



pact's

point of view

serving adopted children of color

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Ask Pact

Our Son Doesn't Mind Being The Only

by Lisa Marie Rollins

Q:

Someone recently suggested that having our child be in a setting where he is the only or one of few people of color may be damaging to his self-identity. We have an African American son, aged 10, who is just finishing elementary school. He is happy, popular, plays sports and has a lot of friends. He does not ever mention having any issues around race or seem to have any problems at school. He actually seems more comfortable in settings with his white friends than he does in settings with a lot of black people. Do you think this is an issue we should worry about?

A:

One of the most difficult things to identify in an adopted child of color's experience is how denial of racialized identity or internalized racism plays a part in their lives. While I think it's significant that your son is making friends, seems happy and is doing well in school, there are many things to consider.

Look deeper and ask yourself if your child is really as comfortable as he claims. Adoptees' concerns about loyalty to their adoptive family often make them feel that they must appear "well-adjusted" to their parents and communities. As you've probably heard before, one of the common themes in adoption discourse is the loaded language which too often implies that adoptees ought to be grateful to their adoptive family for "saving" them. Nowadays, adoptive parents, adoption professionals and adopted people are pushing to change this conversation, but for people outside the adoption community, much of this language is still operative. If people are constantly telling children they are "lucky," they were "chosen," or that they should be thankful, those children can feel guilty when they begin to have some negative feelings related to adoption.

What if they have anger, confusion or resentment about their circumstances that they need to express? For many transracial adoptees, there is a very real fear that if they express discomfort with being in mostly white environments or assert themselves as young men or women of color, their family, neighbors or friends will not fully accept them as part of their community. They may identify the whiteness of their environment with the whiteness of their parents and feel that if they don't say how "okay" everything is, they might jeopardize their position with their parents. This fear of being rejected is often heightened by adoptees' previous experiences with displacement and loss. What is your child's comfort level with other people of color? You indicate that most of your son's peers and close friends are white. Being able to make connections with people of all races is important. Finding oneself in the minority is a reality of most black people's lives, especially on the professional level, and it is useful to have the ability to feel comfortable in these situations.

What is a reality for transracially adopted people is that because many of us grow up without consistent experiences connecting with our cultural communities and thus many of us have difficulty understanding how to communicate in more diverse or in your son's case, all-black settings, and we struggle to find a comfortable space in our own communities.

Many adoptees say that in middle and high school they struggled with their racial identity and questions of belonging both at school and at home, and that it wasn't until college, when they were away from their families for the first time, that they felt comfortable asserting their identity as a person of color in any real way. Even in their thirties and forties, many transracially and internationally adopted adults struggle with issues related to their parents' acceptance of their choices in marriage partners, education, or career when these choices reflect a commitment to their racial community of birth. The messages parents send their children about the importance of recognizing themselves as part of the ethnic/racial community they belong to by birth have a significant impact not only on their relationship with their adopted child, but also on the child's (and eventually adult's) comfort level in balancing their place in the world and their place in their adoptive family.

Commit to developing your son's and your family's communities and interactions with other people of color. To make your family's community reflect your multiracial family takes commitment and dedication. You are comfortable in your community, your son seems happy and comfortable, and he may even resist when you begin to make these positive changes for your family. Consider this: if your son said "I don't like going to Grandma's house because she smells funny," would you let him stop seeing Grandma? Or if he didn't want to go to church anymore because "it's boring," would you agree, no questions asked? Probably not, if you think that family and church are important to your child's well-being. You can make the decision that having connections to a multiracial, multiethnic community is one of your family values.