most common haunt. More than once I followed folks—Black folks—out into the Shop 'n Save parking lot, sometimes running to catch them before starting their engines. "Hi, it was nice chatting with you in the checkout line. Do you want to have coffee some time?" My white face and my Black daughter on my hip giving away, I hoped, the subtext of my forwardness. Numbers were exchanged. Coffee was drunk. But it was a hard way to build a community. Once a man called me thirty minutes after a parking lot

exchange to let me know that his wife might also like to join us for coffee. I assured him my wife might want to come along, too.

It was so much easier to make white friends. Apparently, I was good at it—I had lots. And then I realized, I don't try to make white friends. I've tried to make friends who are parents. I've tried to make lesbian friends, and artist friends and activist friends—all things I am. I am used to seeking out connections with people who reflect part of my self. Attempting to make connection with people because of their difference felt counter-intuitive. It felt awkward, hollow, and sometimes I was afraid it was exploitative. I didn't want to tokenize people.

Let's turn the tables for a moment. Let's say a mom came up to me at a Little League game and said, "Hi, I'm Priscilla, our kids play ball together. My older son, well, he just 'came out' and it's kind of a big deal and we're trying to sort it all out and, well, I see you here sometimes with your, um, partner, and I just wondered, well, if maybe you'd like to have coffee sometime?"

I would probably say yes. If not as a fellow parent, I would say yes for her son. Because I know how hard it can be to come out, and if I can make it easier I will. This mom and I have something in common, we care about her son. I am not going to start parenting her son. I am not going to feel at liberty to boss her around. Maybe we will have coffee and hit it off, or maybe we will never speak again. But I respect her risk and humility and courage in coming over to me, extending her palm in friendship.

Another scenario: If a girl was growing-up in an all-male family in a predominantly male community, where all her doctors and teachers and fellow students were male, with just a few women and girls sprinkled here and there, I would be afraid for that girl. Who would help her fit a bra? Who would prep her for her first period and commiserate with her over cramps? Who would point out the limited roles for women in books and TV and movies? Who would model for her that women can actually do and be anything?

I don't mean that her dads and uncles and brothers don't love her, or can't read books about menstruation and feminism. But lived experience counts for a lot. And we all deserve to have the opportunity to feel a sense of sameness, especially if we are the ones supplying diversity. Would I raise an eyebrow and wonder about this family's choice to raise a child in gender isolation? Yup. Would I want to befriend them? It depends, I would want to get to know them first and see what we have in common. But, if I know they are reaching out for something they themselves can't offer her, I wouldn't feel exploited. I'd feel curious and willing to learn more.

I should say here that homophobia, sexism and racism

are not the same forms of oppression. They have different histories and contexts and they show up in our families in very different ways. The parallels that I am drawing are useful to me as a white lesbian woman to borrow from my deep understanding of need for connection—and to apply it to my parenting strategies.

Indeed it is awkward to make friends with someone when it is exactly how they are different that draws my attention to them. I am used to looking for what is similar, but with these relationships, the leading ingredient is specifically what is different. Of course, I'm not going to try to make friends with anyone who shared shares my kids' ethnicity. I am going to look for common ground, but the priority will continue to be our racial difference.

We don't have to lead with, "Hi! My kid is Asian and I need Asian people at my dinner table. Can you come to dinner tomorrow night?" We can build friendships like we do everywhere else—and we need to hold onto our intention. When we walk into that seminar or parent night assembly, who are we going to sit next to? Who are we going to talk to about Halloween costumes? What committee are we going to join at work? Who are we going to invite to carpool? Who are we going to get to know and ask out for coffee? Someone out of habit or someone out of intention?

Ultimately, being clear about intentions led to transformative changes for me and my family. For years my priorities were: enough food, enough sleep, enough Black people in our lives. We had a moratorium on white friends because making friends takes energy and time and if we were spending afternoons with white folks then we weren't spending them with Black folks. Then when my daughter was five, we left the very white state where we were living and moved across the country to a city and neighborhood that looked like our family. Overnight we had so many more opportunities for connection. Those first awkward attempts to form friendships with a few random individuals led me over time to a diverse and supportive community where I and—more importantly—my daughters feel embraced and at home.

Take the risk and reach out. Your son will thank you for it and both your lives will be richer.

Martha Rynberg is Pact's LGBTQ Family Support and Transracial Adoption Specialist. She could write a twenty-page paper on this topic!