

Ask Pact: To Move or Not To Move?

by Beth Hall

We are getting ready to bring home a child from Ethiopia. We are a white family (we have two children already who were born to us) and we have gone to several workshops on transracial adoption, including some panels of adopted adults. Here is the problem: it seems like there is a big debate about whether transracial families need to live in diverse areas or if children can thrive with less diversity as long as their parents are supportive and giving positive messages about race and people of color. What does Pact think?

What we know about all human beings is that isolation tends to be hard on us psychologically. We are a socially interdependent species. Belonging is described by researchers as playing a key role in the maintenance of confidence and self-esteem in most people. Each of us needs others who validate our existence and reinforce our cultural identity, acting as mirrors that reflect our own experience. When this reflection is confusing, or does not match with one's self-perception, it leads to isolation or an identity crisis. When others reject us, we are likely to reject ourselves too and internalize feelings of self-loathing or disgust.

Rather than getting involved in debates about whether or not people are entitled to adopt across racial lines based on where they live or with whom they interact, perhaps it is more useful to look at what the outcomes have been for adopted people who have grown up in racial isolation. We have noticed two common experiences in transracial families that we call Geographic Isolation and Demographic or Residential Segregation.

Geographic Isolation

This lifestyle is defined by families who live in white-majority areas that are geographically isolated from people of color—very few if any people of the same racial or ethnic background as the transracially adopted child (or even people of color of different backgrounds) live within the child's field of experience. Not only is it likely that the child growing up in this circumstance is the only person of color in their classroom or school (with the occasional exception of other adopted children), they may also be the only one in their school district, county, or region. As articulated by Beverly Daniel Tatum in her important book, *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, this kind of isolation is often debilitating for children. Without

community, children's ability to develop an integrated feeling of belonging is compromised. Often the goal of parents who live in this circumstance is to minimize what they may see as the dangerous emphasis that society places on race. Ironically, their choice to live in this kind of isolation tends to produce an internal sense in their child that race is central and a multiracial community is critical to feelings of belonging. We have heard this from many adult adoptees who say that their own experience was so out of line with the world view of their parents that they felt an overwhelming pressure to flee the environment where they grew up in order to find a diverse community where racial identity exploration is commonplace.

So what happens?

When adoptees in such situations become adults, they often disconnect (physically and emotionally) from their adoptive family because they cannot feel comfortable in the parental environment, or they disconnect from their racial group because they cannot feel comfortable in their own skin. The first choice is sad, because of course the adopting parents desire closeness with their children that is at odds with the adult child's need to leave and find a new and often entirely different environment where they see themselves reflected. But perhaps the second outcome, adults of color who do not feel comfortable with people of their own racial and/or ethnic group, is even more painful, since that has been defined by most psychologists as a symptom of self-hate, something that is unlikely to lead to long-term happiness or a well-adjusted life. Adoptees who have grown up in these circumstance are more likely to suffer from depression and/or low self-esteem.

Demographic Isolation / Residential Segregation

When families live in white-majority suburbs or neighborhoods that border neighborhoods or areas with many people of color, a different set of messages is delivered to the children in the family. These children often assume that their adoptive parents have made a conscious choice to keep the people of color who live nearby at bay. This sets up a "loyalty test" that puts the adopted child of color in the position of feeling that they must choose between their adoptive parents and making connections to people of their own racial and ethnic heritage. The irony here is that parents leading this lifestyle usually see themselves as accepting towards people of their child's race and often bemoan how "hard" it is to make true friendships across racial and ethnic

lines. They insist they have chosen their home's location only in the name of a "better" school district or a "safer" neighborhood. But better for whom? Safer for whom? These parents are making choices that ultimately isolate their child and set up a dynamic that can get very volatile during the teen years. Of course, motivated families can learn to create connections without moving. Interestingly, those families who invest in such connections often find that they become more comfortable with the idea of living in a diverse neighborhood and end up moving.

So what happens?

Children who grow up in this kind of isolation often seek peers of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds during their tween and teen years in a way that exhibits poor judgment in terms of values and/or trustworthiness on the part of the "friends" with whom they connect. Their view often reflects the mainstream media's understanding that people of color live in the "ghetto" because they have no personal familiarity with local neighborhoods of color. This is almost always an inaccurate and very dangerous point of view that stems from low self-esteem and an unbalanced view of what it means to be a person of color in America. Transracial parents often do not understand their own role in setting their children up for this kind of imbalance and flirtation or immersion in dangerous behavior and settings.

Parents in transracial families who live in Geographic or Demographic Isolation often protest that their children seem happy and well-adjusted, but children typically try to fit into the life in which they find themselves. However, it is important to remember that being different or "other" is a central reality of these children's existence, and at the same time they are not learning a cultural language that will connect them to people who share and understand this experience of otherness—so even among other people of color, they remain to some extent outsiders. This double-edged sword of racial or ethnic isolation often causes great angst and pain during the teenage and adult years, and can lead to a real disconnect between adoptees and adoptive parents later in life, when the adult adoptees realize the cost to them of the choices their parents made (or didn't make).

Why Can't I Make Cross-Racial Connections?

The reality is that most Americans do not live a truly multicultural life on an intimate basis. Most of us eat dinner with, worship with, and engage in other intimate relationships with people who are the same race as we are. This means that inherently transracial families are doing something different, whether they live in diverse areas or not. Racial isolation is often attributed to unconscious choices that influence our lifestyles. Only by bringing those choices into the light of honest analysis will we be able to make changes, if indeed we are serious about doing so.

In the pre-adoption phase, it can be helpful to consider how your personality will respond to the unique challenges that come with transracial adoption. Transracial adoption means that your family becomes "public," because your differences are readily apparent to others. If you like to blend in and go with the crowd, think again. If you believe there is one right way to do most things, you should consider how you will incorporate into your family the different points of view that will likely stem from your child's different experiences. If you are attracted to learning new ways of thinking, you will enjoy the challenge. Introverts often struggle with what feels to them like the burden of creating new relationships across cultural lines. Similarly those who experience a sense of shame at their own lack of knowledge and/or cultural incompetence may struggle to reach out for new relationships because it triggers their own emotions. If you know these to be your personality types you will need to explore how you will overcome such barriers to ensure that you do not serve your own comfort more than your child's.

Finally, those of us who are white or experience privilege based on our racial identification must look honestly at our own unacknowledged racism to assess how much it may be hindering our connections to others of our child's racial group. At Pact we hear from parents who say things like, "I want my child to go to college, so I don't want them to get too caught up in Latino [insert any race or group here] culture...." This is a racist statement that presumes that it is the culture itself that devalues education rather than recognizing that racism is a huge contributing factor to why Latinos and other people of color don't perform as well in school or other means of "success." The more you interact with people of color the less likely you are to believe such assumptions, because your experience teaches you otherwise.

Over the years we have seen committed families find many different ways of meeting their children's needs for racial and ethnic connection—everything from changing where they live to "changing in place." Pact offers a variety of consultation services (available by phone as well as in person) for families who are considering transracial or transnational adoption as well as those who are already parenting children of a different race. If you are parenting across racial lines—or planning to do so—and have been wondering exactly how to bring more diversity into your family's circle and support your child's cultural and racial self-esteem, Pact's Building Connections Across Cultures program is designed to help (www.pactadopt.org/community.html). However you proceed, remember that the "should we move?" question is complex and multi-layered, because transracial adoption is complex and multi-layered. There are many internal as well as external issues to consider and while the solutions are usually neither quick nor easy, they are always enriching when we are open to growth and committed to crossing barriers and making new connections for the sake of everyone in the family.