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Seven Common Transracial Parenting Mistakes

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Transracial adoption may present challenges that can lead to a rewarding family experience. Persons who live in a family where more than one culture is valued and practiced will have an advantage in adapting to our increasingly global society. Population projections indicated that by the year 2020 every person in the United States will live or work with persons of another background, and approximately half of all marriages will be bicultural or biracial.

Transracial adoptions are not a new phenomenon despite increased publicity over the past few years. Informal and formal transracial adoptions have occurred for centuries all around the world. However, misconceptions about transracial adoption persist. For example, current thinking suggests that to raise a child who can cope with prejudice and have a positive racial identity, parents must be of the same racial group. This is contrary to my own 20-year experience as a therapist and to reports I have received from other therapists. The vast majority of children we see who have identity and behavior problems are being raised by same-race parents and are living in their own cultural community. More than anything this suggests parenting is an art, not hard science.

Although I believe that being of the same race is helpful but not required to raise a child with a positive racial identity, as an African-American psychologist who specializes in psychotherapy with adoptive families, I have observed that parents of transracially adopted children commonly have problems related to the following seven issues.

1. Focusing Only on Racial/Cultural Issues

Openly acknowledging differences is important, of course, but too often parents only discuss differences. Parents must balance their acknowledgment of differences with their recognition of similarities, including shared likes, dislikes, common interests, personality traits, temperament, gender, spirituality, and elements of family culture, including shared beliefs, traditions, rituals, and celebrations. There are many universal mediums such as music, that all groups share.

Bonding between parent and child is reinforced by similarities. While being of different races may seem to constitute a big difference, according to a study in *Discover* magazine, race accounts for less than 1 percent of the characteristics of a racial group. In that study, researchers compared physical characteristics among various racial groups and found that the statistical difference in any one characteristic (i.e., lip size, hair texture, finger prints, etc.) was less than 1 percent.

2. Accepting Racism or Stereotypes as a Reason for Underachievement or Bad Behavior

Particularly when parents focus on differences, some transracially adopted children use racism or cultural expectations to explain poor choices they have made. For example, a child who feels he or she is being treated differently by a teacher may use that as an excuse for doing poorly in that teacher's class, or a child who wants an expensive athletic jersey or jacket with his or her favorite athlete's name on it may use racial stereotypes or issues of cultural acceptance to persuade parents that he or she needs the item.

In situations where a child is being treated differently, parents should intervene. However, the child must still be held accountable for his or her work and responsibilities. I am not aware of any culture that condones disrespectful behavior, swearing, smoking, etc., and while many groups across society wear athletic clothing, no culture describes wearing it as a cultural preference or characteristic. To assess the child's claim of disparate treatment, parents should consider the child's level of responsibility at home and apply this to school and other environments. The single most important factor is the child's character. Parents must first look at objective evidence (i.e., test scores, completed assignments, etc.) then proceed to assess subjective evidence (such as reports from other adults or kids and their child's complaints). When the evidence confirms that your child has been responsible but has not been treated the same as other children, then you have disparate treatment, which is racism.

3. Overindulging the Child

Out of fear of being labeled inadequate, many parents of transracially adopted children tend to overreact to their child's wants and needs. While children should get all that they need for healthy growth and development, they shouldn't get everything they want. Many parents, however, provide excess gifts and toys, too many structured activities, or too much entertainment; or they over respond to their child's every emotion. Children given too many of these "extras" often become self-centered and have difficulty coping with life's usual frustrations.

4. Allowing Others to Intrusively Touch or Violate the Child's Boundaries

Out of fear of disapproval, some parents refrain from telling others not to touch or excessively compliment their child. Some people experience anxiety when they encounter racial differences between a parent and child, and they overreact to

mask their discomfort. Typically, such people react by touching the child's hair or repeatedly commenting on his or her attractiveness, responses they do not present to birth children. Children often report feeling "like a puppy" when this happens. Birth siblings report feeling ignored or unimportant. In such situations parents must assertively but gently set limits - even if they offend the person giving the unwanted attention. Caucasian parents have reported to me that simply saying something like, "Thank you. I think all children are beautiful, but please do not touch my child's hair," or "Thank you, but I feel uncomfortable when people touch her hair," or "Sorry, but I don't allow anyone to touch her hair" works well. Children do not have the ability to stand up for themselves at such times.

5. Not Embracing Diversity

Transracially adopted children should have frequent exposure to people of various backgrounds to gain a sense that it is okay to be different. The family must become bicultural and practice at least some of the child's ethnic heritage. Celebrating Kwanzaa or sending the child to Korean camp once a year will not be sufficient exposure to develop a positive racial identity. The home must reflect ethnic symbols, and cultural education should be a frequent topic of family conversation and a frequent focus of family activities.

The cultural focus should be for the family's benefit, not for the child alone. Becoming bicultural means integrating at least one additional culture into the family's lifestyle and culture. If all family members receive a "cultural education," the child will not feel different. Having at least one monthly family event (ethnic dinner, video, celebration, etc.) is helpful, but complement this with conversation several times a week (concepts such as attractiveness, success, and community need to be challenged and broadened in family conversation) and daily exposure through symbols around the house (e.g. books, art, etc.) . Any time cultural education is focused on the child alone, it may become distancing and have a negative effect.

6. Not Challenging Racism

Racism today is less aggressive and tends to be "invisible" in the forms of attitude, voice tone, body language and posture, or institutional practices. parents must be alert to disparate treatment and advocate on their child's behalf. Racism should be a family and community concern that is communicated as harmful to everyone.

7. Accepting Powerlessness

Out of fear of inadequacy, parents may adopt an attitude of powerlessness. They demonstrate this by second guessing themselves and delaying timely parenting decisions. Small issues often become large, and indecisive debates become harmful to the marital and parent-child relationships. The child may also experience confusion and feel unsupported. All children need to believe their parents are in charge and know what's best for them.

Professionals continue to disagree on whether parent-child cultural identification or bonding is of prime importance in adoption. My opinion is that a healthy permanent family is superior to an institution or foster home in meeting a child's emotional needs. I encourage all transracial adoptive parents to accept their own cultural and racial identification as a parenting strength, and to put their energy into making the world a better place for us all to live in.

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