

# Ask Pact

## My Child Wants To Be White!

**Q:** *My African-Canadian daughter is seven years old. I recently found her scrubbing her skin with a nail brush. She told me she wanted to be white just like me. I have read many books with her that portray people from other races in a positive light, I have also always talked very positively about her colour, and she has black friends at school. I am upset by her desire to change colour and I am not sure how to deal with this. Please can you give me some advice?*

**A:** Your child believes that changing her skin color will make her more “like you” – more connected to you. In other words, the color of her skin feels to her like a barrier that stands between you (even though you don’t feel that way about it). She is trying to erase what she sees as a significant difference.

You have tried to help her feel comfortable with her race – pointing out the positive attributes of people of different races, encouraging her to have friends of color. You’re doing what you can to bolster her self-esteem and minimize society’s devaluing of black folks. It is important that you are addressing that issue, and you should continue doing so. There is something else you might consider: does she see you relating to other adults of color? It can be very helpful to a child to see her parents in positive relationships not just with her, but also with other adults who share her race. That lets her know that you value black people in general – that she’s not just an exception in your eyes. But the fact that she mentioned wanting to be “just like” you may well mean that there is more going on with her than simply a reaction to societal racism.

She may be grappling with a related, but different issue: how can she be your daughter if she doesn’t match? At this age, she is likely to be fielding a lot of questions from friends and schoolmates about why she has white parents, and where is her “real” mother, et cetera. It is very, very common for a child of your daughter’s age to be asked these kinds of questions. It is also common for them not to share that fact with their parents. Their sense of family and belonging is

being undermined, and they are often reluctant to share their uncertainty with their parents. Sometimes this reluctance is because they don’t want to hurt their parents’ feelings, sometimes because they’re afraid that asking these questions out loud will give the doubts a shape, a body, make them more real. Pushing the questions aside feels safer, though it doesn’t make the doubts go away.

So, in addition to helping her to understand that people who share her race are valuable, you need to do what you can to let her know that her kind of family is a “real” one, and that her status as your daughter doesn’t depend on whether or not you look alike. Does she have friends who are also members of transracial adoptive families? Do you talk openly and directly about transracial adoption with her? Reading a book like *Horace\** with her – about an adopted youngster who is struggling with looking different from his parents – would be a great way to start such a conversation.

She may also be growing tired of being a member of a “conspicuous family.” Being part of a transracial adoptive family means that her adoption is obvious, and increases the likelihood and frequency of intrusive questions. It is wearing for kids to stand out in this way – especially at an age when just belonging to the group is important. You can use the book *WISE Up\** to help her learn how to field the questions she’s getting from friends.

For transracially-adopted children of color, the issues of race and adoption are often intertwined. As an adoptive parent, you will need to be sure to address both.