

Can White People Nurture Black Kids Effectively? by RoAnne Elliot

Answer this question and you'll likely find yourself embroiled in a controversy. This debate is kept alive and well-nourished by today's racial climate of mistrust and misunderstanding.

A few years ago I was privileged to have heard an address by Sydney Duncan, an African American adoption professional specializing in finding homes for African American children. Her message came at the height of the transracial adoption debate. Ms. Duncan said simply "...for the sake of the children, stop the fighting and work together to help the families."

The entire audience enthusiastically welcomed this loving message. Its impact was especially strong because it came from such a well-respected leader, one who had long been active in her concern for black infants and children in need of permanent families.

As an African American woman, I care that black kids enjoy well-nurtured childhoods and grow into whole and healthy adults. As a parent in an interracial family, I believe in not only the legitimacy of interracial families, but also in the unique advantages our families can provide. As a believer that transracial adoptive parenting can be effective parenting, I stand shoulder to shoulder with parents of all ethnic backgrounds who are doing what I am doing - challenging themselves to do their best to meet their children's needs. So for me, Sydney Duncan's speech sparked some more useful questions:

- What kind of support do white parents need as they nurture their African American children?
- How can I become a positive force in support of families and children?
- What can I learn that will further my own growth toward my goal of a multi-cultural perspective?

These questions have led me to examine how we, as Americans, and as parents in inter-ethnic families, can take the initiative in creating personal ties across racial lines - for our children's sake, for our own growth, and for the good of our communities.

I believe that it's important to recognize the experience of being in an interracial family for what it is: the opportunity of a lifetime. As parents you need to rise to the occasion by

embarking on a journey of personal transformation, growing in your ability to nurture your children along the way. This involves an alert awareness of difference (no more color-blindness for nice white people) and an optimistic expectation that cultural differences among us will lead to rewarding personal connections and friendships.

I believe that intuition and insight will grow as parents do their transformation work. You need a supportive community comprised of many races - those who will be role models and provide inspiration, those who will stimulate your thinking, those who will fill your desire for cultural diversity, and those who will challenge you in constructive and respectful ways. In other words, a community that sees a cross-cultural interweaving of life's experiences as necessary and enriching.

And out of all of this work comes the empowerment to affirm publicly that your family belongs together. You need the firm knowledge in your heart and in your mind that you are the best parent for your children. This empowerment is key since you can't parent well if you don't feel confident, competent and entitled to do so.

Racism is a factor in the lives of each of us, and the children of color are particularly vulnerable to its damaging effects. Lessons taught by racism can reverberate throughout a lifetime. Parents of kids of color will need to recognize racism in its many forms - subtle and disguised, or virulent and confrontive, whether promoted by individuals or institutional practices and policies. We have to know it well, be able to say its name, and acknowledge its potential, and teach our kids in ways that neutralize its evil.

Imagine the effect one black child of having white parents who deny the existence of racism; or who acknowledge racism but don't believe it touches their lives; or who have never spoken to an African American adult about the various perspectives of racism.

Get beyond your white identity so you can confront racism with power and conviction. Do some serious thinking about how race has defined you and how you think about the world. For many of us, living in interracial families has triggered an awareness of a need for change within ourselves. I'm not suggesting that you can or would want to deny your ethnicity or skin color. And yes, a very important step in the multi-cultural learning process for white people is to discover what it means to be a person of color in America.

But do not skip an earlier step. It is crucial that you develop a hyper-awareness of what it means to be white in this country, and that you learn how that meaning affects the experiences of people of color. Further, it is necessary to acknowledge the kind of mindset that grows out of white identity, and what children learn when parented from such a perspective.

If it has not occurred to you that the creation of your interracial family is the best thing that ever happened, you might be concentrating on the wrong things. The insight that can grow

only from active, real-life learning is critical for parenting our African American sons and daughters and a valuable asset to our communities as well.

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