

# **“Racially Conscientious” Parenting in a “Colorblind” Society**

**by Terry Keleher**

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“Whose baby is that?” “Is that your child?”

Shortly after my adopted newborn son arrived, whenever we were out in public, we drew frequent stares and questions from strangers. Though we live in a racially diverse neighborhood, I didn't expect the sight of a middle-aged White man carrying an African American infant peering out from a colorful chest-worn sling to be such an attention-grabber.

When White people looked at us, they often seemed curious about the nature of our relationship, but few would ask questions. The unspoken code of etiquette was feigned “colorblindness,” trying not to notice racial difference. Some genuinely expressed how cute my son was, while others over-emphasized the point, as if to prove their racial tolerance. Some tried to touch my son's hair, perhaps feeling more license to explore a seemingly exotic feature. I'd quickly reposition my son out of their reach.

Black adults and children were more direct, questioning whose kid this was and where I got him. Though often abrupt, they seemed sincere in looking out for this child as one of their own. Viewing me with suspicion is justifiable when you look at the big picture, where even well intentioned White people still don't have the best track record for effectively dealing with privilege, cultural differences, or persistent inequality.

As an educator by profession—and one who leads trainings about racial justice—I approach these interactions as “teachable moments.” They're also “learnable moments” for me, for each has its own

nuances needing skillful navigation. Instead of taking offense to intrusive questions or avoiding difficult conversations, I try to embrace them with patience and openness. I make exceptions when someone's downright rude, but that's rare. Sometimes I get things right, but often, I figure out later what I wish I had said.

For years, I deliberated over my options for creating a family. I knew the choice of an open transracial adoption of a newborn Black child by a single gay White dad would involve daily and lifelong learning about an array of complex social dynamics. Since I wasn't just making choices about my own life, my concerns provided plenty of fodder for sleepless nights. My hope was, and still is, that we'd find a way through the challenges, all the more wiser and perhaps even closer. I plunged into parenthood, fully embracing the steep learning curve ahead, but still so unprepared. I knew I would have to draw on all my training in racial justice work, and reach out to find new resources as well—like Pact's Family Camp, where both my son and I return each summer to connect with and learn from other families like ours.

As a White person traveling solo, I know I can go about my business mostly unconscious, unnoticed, and uninterrupted. With my son in the same places, a lot changes. I can only begin to imagine him, as a Black youth or grown man, traveling these places on his own. He's sure to encounter a whole different set of reactions with pedestrians, shopkeepers, teachers, prospective employers, landlords, police officers. The seemingly mundane interactions of everyday life are connected to a web of cultural stereotypes, media images, biased institutions, and unfair laws.

The way he'll need to respond will be different than the way I choose to respond. And we have to stay in sync

when we're together. My White skin gets me over in ways his dark skin will not. I'm given the benefit of the doubt that I'm a normal upright citizen doing the right thing. I carry my racial privilege in all routine matters, regardless of how anti-racist or racist I may be. My son won't be given such a pass and he'll need to be prepared.

As my son nears seven years of age, the public interactions are changing. On our last airline trip, a security agent, upon noticing our racial difference, looked my son directly in the eye while pointing at me, and asked him "Who is this man?" Fortunately, my son didn't joke back, as he's quite capable of doing. I realized I hadn't prepared him enough for airport scrutiny, where he could easily be racially profiled.

Last year, as a kindergartener at the local public school, when my son took another child's show-and-tell toy and hid it in his locker, he was sent to the principal's office with a formal disciplinary referral for stealing. It landed him an in-school detention and a call home from the principal. I never imagined I'd have to discuss with school personnel the absurdity of applying Zero Tolerance policies to five-year-olds.

As the parent of a Black child and member of a "conspicuous family," race will always be a conscious part of our daily lives. But being conscious about racism shouldn't be limited to families of color or mixed-race families, just as being unconscious about racism shouldn't be a luxury for so many White families. By all key indicators, most White people fare much better than most people of color because of past and continuing bias. Yet we downplay the disparities and dally with the delusion of a "colorblind" and "post-racial" society. Racism won't disappear because of wishful thinking or blind magic. Replicating this denial in our homes and families only perpetuate the inequities.

Instead of "colorblind parenting" where we try to protect our kids from racism by pretending it doesn't exist, we need to embrace "racially conscientious parenting" where we prepare our children and ourselves to deal with our racialized reality so we can change it. It means choosing to become consciously and actively part of the solution instead of unconsciously and passively part of the problem. Parents have a particularly influential role to play in shaping the awareness and abilities of our children and in breaking down the barriers and bias of our neighborhood institutions, from schools and businesses to government agencies and social services.

As I continue, every day, my own learning process, I've gathered some tips for racially conscientious parenting that can also be helpful for grandparents, guardians, teachers and others involved in child-raising:

1. Acknowledge and discuss the reality of racism. Addressing racism involves seeing and listening more carefully, and speaking up when something's wrong. Don't be "colorblind" or "race-mute"—avoidance is unhelpful and silence is complicity. We must illuminate racism in order to eliminate racism. As adults, we can step up and initiate ongoing and age-appropriate discussions about race. We can learn through practice how to lead and model constructive, validating, and enlightening conversations.

I began talking with my son about race at an early age. We've discussed how sometimes people don't get treated fairly because of their skin color and how they've had to stand up for their rights. I've explained that I'm called "White" even though my skin is tan, and he'll often be called "Black," though his skin is brown. We talk about current events, like a few summers back when a group of Black children weren't allowed to swim in a Pennsylvania pool. These conversations are as natural as talking about the changing weather and safely crossing the street. I'm helping him understand his reality so he's equipped to deal with it. And I want him to know that it's okay to talk openly about race, especially with me, and hopefully with others.

2. Learn to understand and challenge institutional racism. Racism is not simply personal prejudice, but rather, a system of institutional inequality. It's not enough to try and change yourself or other individuals. We also have to change institutions that have biased practices and unfair policies. Chances are, racial profiling by the police, predatory lending by financial institutions, discrimination by landlords and employers, and the exploitation of immigrants are occurring daily in your community. Instead of ignoring or accepting this, parents can work to make things fair, to create a world where all children and families have equal rights, respect, and opportunities.

Schools are a great place to start challenging institutional racism since most families have direct experience with them. When parents at my son's racially diverse school learned of a proposed policy change that would make it easier for the district's wealthier and whiter schools to obtain more computer equipment, we started a petition and presented it as a group to the school board. For we know that the so-called "racial achievement gap" is often a reflection of a resource gap, where unequal inputs yield unequal outcomes.

If the Advanced Placement classes are filled with mostly White students, if the curriculum is perpetuating stereotypes, if there aren't many teachers of color, you can do something about it. Ask questions, talk with students about their experiences, request public documents, organize parents, talk to elected officials,

notify the media and take public action. If you're White, you don't have to wait for people of color to complain first. You can be change agents and agitators, by speaking out when something's wrong, as well as allies to people of color.

3. Offer proactive solutions to advance racial justice. Reacting to racism is necessary, but not sufficient to bring about change. Instead of dwelling on "who's a racist," it's more useful to ask "what's causing the racial inequality?" and "what can be done to make things fair?" These questions move you from a reactive to a proactive framework. They also shift the focus from individuals and their intentions, to institutions and their impacts. We need to suggest concrete proposals that actually advance equity, inclusion, diversity, and unity. By offering viable alternatives and doable actions, you can cut through resistance and recruit unlikely allies.

In some Chicago schools with highly biased and punitive disciplinary practices, parents and students have introduced restorative justice programs. Some schools have implemented new curricula to accurately teach about racial histories and cultures. Look around and the possibilities are endless. Perhaps your public library needs more computers for those who don't have them at home; maybe your local hospital could devote more profits to health care for low-income families. Many positive models already exist. It just takes proactive thinking and persistent action.

4. Learn by taking action. Most racism is not perpetrated with intent or malice; it's perpetuated through silence and inaction. Only when we move from words to action will real learning and change begin. You'll gain clarity and confidence as you take action, risks and leadership. You'll expand your insights, skills, connections, and support. The path forward may not always be clear and direct, but moving from where we're stuck to a place of new possibilities is well worth the journey.

Racially conscientious parenting involves awareness and action, commitment and courage, patience and persistence. These are all transferable traits we hone in other aspects of parenting. Racism insidiously replicates itself, but as parents, we are well-positioned to be on the frontline of change. If we keep our eyes on the prize—racial equity for all—we can start at home, then work outward in our communities to build real and lasting change. Teaching by example how to create a more just world is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children.

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