pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2006
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White Parents Identity

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If you are like many white parents who have adopted across race, your journey has had twists and turns in it that you hadn't anticipated or weren't prepared for. While loving your child of color has been a vital ingredient in supporting her/him, many of you might have found it not sufficient for dealing with the issues of race and racism encountered by your child and your family. This article presents a model that we have developed that can serve as scaffolding as you navigate your relationship with your child of color and your relationship to race and racism.

Although the four stages in this model are presented, in this article, as if one travels through them in a linear, timely fashion, we know that's not the case in real life. As you read about the stages described you may notice one of them as your 'home base' – the stage where you find yourself much of the time currently. You may also recognize your forays into later stages or your return to prior ones. While the progression through the stages is not linear, over time there is movement of your 'home base' from an earlier stage to a later one. Progression through these stages is not necessarily supported by our families or friends, and is at the same time personally challenging. We hope that in understanding this journey you'll be kind to yourself for the place that you are and that you'll get the support you want to move along in the process.

Stage One: We Are Family
The primary task of this stage is the creation of your transracial family. In this stage you are making your child of color your own and falling in love with her/him. You are making an extended family that loves your child, supports your family, and sees your child of color as part of their family.

At times, your child, with physical features different than yours, may serve as a reminder of fertility issues that may have been part of your adoption journey. These same physical differences may allow grandparents and aunts/uncles to maintain a distance from your child that while subtle, may still be felt by you. The noticeable physical difference between you and your child often invites strangers into your life in grocery stores, at the playground, or in restaurants in ways that many times feels intrusive.

There is a pull in this stage to be fiercely 'color-blind' as a way of minimizing the differences between you, as a white parent, and your child of color that you and others around you see in service of loving your child, forming family, and making her/him 'yours'. In this stage, 'love is enough' for you and your child of color at this point in your transracial adoptive journey.

Stage Two: We Are a Multicultural Family
As your child of color ages, she/he has begun to notice and speak about the physical differences between you and her/him. If this article was written twenty-five years ago, the instruction you would have been given by adoption professionals and your community was to 'reassure' your child by speaking about the ways you and she/he are similar and to minimize the differences she/he was noticing. While this instruction still operates today, enough adult adoptees of color have spoken about the ways this denial of difference has not worked for them, that most transracial families and the adoption community support ways of celebrating your child of color's birth culture.

The celebration of your child's birth culture is the hallmark of this stage. In many adoptive communities there are festivals, culture camps, networking groups, and holiday activities which provide opportunities to celebrate your child's reference group. Parents in this stage are taking steps to appreciate the traditions of their child's birth culture. It is often the beginnings of your child of color witnessing you, as the white parent, crossing the color line and recognizing and appreciating what they have brought to your family as a result of their difference. This stage also provides opportunities for your family to meet similar families and get support from each other to continue your transracial adoptive journey.

Stage Three: We Are an Anti-Racist Family
If you are like most white people raised in the United States, you were taught *not* to notice and speak about racial differences; that the best way to be combat racism was to be 'color-blind' and see everyone, regardless of skin color, as the same. Participating in the celebrations of your child's birth culture in Stage Two of this transracial journey is an invitation to recognize, understand, and appreciate differences based on your child's race, which for many parents is in contrast to what you were taught growing up about being in relation with someone who is racially different from you.

The primary task of this stage is to begin to notice and speak about not only you and your child's differences, but also to notice and speak about race and racism. This stage is about how you, as the white parent, begins to and continues to break the racial sound barrier. By talking about race and racism with your child of color, you are giving her/him important survival tools to thrive in a world that is not color-blind; in a world where racism still exists.

Raising a 'color-blind' child of color invites your child *not* to speak about and get support from you about the racism she/he experiences when she/he is not with you. In the absence of conversation about racism, your child has no way to understand the racism directed toward them; other than that it is about them personally. Talking about and understanding racism gives your child a way to see that the racism she/he experiences is *not* about her/him; rather it's about something bigger than her/him and that operates on a societal level called racism.

In general, most white people haven't had much experience noticing and talking about race and racism, which presents a unique challenge for you as a white parent raising a child of color. Parents in this stage are talking to other white parents about what it means to be white and how that impacts their raising of their child of color. Parents in this stage are reading newspapers and magazines, watching the television, observing cross-racial interactions and asking 'what does race/racism have to do with this?' Parents in this stage are actively giving up their white privilege of not having to think about race/racism much of the time. Parents in this stage are attending 'anti-racism' workshops where in a safe, group environment new cognitive and emotional learnings and skills can take place.

Currently, there is not much support from the transracial adoption community, either from adoption professionals or adoptive families, for parents in this stage or for parents who might want to be in this stage of their transracial adoption journey. We are hopeful that as more white adoptive parents who are raising children of color express the desire for support in talking about race/racism, there will be as much cultural support for parents to be in the anti-racist identity stage as there is currently for parents in multicultural stage. In the meantime, meet with other white parents raising children of color to talk about the impact of racism on your families. Attend 'anti-racism' workshops. Start a book group whose readings have to do with learning about different races and cultures.

Stage Four: We Are a Multiracial Family

This stage is about becoming bi-cultural. It is about you, the white parent, spending as much time as a racial minority as your child of color spends as a racial minority. Parents in this stage are asking themselves questions such as the following and are making significant changes in their lives based on the answers:

- What is the racial makeup of our neighborhood?
- What is the racial makeup of our child's school?
- What is the racial makeup of our place of worship?
- What is the racial makeup of our friends?
- What is the racial makeup of our family's providers (i.e. doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, carpenters, plumbers, housekeepers, childcare providers)?
- What is the racial makeup of where we go for vacation? To shop? Out for dinner? For on-going leisure activities?

If you are like the majority of white people your answer to these questions is 'almost entirely white'. Parents in this stage have, and are continuing to, make changes in every arena of their lives so that they and their child of color are as likely to be with people of color as they are to be with white people. Your child of color notices whether the people you choose to spend time with are people of their race/ethnicity, are other people of color, or are white. Parents in this stage recognize that without even talking about race/racism, their choices speak volumes to their child of color.

This stage is about 'walking the talk' in new ways that communicate to your child of color that you recognize, understand, and appreciate differences based on race, ethnicity and culture. Parents in this stage are in on-going process with themselves around the following questions:

- Do my actions communicate what I intend them to communicate?
- What do I imagine to be the impact of my choices on my child of color?
- Have I spoken to her/him about what I notice about my choices and their impact on me and her/him?
- Do I talk with her/him in an on-going way about my choices and their impact?

Parents in this stage are continuing to stretch their comfort zones. They are consistently in situations where they are the racial minority. They are interested and open to the experience offered by a life among people of varied races; one that is not available to them in white communities. Parents in this stage are interested in contact across race not only for the ways it enriches the life of their child of color, but are interested in contact across race for the ways it enriches *their* lives.