

Ask Pact

Transracial Adoption, Laying Our Cards on the Table

Q: *I have heard that Pact is the place to go to learn about adopting children of color, but I've also been told that Pact has a very negative attitude toward white parents who want to adopt transracially. Do you work with white people? Or are you opposed to transracial adoption?*

A: Pact has been a respected leader in the field of adoption for decades, but we still hear erroneous rumors that Pact only supports same-race adoption, or that our main focus is transracial adoption. Neither is accurate—and as usual, the truth is complicated.

How would you respond if an African American couple told you they were only interested in adopting a white child? Their desire would strike most of us as odd. If they were dead set on raising a white child, you would think about all the challenges that lay ahead for them—on the playground, in the classroom, in the supermarket—and hope that they were getting plenty of support and building a strong community as they prepared to create their “highly visible” family.

African American families seeking to adopt white children are almost non-existent, but Pact is contacted all the time by white families seeking to adopt children of color. Pact was founded by two white women who adopted across racial lines, and our staff and board include several transracial (as well as same-race) adoptive parents. We don't doubt that transracial adoption can create strong, loving families. But we are well-aware that having parents who don't share their race creates additional challenges for children who must already process the challenges of having parents to whom they are not biologically related. We actively recruit adoptive parents of color—because we believe same-race adoption is easier for the children.

Because no child should wait to be placed in a loving, permanent family, we also work with parents who wish to adopt across racial lines, if they are willing to do the work necessary to ensure that their child can develop a positive racial identity. But we'd like to start from a point of honesty about why these families choose transracial adoption.

So let's talk candidly about why white couples and individuals seek to adopt children of color.

Up until the early 1960s, most adoptive families shared the same race, often “passing” as biological families. However, since the legalization of abortion and the de-stigmatization of single motherhood, the number of white infants being placed in adoption in the United States has plummeted. This context led to an increase in international adoptions—and in transracial domestic adoptions. It became “easier” to adopt a child from another country, or a child of color born in the United States, than to wait for the few available white babies.

During the same period, a growing number of white people whose consciousness had been raised about racial prejudice began to consider the possibility that they could love a child of any race. Some people now decide that their primary desire is to build a family, and that they are open to doing so by adopting a child of any race, white or otherwise. Some go a step further, officially dropping out of the “competition” to adopt a

white baby and concentrating their efforts on adopting a child of color, either domestically or internationally. Some may feel that adopting a child of color is a “good deed” (an idea promoted by adoption professionals who use the language of finding families who are “willing” to adopt children of color). Some feel that, due to their own age, lifestyle or other factors, their chances of becoming parents are slim if they focus on adopting within their own race.

In our experience, it can be extremely difficult to get white pre-adoptive parents to speak candidly about why they are considering adopting a child of color. Many have been struggling for years to start a family, and they want only to give the “right” answers that will move them quickly towards the baby they are yearning for. But rather than glossing over issues of race or sliding into the “colorblind/love is enough” mindset, we ask white pre-adoptive parents to sit with some hard questions about racism, white privilege, and racial identity formation. If they are “willing” to adopt a child of color, in order to fulfill their dreams of becoming a parent, are they “willing” to do the work necessary to help that child grow into a strong, proud, and culturally confident adult of color? Are they ready to make changes and perhaps experience discomfort in their own lives, in order to serve their children’s needs? It may be Pact’s determination to ask these uncomfortable but crucial questions that has given us a reputation, in some quarters, of being “negative” about transracial adoption. Actually, we are just being honest.

While for some, adopting a child of color may be a natural extension of a personal community that is already highly multicultural, for others, the desire to parent may be driving them to form an intimate relationship with a person of color for the first time in their lives. That is why Pact began Building Community Across Cultures, a training program for those considering adopting across racial and/or cultural lines. We want to reach prospective transracial and transnational adopters before they adopt and get them thinking about the diversity of their current community—their neighbors, their friends, their local schools, their doctors and dentists—and how it might impact their child.

Many in the adoption field support transracial adoption just enough to place children of color with white parents—but they do little to prepare those parents for the fundamental changes they need to make in their family life after placement. We call this the “colorblind/love is enough” approach (or, in some cases, the “adoption as a business” approach), and we reject it. We believe that race matters, racism exists, and building a positive racial identity for transracially adopted children of color has to be an intentional goal, actively pursued. Pact not only requires transracial adopters to complete specific pre-placement training, we provide post-placement workshops, trainings, support groups, and consultations, as well as our annual Pact Family Camp,

all in an effort to give transracial adopters the skills and knowledge they need to parent successfully.

So do we support transracial adopters? You bet. Pact provides myriad positive, proactive programs that help transracial adoptive families. Do we do transracial placements? A few, but we make sure to balance our recruitment to reflect the imbalance we see in the rest of the adoption community, where adoptive parents of color are under-represented and under-served. We see ourselves as allies of adopted children of color and measure our success in all our services by how well we serve their needs

1 This exact scenario is explored in the training video companion to *Adopted, The Movie*.