



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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## Mia's Art

### What I Learned from My Daughter's Self-Portrait

by Elise Crum

My husband and I, along with our six-year-old son (mine by birth and my husband's by love), adopted Mia, a beautiful African American baby girl, when she was two weeks old. My husband and I had already spent six years together raising our son, whose biological father is African American. We felt comfortable discussing race, and were well-aware of some of the discomfort our multiracial family caused in our predominantly white community. We had a well-established friend and family base, along with the beginnings of a supportive adoptive community. We felt prepared.

Mia spent her first five years a powerhouse of giggles and dancing, providing hours of entertainment for friends, family, and strangers alike. She entered kindergarten at the public charter school that our son had attended for three years. I was excited for them to be at the same school and for her to learn in the Montessori manner. Her kindergarten year was a bit challenging. She was very shy, which she can be, but didn't really get over it, as she usually does after becoming familiar with a situation. She did make a few friends, and her teachers thought she was doing okay, but did wonder why she didn't want to make any art in class.

We kept her at the same school for first grade and crossed our fingers that everything would be fine. I was concerned, as Mia was the only African American student in the entire school, now that our son had transferred to a traditional middle school. Academically she continued to do fine, but socially things were getting tougher. I watched her struggle with relationships and finding a place to fit into the fabric of her classroom and school community.

The end of the year brought everything to the surface. For the spring art show each child in the first grade was asked to make a self-portrait. They were asked to draw and then color just their face and use the entire sheet of paper. At the art show, there was no sign of our daughter's picture. Later I saw the art teacher and asked him about Mia's portrait. He said he had wanted to call me and talk about it. He showed me her portrait with a worried expression on his face. Mia had drawn herself about the size of a quarter in the center of a white page. She had been unable to finish it, he said. She tried and just couldn't seem to get it done. I walked away with my heart hurting, knowing that things were not right.

I wish I could say that then and there I made a different decision for her schooling, but it would take more "obvious" signs from her before we were ready to face the issue head-on. Close to the end of the year she came home in tears, crying for hours about being teased at school. A student in her class was making fun of her hair. She was so upset she did not want to return to school the next day. I went up to school in mama-bear mode, ready to tangle with anyone and everyone who was hurting my baby.

After multiple discussions with the principal and her teacher, it became clear the school was ill-prepared to support her and our multiracial family. There was an effort made to have a counselor come in and lead a lesson on treating all people kindly. The class did talk specifically to the culprit and made it clear that teasing was an unacceptable way to treat anyone, but as her teacher so humbly said "I am not sure what to say and I don't want to use the wrong words."

I wrote a letter for the school newsletter about teasing and bullying and provided a lesson for parents and kids to use together to practice combating that atmosphere in their school, but I knew that wasn't really the solution for Mia. I started looking for a more diverse school that she could attend. Eventually we decided to enroll her at a school with 36% minority students, which in our town is one of the most diverse student bodies.

After almost a year at this school, Mia has grown so much more confident. I can see it in the way she walks into school, I can see it in the way she acts at school, and I can see it in her artwork. She is drawing constantly, at school and at home, and is proud of her artistic expressions. I am watching her thrive in an environment that is ethnically diverse, in a school that celebrates diversity and respects every family, regardless of how it was formed.

I know we have all learned a lot from this experience. In the future I will pay much closer attention to the subtle signs Mia uses—through her words, her acts, or her art—to express that she is uncomfortable in her environment.

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