

Ask Pact:

Is Transracial Adoption Easier for Biracial Kids?

Question

We are looking to adopt transracially. Our first son is biracial (African American and white) and we are both white. We think it would be easier if we adopted another biracial child but our social worker has suggested that we consider a baby who is fully African American. How does Pact handle these issues? Can you give us some insight as we make our decision?

Answer

When a child is growing up in the family she was born to, with parents of two different races, one white and one black, she has role models for each of her heritages and should certainly be supported in every way to celebrate what she will receive by osmosis from daily loving interactions with both parents. But African American/white kids who are growing up with two parents who are white do not have those same intimate connections within their family for their black heritage. To be able to feel like a fully entitled member of the African American community, whatever individual form that takes, they still need adult role models who share their heritage. Pact's experience with white adoptive families raising biracial kids is that sometimes they believe it's okay to forget the black (or Latino or Asian) part because they focus on the part of the child that is "like" them, the part that is white. It is important for parents to move beyond that view and give adopted biracial children the tools they need to feel themselves authentic members of the community of color to which they are entitled by birth.

Sometimes white parents believe they can offer more to a child who is partly white because they can be role models in a way they cannot be for a black child. But if the attachments within the family depend on racial matching, meaning white parents

are appropriate for a biracial child because of the child's white heritage, what does that say to the child about the part of him- or her-self that does not match? The child in this context too often feels pressured to put priority on developing the characteristics of being or trying to be white, because she believes they will help her "belong" in the family. As an adopted child she already has a heightened sensitivity to making sure she "belongs" and to defending against the possibility of rejection. Being partly of color (not white) makes her different from her parents, so the child worries about being rejected for being part Latino or Black or Chinese. If she looks into the mirror and sees a brown face, she must discount it. She is told she is like her parents because she is half white. Her parents want the best for her. In their estimation, this means ensuring a place for her in white society. The child wonders, "What's wrong with being black? What's wrong with me?" In this way, white parents may unintentionally separate their child from her racial identity.

Biracial adopted adults whose parents went on to adopt other children who were fully of color describe the relief they felt when their parents choice so clearly validated the "part" of them that is of color. Some adult adoptees talk about the internal struggle caused by believing that their parents value the part of them that is white more than the part of

them that is not. Again, their parents never said such a thing to them. But when a parent looking to adopt a second child specifically rejects adopting a full child of color in favor of one who "matches" because they are half-white, the message is hard to miss.

And, of course, kids gradually learn that our society values people of color less than white people. So emphasizing the part of them that is white, and downplaying the side that is of color is reinforced by messages kids get outside their homes. To counter this, Lise Funderberg (biracial herself), in her book, *Black, White, Other*, says biracial kids "should be taught to claim their black side first because that's the side that needs sticking up for." Priority should be given to supporting the non-white ethnic origins of each child's particular background because in our current white-dominated society, those are the parts that need moral support.

Racism is not somehow easier for biracial kids. *Half & Half*, an important book that is a series of essays written by biracial people with very different perspectives and experiences, includes an essay by Danzy Senna (a writer of black/white heritage) who says, "My mulatto experience, I argue, was difficult not because things were confusing, but rather because things were so painfully clear. Racism, as well as the absurdity of race, were obvious to me in ways that they perhaps weren't to those whose racial classification was a given.... In all this mulatto fever, people seem to have forgotten that racism exists with or without miscegenation. Instead of celebrating a 'new race,' can't we take a look at the 'new racism'?"

Sometimes white adoptive parents want to specify that their second child also be biracial because they want their kids to "match" physically. They assume similar looks will produce a similar life experience. But the designation "biracial" doesn't necessarily describe how the child will look. Both black and biracial children have an enormous diversity in their appearance. Remember, almost all African Americans are in fact of mixed racial background. It is unrealistic, then, to expect that by adopting two

biracial children, the children will physically "match." And white parents have to ask themselves honestly if they might be carrying some form of racism that says that lighter skinned African Americans are somehow better than those with darker skin. What if the child in fact turns out to have a dark complexion? Will that child be welcomed into the family with the same warmth and enthusiasm? Or will there always be some residue of ambivalence or even disappointment that the family now has a member who looks 'unambiguously' black? What's more, the experience of being a biracial person is highly variable. Biracial children from the same family often process the experience differently even when they are both born to the same genetic parents, let alone when they are not.

Finally, remember that adopted children inherently have dual identities based on the reality of having two families, two legacies, one by birth (genetics) and the other by adoption which they must find a way to resolve. Children who are transracially adopted also have the experience of balancing at least two racial experiences, their own and that of their white parents. Each of these issues on its own is significant and presents challenges for children in finding themselves and growing up to be strong individuals who feel whole. Biracial children have similar but different inherent struggles in making peace with their identity and place in a world that is not very tolerant of ambiguity. Too often, the adoption community suggests that when white families adopt biracial children it will somehow be easier for those kids than if they adopt a single-race child of another race. Given the issues inherent to adoption, biracial identity and transracial adoption on their own, adding them together can only make for MORE layers of complexity in the struggle for identity, not less. In fact, in the context of transracial adoption having an unambiguous racial identity can feel like a relief for a child who is already living with so many other questions about identity.