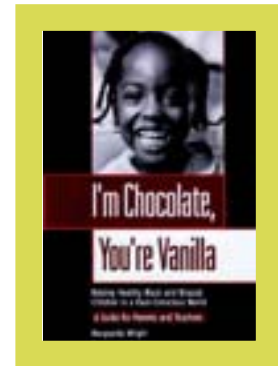


Book Review

I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla

Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious Society

by Marguerite A. Wright
Jossey-Bass Press



I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla is a book about how parents and teachers of young children should deal with the issue of race and racism. The book is not new – it was published in 1998. It is, however, one of very, very few available books on the topic. Parents who have searched for information and advice on talking with kids about race cite it frequently. Many, many adoptive parent groups – online and otherwise – recommend it as a useful resource, especially to white parents raising transracially-adopted kids. We would beg to differ and offer a strong caution when considering the content of this book.

We see fundamental problems with the book's basic approach to race and children. The book seems to suggest that parents not engage in any conversation about race with young children that goes beyond recognizing that people have different colors of skin that the author suggests describing as "chocolate", "vanilla" or "peach," etc. Her basic premise is that children – especially preschoolers – do not understand the concept of race, and that any emphasis parents or teachers place on the issue is detrimental to them. Because adults are teaching things to children that they cannot yet comprehend, Wright contends that, "overemphasizing race" is teaching bigotry. She advocates that discussions of race are best left alone, and the way to handle race with young children is downplay or ignore it.

"Parents and others who emphasize obtaining the 'right' colors for the toys their children play with may be setting their children up to be racially sensitive, if not race-obsessive." Thus, while the author says that it is helpful that children of color have access to books and dolls that represent a variety of races, her downplaying of race extends to how adults should handle incidents of racial discrimination.

In an example of a black mother who was with her children in a store and who experienced an obvious racial slight from a clerk, the author commended the mother for handling the incident without mentioning race at all. "She taught them [her children] to give the perpetrator the benefit of the doubt" by acting as though race was not an issue in the encounter.

In another example, the author sees a black mother as "overreacting" because she was concerned about what her six-year-old daughter was learning as she attended a predominantly white school. The mother was upset by the fact that the child had learned from her white friend that whenever they saw a group of black teenagers, they should cross the street. The child's white friend told her that they should avoid "the black boys." The mother was considering moving her child from that school to one where she would be able to have black friends because she saw her daughter learning that young black men should be assumed to be a threat. "I couldn't have my child afraid of black teenagers. She would eventually be a black teenager." The author's perspective, however, was that there was no need to worry about this issue because "Black children need to know that some people who look like them will try to harm them. Black-on-black crime is a major problem in the black community."

The truth is that our children actually do live in a racist society. Children – even young children – are likely to be exposed to racism. White children are likely hear racist comments or see incidents that raise the issue of race from any number of sources – their parents or relatives, older kids in the neighborhood, mass media, even other kids at preschool. Children of color are even more likely to have first-hand experience of race and overt racism.