

The Benefits of Pact Camp

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A tall, slender African American teenager tells his white lesbian mom, “You can hug me in front of people here.” A 9-year-old in the breakfast line

lights up with a huge grin when I tell him, “You know something? I was adopted, just like you. And my mom is white like yours.” Smiling, he yells the news across the buffet to his mom. “John was adopted, too!” A non-adopted 10-year-old shares, during the Image Theater workshop for the tweens, that he now understands both the happiness and sadness of what it feels like for his brothers and sisters to be adopted. Then he tells the group that the exercise made him feel like he wants to adopt a child when he grows up. Later over lunch, this non-adopted sibling explains that if he does adopt kids, he would definitely bring them to Pact Camp.

Naming the similarities between us—as well as our differences from the mainstream—is part of the explicit agenda at camp. For a few brief days each year, transracial adoptive families come together to create a special, caring learning community where nearly everyone walks around as part of an interracial family. There are plenty of people of color around—lots of other campers, some of the parents, camp counselors who were not necessarily adopted, transracially adopted staff, the music teacher, and resident hair clinicians. This collective of caring adults of color mirrors back to the children who they can become when they grow up. They teach through example that people of color are not stereotypes, and are not scary. Kids and parents learn that people of color are approachable and can be trusted, a not insignificant lesson for all of us who care about integration and about healing the wounds of a racially divided society.

Gathering together as families touched by adoption empowers children and youth to identify with each other. Moreover, it gives them permission to voice highly personal thoughts and feelings pertaining to adoption and race. Instead of feeling like they are the “only one” (for instance, who is adopted or a person of color), young people find many others whose families are as different as theirs. They also encounter peers who are working hard to make sense of adoption and race issues. At Pact Camp, everyone is encouraged to talk about race and about adoption—parents, kids, and teens.



Some parents have told me how they’ve seen their children relax in ways that seldom happen out in the real world. Many adopted children and their non-traditional family members cannot automatically depend on their peers, neighbors, or even teachers to understand why their family members don’t match. Nor can these “outsiders” easily follow the intricate relationships between members of their adoptive, foster, and birth families. For a brief time at camp, kids don’t have to explain. Everyone “gets” them! Pact Camp normalizes the experience that often feels anything but normal when families are confronted by stares and curiosity in the everyday world. Single parents, queer parents, straight parents, older grey haired parents, bilingual parents, parents of various races, and siblings who may not look like they share the same parent—all are visible at Pact Camp.

Kids and parents alike get to see adult adoptees taking charge. From the camp director and guest artists who work with the campers to the presenters who lead sessions for parents, and including even some of the camp counselors, adults and children benefit from interacting with competent, professional adoptees of different racial backgrounds who have themselves navigated the tricky waters of race and adoption—and lived to tell about it with passion, insight, and humor.

While racialization conditions us to stay safely in our comfort zones with people who more or less share our racial designation, Pact Camp models what I call transracialization, that is, how long-term caring friendships that cross race lines can unfold over time, influencing the way we think about race and even altering our identities. As families return year after year, friendships and relationships are renewed and strengthened. After being at camp for six years now, I have observed firsthand how children and parents continue to change. Perhaps in the first year, the unique social environment at camp feels almost too good to be true. But for families that keep coming back for more, Pact Camp is nothing short of transformative.

I’ve seen kids who, when they were new to camp, did not make a lot of eye contact with adults of color. Many of these children seem much more comfortable now making eye contact and even interacting in subsequent years.

I’ve watched African American girls come to camp their first time with “jacked up” hair (and damaged self-esteem). After spending an intimate session at the Hair Clinic, these same girls emerge feeling beautiful, with a freshly conditioned scalp and gorgeous new braids. I liken the state of black children’s hair to the proverbial canary in the coalmine, by which I mean that many of us who are transracial adoptees survey the children’s hair to get a sense of where the parents’ heads are at—quite literally—in terms of their attention to African

American cultural values and their commitment to instilling racial pride in their children. There's an in-joke among black and biracial transracial adoptees that we can tell who was raised by white parents just by looking at the hair. It excites me no end to witness head after head of lovingly cared for hair among the young campers. I particularly love to chat with little girls about who braids their hair, and watch as they beam with pride, "My mommy (or daddy) did it."

During the first year at camp, the realization that everyone "gets" families like ours may not take hold. By the second year and beyond, I've seen how that awareness dawns. Kids and teens begin to relax and trust their counselors and the adult adoptees they are working with. Kids come to believe in the camp leadership that consistently demonstrates that they take young people's ideas and experience seriously. It's amazing to see how healing and affirming all this can be. Children who, as camp newbies, avoided interacting with adult adoptees now come up with outstretched arms to greet me with a smile and a hug on the first day back at camp. Returning to Pact Camp feels like being at a very special kind of family reunion.

During informal games of ping-pong or air hockey with the kids, I like to inquire, "Who here was adopted?" and "Who here has a brother or sister who was adopted?" I do this to generate a quick show of hands, because, if I feel empowered and affirmed as I watch the hands go up, I imagine that many children do, too. It's inspiring to listen, in sessions with tweens and teens, to the questions and insights about race and adoption that occupy their minds. I'm fascinated to hear kids verbalize some of the secret thoughts that are not usually shared, but that are nonetheless present just beneath the surface of consciousness. For example, one 12-year-old dared to articulate a powerful insecurity felt by many adoptees about the permanence of our place in our adoptive families. He suggested, as a Forum Theater scene, to role play around the "Sometimes I wish I'd never adopted you" statement as blurted by an angry parent in the heat of a parent-child conflict. Tweens and parents together then had a chance to play out the scene and try out various responses and alternatives to dealing with conflict, while sharpening their understanding of the power of such a statement and how different individuals interpret and address it.

Having stated the benefits of the family adoption camp experience as I see them, I also feel that it's necessary to say that Pact Camp is not simply a love fest. It's not all fun and games, by any means. In other words, Pact Camp asks much of families. For one thing, parents and kids alike are encouraged to participate in difficult conversations about sensitive topics. Interracial dialogues about race and racism can be awkward and feel oppressive. Adult adoptee/adoptive parent discussions similarly can be minefields fraught with emotion and tension. Viewing poignant films together and listening to various presenters point out the downside (or challenges) of transracial adoption can feel overwhelming.

Still, I give parents credit for their willingness to engage, and to stay engaged even when the going gets rough. I have come to view the Pact Camp experience as giving parents a chance to learn by

doing. That is, for a few short days, adoptive parents get to practice holding the jumble of emotions about adoption, as well as the cultural insider information about how race works, that transracial adoptees grapple with every day of our lives. In a real sense, we say, "Welcome to our world." Participating in adoption camp allows parents a chance to enter an adoptee's inner world of tangled and sometimes contradictory perspectives, ambivalent feelings, and pesky questions about who we are and where we belong.

Last year, some parents described Pact Camp as boot camp. This year, the tone shifted: one parent said it felt "less combative". Personally, I felt less confrontational, and approached families with a "we're in this together" attitude. If newbie families thought this season still felt like boot camp, they really need to talk to some old-timers about some of the explosive and enlightening sessions in past years!



After 6 years at camp, I'm settling in for a longer view. I see families making life-changing decisions for their children, for example, about relocating and choosing to attend more racially diverse schools and houses of worship. I see parents who are willing to learn about black hair care and how to do braids, rather than chopping off hair that feels unmanageable due to their lack of experience. I see families that are receptive to hearing the hard knowledge about living as a person of color in a still racist society. I see parents acknowledging that their adopted children of color need to be around people who look like them, for reasons too numerous to reiterate here.

I see parents choosing to work towards more openness in adoption, for example, by establishing ongoing relationships with their children's birth families. I see parents becoming advocates for open records and adoption reform. I see families grappling with how to live ethically as a multiracial family, and with what transracial adoption and race mean to the white children in their families.

Most importantly, I see families loving their children unconditionally, accepting all their parts, and allowing them to have their feelings and find their voices. I see parents who are shouldering some of the burdens of being adopted, such as the emotional toll of surviving orphanages, foster care, and birth mother relinquishment, and other early traumas. I see parents standing in solidarity with adoptees of color as allies in the struggle to transform racism.

I see families growing together, listening to each other, learning to acknowledge the hard truths, and taking action to make a better way. Pact Camp provides the catalyst for necessary change. Pact Camp literally makes another way possible. As a teacher, I have dedicated my life's work to anti-racist, multicultural education. From that perspective, I couldn't ask for a finer learning community. Pact Camp stands as the model for effective, post-adoption parent education and support—and is also really fun for the whole family!

