pact's point of view
serving adopted children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2008
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Ask Pact

Mom, What's the N-word?

On Pact's website, we support several chat groups for adoptive parents of children of color. The following discussion took place online within a group of parents whose children have attended Pact Camp. Many of these parents have adopted transracially. We felt the comments were both useful and insightful and received permission from the participants to re-print them here.

Q: MC (white mother to two adopted African American sons and one white daughter born to her): The dreaded question...Last Friday my six-year-old asked me that question. Of course, we were in the car so there was no escaping! He said he heard it at school and was wondering what it meant. So I explained for the next few miles...that it was a word that was racially loaded. That in our family we were not going to use it. I spelled it out for him and told him that it would be the only time he would hear it coming from my mouth. I gave him the historical perspective as well. I also told him that some African-Americans used it as an endearing term. I said that it was not for me to judge if it was wrong or right for others to use it. I said that in my birth culture (both parents being Quebecois French-Canadian), such a word was not used so it was culturally relatively new to me. He sat in his booster seat and took it all in. Now that I have "outed" myself, I'd like to hear how you handled it in your respective families...

A: **MC** *(white mother to two adopted African American sons and one white daughter born to her)*:
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LP *(white mother to two adopted Nepalese children)*:
My now six-year-old heard the term last year when he was five, but didn't really question what it meant until the day he heard the actual word (spoken by an older white boy he doesn't know, but beyond not being directed at my son I couldn't determine the context, I wasn't present)….We've had the opportunity to discuss it several times since. Once when my son heard some African American teens use the N-word amongst themselves, he asked me why they were allowed to use it but he wasn't. My answer was that everyone has the right to choose their own terms to refer to themselves. By mutual agreement friends in a group might also use certain terms with each other; otherwise the terms may be received as offensive even within the group. If we don't belong to the group, however, we don't get to choose the words for that group, and it is never okay for us to use hate words about members of another group. I've told my kids that the N-word is a hate word. I've put certain other words that they've heard in the same container (distinct from "dumb," "stupid,"

"weird" and other similar words they like to use). In our family, we leave the hate words in the container and don't take them out. Seems a little simplistic, but at the same time we're continuing to expand the dialogue as my kids' comprehension grows. We may have to revise this explanation as they get more sophisticated, but it's our starting point for now.....

EDF *(white mother to an adopted biracial daughter and a white daughter born to her)*: I've told my kids that it's a "bad word" like s¬¬¬__ or f__ (did give some of the racial background but I don't think it sunk in) and that some people use those words and we don't and they are not considered appropriate language. To me, we hear those three words being used together many a time as part of bad language, so I felt that it would make most sense to approach it that way. I also had a discussion around the usage of the word Negro which is prominent in the movie Hairspray that seems to be all the rage with my kids (thanks, gramma...) and the fact that with some words it very much depends on how it is used (Negroid, for example, being a scientific word mostly, etc).

HW *(white mother to an adopted African American son)*: My thinking is that the word belongs to the African American community, and I don't feel comfortable adopting a strict approach to its use. My son has been called it and understands that it's deeply offensive from a non-black person and needs to be reported. He understands that there are different feelings about the word in the African American community. I may like the idea of eradicating the word altogether—I wonder why I like that idea so much—but it doesn't belong to me is what I think. My son's birth family use the word among themselves sometimes, but very rarely when we are around; I think I can't tell him not to use it when he's with his siblings. I think maybe it's a matter of trusting a community with its own language. I'm still thinking about it ...

KW (*white mother to two adopted African American daughters)*: We haven't talked about the N-word yet, although I think we will before sending our now four-year-old to public school. But we have encountered the words Negro and Colored in books about famous African Americans, Jim Crow, etc. I have just said that Black people were called Negro etc, a long time ago. I do want to say, however, that there is really nothing scientific about the word Negroid. Yes, it was used in "science" as a racial classification, but this "science" has been discredited, since there is no biological basis for the concept of race. Most of the "science" that utilized this term and other racial categories was either in search of racist results or was used to justify existing racism….

DT *(white father of an adopted African American son and daughter)*: I believe my daughter's first exposure to the word was at an African American History Month presentation at the local library, when the former mayor of our town, who was also the first black female mayor of any Peninsula city, said it. She was telling a story about her father, who had operated the town dump for years, took a lot of s__ from people, and had to put up with it. He wound up publishing a book called The Official Nigger, which his daughter talked about at that presentation. I don't think it made much of an impression on my daughter at the time. She would have been about three years old and wasn't paying much attention to what former mayors, black or otherwise, would have been saying about such ancient history. It did, however, help to desensitize me about the word a little bit. As a white person I sort of feel that the word is electrified, and I can't touch it or even go near it without getting shocked. In reality it's just another word, and I feel that my daughter needs to be wise about when people are using that word in hatred, in ignorance, or in an attempt to evoke camaraderie. I don't think you can impart that lesson if you feel like the word itself has some magical power, or if you talk about it as if it does. We have had discussions with her about that word, and others used to demean various ethnic groups, and we've made it clear that these are rude words, not to be used, and that she should let us know if other kids are using these words, so we can talk about it. But it's been over a year since we had that conversation with her so it's probably a good time to revisit it. Like talking about sex, I'd like to think that we could have the awkward conversation just once and be done with it, but I don't think kids work that way.

John Raible *(transracial adoptee, father of two adopted African American sons, and a professor of multicultural education at the University of Nebraska)*: I view the chance to have this conversation with my kids as a chance for me to explain my commitment to anti-racism and to countering a culture that is mired in an ideology of racial supremacy. It is always awkward to talk about it. But I think taking the plunge and going ahead to voice my thoughts and feelings on the use of the N-word models for my kids how strongly I feel about it.

When my sons were much younger (pre-teens), they began using the word with each other and with their friends. I cringed every time I heard it. Yet I knew from my experience working at a progressive school that had tried to address racial name-calling through an anti-bias curriculum that trying to ban my sons' use of that word would be futile and ineffective. At the school, the kids "learned" the power of the N-word. They also learned not to use it within earshot of teachers. But once school was over and the language police/teachers were off duty, kids could be heard far too frequently on the playground tossing the term around after school.

I tried to explain to my boys that to people of my generation (especially among conscious black people), the N-word as used by African Americans represents a sense of internalized shame and racial self-hatred, which is an understandable and predictable response to years of indoctrination and socialization in a culture based on white supremacy. I said that some black people claim that calling each other "N" is a term of endearment. I said that I even understood the argument that by using it themselves, black people might think they are taking the sting out of it, similar to how some of my gay friends call each other "queer," as a way to turn a negative into a positive.

I even admitted that I have used the N-word myself with black friends, to make a point or to fit in and demonstrate that I was part of the group. I said that I feel torn about its use and that for myself I have decided that, ideally at least, it should be dropped from general usage, but that sometimes when used judiciously the N-word can be used to powerful effect. I said that when it is over-used, casually and on a daily basis, it easily reinforces our collective shame and racial self-hatred. I told them that I am proud to be African American and that I hoped they would be too.

I reminded them of the history of slavery and the deliberate destruction of African culture and how the N-word played a role in our dehumanization, and that is the main reason I detest the word. I confessed that even when I myself use it, the N-word still makes me cringe and I feel like I am betraying myself and my people by saying it.

Their response? "Dad, you see racism everywhere." Yes, son, I do, because it IS everywhere! "We say 'nigga,' not nigger." Well, do you really think it means something different? It reflects the same ideology. I just want you as young black men to be conscious of how and when you use it. Just as my feelings change, I am sure yours will change. Perhaps you can be leaders who will teach your peers about the word's history and power.

I don't know how much good this did, and we have had these sorts of conversations many times. On the positive side, I have heard my sons explaining to other young people the kind of argument I had made to them—even though they pretty much still use nigga.

Lastly, I think many middle- and upper-class black folk (including entertainers and other "role models") who feel guilty for attaining a level of economic success or who are worried about maintaining their street credibility continue to use the N-word as a way of signaling that they are still "down," that they have not turned their back on the "hood." This is one reason I respect Richard Pryor's public pronouncement that he would no longer use the N-word in his act. After his trip to the Motherland, he came back talking about all the black people he saw running things, in positions of real power. Pryor said that there were no niggers in Africa and that he would no longer talk about us that way. Hopefully more black people will get to that level of consciousness.