

Dealing With Racism

PERSPECTIVE OF A WHITE TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIVE PARENT

by **Beth Hall**

No one can live in an environment "diverse enough" or "friendly enough" or "good enough" to protect children from the hurt of racism. Discrimination hurts everyone, but white parents are especially susceptible to being surprised or taken aback by racist experiences, because they don't anticipate them. In order to successfully support their children of color, white parents must take an honest look at their own blind spots and biases, in order to become effective anti-racist allies.

Racist things happen, and they hurt.

My son was only five when we took him to a Chinese New Year celebration in Chinatown. When we came home he was so excited and wouldn't stop saying "Gung Hay Fat Choy" to everyone we met, whether we knew them or not. We were in the grocery store when a woman and her daughter came up to us and started berating me for bringing more of Them into our country. "Can't you see they are hurting American kids' chances of getting into college? And they are getting rich while our people can't even get jobs. We don't need more chinks in this town..." My first thought was to get us out of there as fast as I could. My pulse was racing and I just couldn't believe anyone would say such a thing in our town and in front of our son. I didn't know what to do and I was afraid to say anything to my son because I was so angry myself I thought it might scare him.

This is a scenario of overt racism. When a white person, who has likely never been the target of such race-based venom, witnesses such epithets directed toward their child or other people of color, they are often so surprised that they find themselves unable or unprepared to respond.

We have to teach white parents to believe, first of all, that it is appropriate to talk to their children about these and all racist experiences, and secondly, that it is not only safe, but in fact essential to their child's well-being that they do so.

Recognizing Stages of White Parent's Anti-Racist Development

Deborah Haynor and Lori Miller describe four stages in the evolution of transracial parents as they move towards readiness to support their children in combating and navigating experiences of racism.

Stage One: We Are Family. The primary task of this stage is the creation of a transracial family. In this stage, as parents focus on making their child of color their own, the notion that "love is enough" is often embraced.

Stage Two: We Are a Multicultural Family. The celebration of a child's birth culture is the hallmark of this stage. It is often accompanied by the desire to "reassure" the child by speaking about the ways he/she is similar to the adoptive parent in order to minimize differences. Parents who are in this stage are taking steps to appreciate the traditions of their child's birth culture, but they are not necessarily acknowledging their child's racial identity or the racial landscape of the world. This is often a comfortable place for white parents to be and is a common "stuck place" that they may need help to push beyond.

Stage Three: We Are an Anti-Racist Family. Parents in this stage are talking to other white parents about what it means to be white and how that impacts raising a child of color. They are observing cross-racial interactions in person, on television, in newspapers and magazines, and asking "what does race/racism have to do with this?" Parents in this stage are actively giving up the "white privilege" of not having to think about race/racism much of the time. These parents are attending anti-racism workshops where, in a safe group environment, cognitive and emotional learning and skill-building can take place.

Stage Four: We Are a Multiracial Family. This stage is about becoming bi-cultural in a racialized context. This means the white parent spends as much time as a racial minority as their child of color spends as a racial minority. Parents in this stage are asking themselves questions such as: what is the racial makeup of our neighborhood? our child's school? our place of worship? our friends? our family's service providers (doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, plumbers, housekeepers, childcare providers)? They are making significant changes in their lives based on the

answers to those questions.

Parents moving through these stages are purposefully stretching their comfort zones. Pushing oneself to actually behave differently opens the door to establishing oneself as an anti-racist ally.

John Raible, transracially adopted himself, coined the term transracialization to describe white adults who are interested in contact with communities and people of races other than their own not only for the ways it enriches the life of their child of color, but for the ways it enriches their own lives. In fact, a transracialized white adult usually no longer feels comfortable in spaces where whites are in the majority. This is the goal that we need to hold out to white parents of adopted children of color if we are putting their children's needs front and center.

Understanding the Experience of Racism

It is sometimes tempting for transracial parents to see racism as an event, instead of an ongoing series of messages that contribute to an overall belief that there are inherent race-based value differences between human beings. First coined by Chester Pierce in 1970, the term "microaggressions" is more descriptive of the everyday experience of racism. Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Examples include white teachers who rarely call on students of color, or white strangers who compliment Asian Americans on their mastery of English. Microaggressions are detrimental to people of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities.

White parents need to understand that these "micro" actions and behaviors cannot be ignored or explained away, because they do have a significant, cumulative, and harmful impact on the developing child. Helping white parents understand these interactions will give them insight into their children's experiences, and allow them to traverse the conversation from culture to race.

Intent vs. Impact

The social justice movement describes two challenges in confronting individual and societal racism: intent and impact. Many "good-hearted" people don't mean to hurt anyone (intent), yet in fact are being racist (impact) without realizing it or recognizing why.

White parents can fall into the trap of focusing on intent when they respond to situations with comments like, "I'm sure she didn't mean it like that." Over and over, people of color say that specific words are insulting, identify actions that connote white privilege, and do not feel white people hear or understand what they are trying to communicate. It is presumptuous for white people who have not experienced racism to think that they are in a better position to decide how people of color should feel and/or respond to "subtle" or overt racial bias. And that presumption that the white experience is somehow universal or "normal" is the essence of white privilege.

It is too easy for white folks to hold their own experiences and sense of race and racism in equal standing with those who live the daily experience of not being white in America. Whiteness is privilege, and part of white privilege is to think that there is no white culture or that "whiteness" cannot be defined. Whiteness is power; it is the assumption that white people can use their own internal barometers to understand everyone else's experience because unconsciously white people see themselves as the measuring stick, the "norm."

Whiteness is believing that racism is being eradicated because white people don't experience it or see it themselves. In a supportive way, we have to help white parents who are parenting children of color understand the degree to which white people learn about race and racism on the backs of people of color. Parents need to understand that it cannot become the "job" of adopted children of color to help their parents understand that racism exists – or to make the message of racism palatable so they won't feel too guilty. This means finding or creating an environment where white people can inspire one another to think about how to affect the impact of racism in their own community, as opposed to simply focusing on a shared intent to be "colorblind" or avoid racist actions for themselves or their children. People of color struggle with racism their entire lives; it must be the same for white parents who want to be their child's truest advocate.

None of Us Is Ready for Racism.

If parents wait for an injury, or for their children to be "old enough," or "ready," before they start to talk with their kids about unfairness and bias, they will be too late. We are never old enough for it to be something that we know how to handle. As it is with most things that are hard, adults must handle their own feelings about racism before they are ready to help their children deal with it. Most white people raised in the United States were taught not to speak about racial differences; that the best way to combat racism was to be "color-blind" and see everyone, regardless of skin color, as the same. We continue to be burdened by this distortion.

Gina Samuels describes the problems with the color-blind model for transracial families:

[B]eing colorblind can be lethal to the health and well-being of people of color. Prejudice and racism are not caused by seeing physical differences but by attaching a status of "normal" to one group and its members while relegating every other group and their members to the status of "other." Being anti-racist requires a radical change in belief systems, not in vision. For white parents, this might require understanding their "whiteness" as a distinct racial experience. [Another] problematic element of colorblind identities for transracial adoptive families is the belief that equality and connectedness depend on sameness, and that seeing race differences fosters inequalities and disconnections. Some parents hope that deemphasizing or denying racial differences will promote parent-child bonding and family cohesion. This can especially be pronounced for multiracial children with white heritage, whose white parents may wish to connect over shared white racial heritage. My

research with multiracial black-white adults, similar to research with other groups of transracial adoptees, finds parental attempts to deemphasize their black heritage actually created parent-child rifts and a sense of disconnection into adulthood.

It is critical to remind parents not to hesitate to talk to their children about scary or harsh experiences that they consider a matter of life or death. We don't wait for children to ask us how to cross the street, or fear that talking about the dangers of cars will scar children or make them see danger in places where it does not exist. We know that it is critical to their well-being to have a healthy fear of the road and to understand their limitations in order to remain safe. We have to help parents see that the same principle applies to discussions about race.

Breaking the racial "sound barrier" is critical to providing children of color important survival tools to thrive in a world that is not color-blind and where racism still exists. And it is often something that white people (and sometimes people of color, particularly those who are doing more than getting by) are afraid to do. Talking about and understanding racism gives a 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 that operates on a societal level.

Nine Principles for Parents to Learn and Practice

First, Last, and In-Between: Talk About It!

It's easy for parents to imagine that since racial differences have become a comfortable part of their own reality that their children must be feeling the same. This is another reminder of how different a parent's experience often is from that of their child. Parents have finally adjusted and become comfortable with their status as an adoptive family; therefore they presume their child has too. Talking openly with their child about the questions he or she confronts and the issues underlying them is crucial. Initiating conversations with children is critical – otherwise parent's voices will be the ones left out of the mix. There is also a risk here of sending an unspoken message that silence about race is expected in the family and is a specific expectation that the parents have of the child.

People will not stop making comments about race and most of the time you won't be there to help your children respond. Parents need to teach their children how to recognize racialized assumptions so that when they are alone they can be assertive and protect themselves. It is of course important to consider the age of the child when developing expectations of what they can learn about responding to racism. Between the ages of seven and twelve, children become concerned with accuracy; in fact it is sometimes hard at this stage to get a child to speculate about things they don't understand or have a full handle on. Children in this age group are capable of a fairly accurate understanding of social relationships, so this is a time when the meaning of racial biases likely to arise for children. These new feelings will not necessarily be obvious to the adults in their lives. Children often stop asking questions. But they absolutely do not stop listening.

Parents can talk about race in straightforward and concrete ways with children of all ages. As they move through elementary school years, every child deserves to have a parent who has communicated certain basic truths about the racial landscape of American culture:

- Race and gender come with birth; no one can choose or earn either.
- You are always available to talk about things that concern her about race. Practice talking about race in many contexts so that you won't be nervous when you talk with your child.
- It's okay to be different. The goal is to recognize, accept, include, honor and celebrate the diversity of human beings. As people, we are more similar than different. Our differences benefit us all.
- He is loved and he is not alone.
- She need not let anybody, of any color, limit or define her solely by race or undermine her acceptance of and belief in herself.
- He doesn't deserve bad treatment and is a good person just as he is.
- There is always something she can do. She has all the tools she needs to be attractive, nice, clean, and smart. She will get up every morning and do what she has to do and get up every time she falls down. The answer lies inside him and you believe that he will triumph in the end. I like to tell children that they have an "internal power" and they need to never give it up.
- People who act rudely don't know him and have no right to comment.
- Some people are toxic, always negative. She has every right to be angry when that toxicity is directed at her. It has nothing to do with who she is.
- He is encouraged to talk about oppression and racism AND that he will be taken seriously when he explores the possibility that something might have been directed at him even if a white person who loves him didn't see or experience it the way he did.
- One person can make a difference.
- He is part of a group from whom he can gain strength and comfort.

Parents Need to Handle their Own Feelings.

Many parents secretly hope that if they love their children enough, negative racial experiences won't happen. When their children begin talking to them about racialized experiences they may want to deny or excuse those experiences as something else because it makes the parent feel better. Parents can ask themselves questions such as: "Who am I taking care of now, my own feelings or my child's? Am I ready for this, or what else is going on for me? What if I feel nervous, frustrated, disappointed, embarrassed, guilty, concerned, happy?"

Parents need a safe harbor for parents where they can acknowledge difficult feelings and move beyond them before their children interpret their uncertainty and fear as denial and lack of support. In order to become an ally and advocate for their child the parent must first acknowledge what often feels like a harsh truth to white people; they need to sort out their feelings and fears about their own racism in a safe context without asking their children to participate in their growth.

Confirm That Race Matters.

Children deserve parents who can admit that race will be a factor in the way that they are seen by others in their community. Admitting this not just to themselves but also to their child is often a big hurdle for white parents, who are not used to talking about such things and are often afraid that naming racism will somehow make their child a victim of it, when of course the exact opposite is true.

Parents need to learn and practice how to use conversations as opportunities to hear what their child is thinking and what their child knows, so

they can begin to address the issues and any information gaps accurately. They need to prepare their child to deal with the reality of negative attitudes about race in the same way they prepare him or her to confront other isms. “Did you hear what that little girl said? She doesn’t think it’s possible for Asian people to be American…” or “Why do you think she assumes that you don’t have a father who lives with you?” Parents must be taught how to become proactive in recognizing racial bias and assumptions as well as affirming the importance of this skill to their child. This will allow the children to begin to identify who they can trust and rely on to be their ally.

A corollary to this principle is the often unrecognized commitment to believing a child when they say something might have racial connotations even when the parent is not sure it does. Recognizing a moment like this means that the parent has progressed to a place where they know that racism happens and don’t question it, and that they value the necessity of their child developing good antennae to recognize racism in its overt and more subtle forms. When we are teaching young children how to stay safe on the street, we don’t chastise them if they are over-careful on an empty roadway, rather we understand that they are honing their skills and learning to practice caution, which we want to encourage. By the same token, white parents must learn to encourage their children of color to explore the possibility of racialized responses and understand that this will sometimes mean that they see danger when it isn’t there. But that is so much better than risking them not having the tools to see danger where it is.

Create Some Responses Together.

Negative attitudes are unfair. Being angry about them is an appropriate response along with having other strong feelings including sadness and frustration. Often the hardest emotion for parents to encourage in children is anger, but righteous anger needs to be validated in order for adults to be true resources for helping children (or adults) deal with the unchangeable reality of racism. Acknowledging difficult feelings leads to being able to talk about them. Once anger has been acknowledged, then parents can brainstorm solutions with their children, so that they know they have allies on their side.

In the brainstorming stage, parents can communicate that they understand their child’s experience and share strategies and empathy. Sometimes this can even be in a silly or outrageous way! Even though some of these strategies may not ever be used, children’s knowledge and memory of these “good” times will become part of their protective armor next time someone approaches them. Examples could be: “Not another one of these comments, sometimes I get tired of it, how about you?” or “Let’s play ‘remember the dumb thing someone said to us recently about race and think of the most outrageous things we could have said (even though we probably didn’t).” These exercises and discussions are respite in the storm for people of color, and white parents have to learn how to have these kinds of conversations without being defensive or taking care of the other white people who are often the perpetrators of the hurt.

Help Children Plan Ahead.

Kids develop new problem-solving skills in middle childhood. When a child says she has been teased or excluded because of race, parents need to help her to hone and use these skills in the racial arena. Parents need to concentrate on how to support their child and encourage her to express her feelings. The goal is to practice ways to encourage their child to explore the short-term and long-term consequences of his or her possible responses while being sure they are not second-guessing their child’s legitimate irritation in response to racism.

Role-playing is a good way for parents to practice calmly asking children to tell them what happened, how it felt, what she did, what else she might have done or wishes she had done. “What would you do if/when it happens again?” “Do you think it would it be better to back off or to take a stand?”

Another tactic for parents is taking the opportunity to talk to their children about experiences they have with racism or racist remarks and then ask their children for suggestions and or feedback about ways they might improve their own responses. This not only creates a balanced give-and-take, it also becomes a great opportunity for them to model a willingness to demonstrate resilience and self-forgiveness when learning new skills. This is critical for all children of color who face challenges that require skill-sets they must practice and improve over time to become effective and happy human beings.

Prepare Children to Handle Problems on their Own.

It is important for parents to remember that their children will spend most of their lives as adults. For this reason, they need to give their children permission to find their own solutions to their own problems. It is important for kids to feel capable of handling their own problems—especially as they are learning about being treated unfairly because of adoption or race. When possible, children need to feel able to handle racism without adult protection as this will lead to more self-confidence the next time something happens. Often white parents, who are used to using their own white privilege (whether they recognize it or not) in addressing unfairness in their world, are particularly quick to try to fix rather than simply offering response to their child like, “Do you want me to do anything?” or “How can I help? or What are your thoughts about this?” which are often far more empowering.

Provide Information and Challenge

Elementary school kids are information gatherers. This is an ideal time to provide children with opportunities to gather realistic images of members of various racial and ethnic groups. This information will then be part of their repertoire of responses to racist comments or actions. “Remember when Juan said people told us that his friends told him he was a sell-out because he joined the science club at school? But now he is a scientist and he is also a strong Latino man, so that can’t be right.” or “How can black kids with white moms be stupid, Barack Obama is Black with a white mom and he is one of the smartest Americans ever!”

Race and racism are important subtexts to much of what children learn in school. The U.S. was founded on the radical principle that “All men are created equal.” But our early economy was significantly influenced by slavery. The idea of race helped explain why some people could be denied the rights and freedoms that others took for granted, and justified social inequalities as natural. As the concept of race evolved, white superiority became “common sense” in America. It justified not only slavery but also the extermination of Indians, exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican lands by a nation that professed a belief in democracy. Racial practices were institutionalized within American government, laws, and society. All of this leads to the important assertion that even though race isn’t biological, racism is still real.

Help Your Family Find Other People of Color to Have as Friends

Parents must make sure that their children are able to talk with other adopted kids and adults who have had similar experiences and can provide new ideas on how to react. This promotes their sense of having allies within their world and reminds them that they are not the only ones experiencing this. In hard times this can make a big difference. Without this exposure the only role models for our children will be the same narrow, generally negative stereotypical models from television and the movies that the perpetrator or questioner is espousing. “Did you call _____, to ask her how she used to handle this when she was your age?” or “Was your friend there when it happened? What did she think?” Remember the old adage, “if it doesn’t kill you, it makes you stronger.” Demonstrate every day to your child that making lemonade out of lemons makes us strong. Being part of an adopted family may sometimes introduce issues we wouldn’t face otherwise, but also gives us opportunities to grow closer as we learn to rely on each other for support and laughter to get through our challenges.

This is sensitive territory for many transracial adoptive parents. White parents can sometimes get caught up in the debate about whether transracial families are the best parents for children of color or not. Underlying this is the question about whether they need to live in diverse areas or if children can thrive with less diversity as long as their parents are supportive and giving positive messages about race and people of color.

What we know about all human beings is that isolation tends to be hard on us psychologically. We are a socially interdependent species. Belonging is described by researchers as playing a key role in the maintenance of confidence and self-esteem in most people. Each of us needs others who validate our existence and reinforce our cultural identity, acting as mirrors that reflect our own experience. When this reflection is confusing, or does not match with one’s self-perception, it leads to isolation or an identity crisis. When others reject us, we are likely to reject ourselves too and internalize feelings of self-loathing or disgust.

Rather than getting involved in debates about whether or not people are entitled to adopt across racial lines based on where they live or with whom they interact, it is much more important for transracial adoptive parents to understand that their children’s connections to others who share their experience and have successfully negotiated similar challenges is critical to their long-term well-being. This means that they must create opportunities for their children to interact not just with other children adopted transracially but also with transracially adopted adults and other adults who share their race.

The reality is that most Americans do not live a truly multicultural life on an intimate basis. Most of us eat dinner with, worship with, and engage in other intimate relationships with people who are the same race as we are. This means that transracial families are doing something different, whether they live in diverse areas or not. Racial isolation is often attributed to unconscious choices that influence our lifestyles. Only by bringing those choices into the light of honest analysis will parents be able to make changes.

Transracial adopters who experience a sense of shame at their own lack of knowledge and/or cultural incompetence may find it difficult to reach out for new relationships in their child’s racial community because it triggers their own emotions. But it is critical—perhaps the most critical way that parents will support their child’s ability to handle and overcome racism—for them to overcome these barriers so they can place their child’s needs for connections and racial guides over own comfort. The more they and their children interact with people of color, the less likely they are to believe racist assumptions, because their experience teaches them otherwise.

When Something Bad Happens: Bring Out the Toolkit

- Validate your child’s hurt, offer comfort and share feelings.
- Don’t imagine your child doesn’t notice or hear something that was said in their presence.
- Not talking about it means you condone it.
- Make sure that your child is clear that being blamed may not be related to his or her actions.
- When your child is the target of a racial slur or is treated unfairly, offer him or her a dignified way to regain composure and withdraw from the situation. Saying something like, “I’m going to give the puppy a bath now. Would you like to help?” can provide some respite from the hurt until he is ready to talk some more.
- Model appropriate reactions to racism. Acknowledging that they have a right to be angry, validating the reasons they are angry and commiserating with them about injustices they observe and experience will go a long way toward helping your children work through their feelings and to strengthen the bond between you.
- Revisit issues from previous days that you have had some time to think about. Children love to know that you have been thinking about them over time.
- Help your child to externalize racist remarks rather than internalize them. This is a critical coping skill for children of color if they are to handle the onslaught of negative messages they will likely encounter in their lives. This skill can be developed through the observations and modeled anger of their parents. Example please
- No one can know the perfect way to respond to insensitive remarks all the time. In fact, people commonly respond to racist insensitivity with shocked disbelief and stunned silence. It is only later that we gnash our teeth and think up clever ways to handle the situation. Giving yourself permission to handle racial insults imperfectly is to acknowledge your humanness. Don’t be ashamed. It’s not you or your children who need to be embarrassed. Use your reaction to process the event with your children. “Wow. Can you believe he said that? My jaw just dropped open; I didn’t know what to say! Here’s what I wish I had said.” Sharing and processing experiences is an important way to externalize racism.
- Sometimes parents of children of color tell them that they have to try twice as hard and be twice as good to convince biased people that they are not bad. A racist will not be changed by a child’s “good” behavior. Your child may no longer trust your judgment if you give them advice that doesn’t work.
- Don’t feel guilty for your race. Especially when you and the person who hurt your child are both white, it is important for your child to hear you acknowledge that some white people really do abuse their power to hurt others.
- Model obtainable goals. Don’t add to your child’s stress by over-responding to every situation. Prioritize. Fight the battles that make a difference. Children need direction and hope.

In the Trenches – Real Experiences, Real Answers

My Caucasian husband and I have an African American daughter, who has blessed our lives since her birth four years ago. We have struggled to find intercultural friends and connections. My daughter told me yesterday that a preschool classmate, a white girl, told her that white girls can't play with her because she has brown skin. She was saddened by this. I tried to get more details—were there other kids or adults around when this happened, did she tell anyone, how many white girls were there and were they playing together at the time—but I couldn't get answers I was sure about. In any case, something happened, something upsetting, and it makes me sick to my stomach. I tried to tell my daughter that people say things that are unkind without thinking, or because they themselves have been hurt and don't know better, but I lost her attention—I'm still trying to figure out how to talk to a four-year-old about abstract concepts!

Kids notice bias and difference between the ages of two and three. That is adults' cue to begin the discussion that will last a lifetime. The discussion begins by teaching young children facts about race and racism. Fighting racism begins with knowledge, because it counteracts the power of false justifications for face-based prejudices.

This example also highlights a situation where other children are responding with racist attitudes to the transracially-adopted child, something that happens with significant frequency. In response to the questions the parent expressed above, another parent offered this piece of advice:

I sincerely hope your child is not the only African American child in her school. I can't stress that enough. My daughter gets a lot of support from her African American girlfriends at school whenever there are issues of any kind. They have a little sisterhood going that is a source of comfort and validation for her.

We had to look hard to find a school with a substantial African American peer group for her. It's not convenient, it's not cheap, but that is a sacrifice we signed up for when we adopted transracially. I remember that feeling of hurt on behalf of my child, and wanting to take away the pain! We just keep building her up as much as we can and don't let anybody's ignorance bring her or us down....When we teach kids to recognize bias, we are also teaching them how to create change, become strong and protect themselves.

Peer-to-peer interactions like the one described above allow for frank conversations that don't feel judgmental, because all the parents are living the same experience and struggling to find solutions that support their children.

Children can learn to recognize racism, adoptism (the belief that families genetically linked are best) and all other "isms" if we make an effort to point them out when they come up in reading, on TV, in music, or at the movies – as well as in our real lives. Parents can make a family game of trying to spot "isms" of whatever kind. We may not all react to the same things in the same way, but in making a priority of examining the messages embedded in materials, media and conversations, adults are helping children become clearer thinkers. Children can be taught to ask questions like: "What is wrong with this story? Whose feelings would this hurt? To whom is this not fair? Who is left out of the story? Who is being described incorrectly? And (most important of all) what can we do about it?"

Encourage parents to make their commitment to fight racism very clear, even to very young children. This is especially crucial when rejection from others occurs. Involving children in groups that foster appreciation of differences means that parents' social life must also include frequent activities with not only children but also adults of other races. That said, it is also critical that parents be sure they are not setting up their child up to be an ambassador of multiculturalism, but rather are living multiculturalism in a multiracial community. The more diverse her circle becomes, the less often she will be targeted unfairly because of race or ethnicity. Finding support together helps children understand that it isn't just about them.

Of utmost importance is that adults teach children that racial slurs cannot be ignored. While in this particular scenario the family may not decide to respond by going to the teacher (perhaps the daughter's reluctance is telling her parents something about that particular teacher's response to racism or bias in general), there can be no implicit approval of what happened by doing or saying nothing. There are no excuses, in these days of demeaning music, racist jokes, and loose tongues, one thing must clear to kids: their parent has a zero-tolerance policy toward racist remarks and behavior.

Culture and Race are Different – Parents Must Empower their Children Understand Both.

I recently met an African American woman who was really interested when I told her I had adopted from Ethiopia. The conversation was going well, but at one point it seemed the woman became offended that I identified my child as Ethiopian and not as African American. I am involved in a support group specifically designed for Ethiopian adoptees and parents, and I have reached out and made what I feel are good cultural connections to the Ethiopian immigrant community so my child will feel connected to her country and culture. On the flip side, some of the Ethiopian people I am getting to know have very disparaging things to say about African Americans and I am not sure how to respond to this. I don't really understand the issues between these communities and I am not sure how to navigate them, let alone help my daughter do so.

When white parents adopt internationally they have to ask themselves how much of that is because of a politically incorrect hope that "racism" will apply differently to an internationally adopted child as compared to those who are domestically born.

Understanding race in the diasporic sense acknowledges that there is a global phenomenon of anti-Black (brown) sentiment, not just reserved for American Blacks, but for African, Caribbean, and sometimes simply dark-skinned people who aren't even of identifiable African descent. This diasporic "blackness" takes on different cultural meanings in different nations. Yet even if the "black" that is applied to a South Asian in England or the "black" applied to an Aborigine in Australia seems different, we can't ignore the many similarities in the way racism operates

locally and globally.

For a complex combination of reasons, including a desire to maintain their own cultural identity or the wish to avoid being targeted by racists themselves, some immigrants in the United States have found it advantageous to distance themselves from American groups who share their racial roots. Further, some immigrants perceived as “exotic” may more rapidly gain access to privileges or class mobility long denied to African Americans burdened with less flattering stereotypes.

If we place these ideas about international adoption alongside the pattern of immigrant exceptionalism, it can change the way parents think about the dynamics between internationally born and American-born adoptees. If a parent hears a voice inside their head that says, “MY child won’t be like that, my child won’t be like those other American people of color,” then they need to confront the fact that their child is now a person of color in America, and think about what kind of messages they will convey to their child about other people of color. Will they reinforce stereotypical images that pit more recent immigrants who “make something of themselves” against American-born people who “won’t get off welfare”? Or will they place the tensions between these communities in historical perspective and emphasize the common experiences they share?

So while the mother quoted above calling her daughter Ethiopian isn’t untrue, not acknowledging Ethiopian American or African American as parts of her identity is problematic because it doesn’t fully acknowledge all of the identities she has to navigate and hold. Because the parenting goal is to have children confident enough to move through each of these cultural groups with comfort, parents of internationally-born adoptees must consciously encourage and participate in relationships with Americans of their child’s racial and ethnic group as well as immigrants living in America.

This dichotomy can be particularly painful for internationally adopted people who describe a struggle to acknowledge their racialized identity while finding that often their cultural identity does not reflect that of others who were born in their home country. This is yet another reason why parents must acknowledge and support racial identity and anti-racist values, because the promotion of culture alone may result in their child feeling isolated based on the difference between their own experience and that of other same-race peers who have grown up with same-race parents (whether they were adopted or not).

Handling Complex Emotions

The dreaded question...Last Friday my Guatemalan seven-year-old asked me, “Mom, what does ‘wetback’ mean?” Of course, we were in the car so there was no escaping! He said he heard it at school and was wondering what it meant. So I explained for the next few miles...that it was a word that was racially loaded and that people often used as a way to imply that Latino people, especially people from Mexico, don’t belong in the United States. That in our family we were not going to use it. I spelled it out for him and told him that it would be the only time he would hear it coming from my mouth. I was so scared and I had so much to say, by the time I was done he didn’t have much to say.

The most important thing about these moments is to recognize them as conversation starters. This mom did a great job of sharing information about a racial slur and why she doesn’t agree with it, but she didn’t seize the opportunity to hear more about the context of the slur and how her son feels about what he heard. Parents need to learn to hear their children’s concerns and keep the conversation going so that the child feels both validated and heard. This is never easy and takes practice.

Part of the additional burden of white parents is acknowledging the reality that they are part of the group that is often the perpetrator of racial slurs. When children see adults working through their own racial privilege, the children can believe that they can trust the adults despite their membership in the privileged group that is targeting members of their own racial group. Often white people struggle between shock and guilt at the notion that their “tribe,” their “people,” are the perpetrators of racism, because they themselves don’t engage in active racial insults. This is why it is so critical for them to find community in groups where they can move through these feelings with the encouragement of others who share their desire to become more race-conscious.

“I don’t know” or “let me think about that for a while” are valid answers.

Racism is a complicated and persistent problem. Sometimes we need time to clarify our own thoughts and feelings before we can be of help to our children. Unfortunately, we and our children will probably be wrestling with racism for many years to come. Most of the time we can think of their questions as the beginning of an ongoing conversation.

Sometimes children’s concerns are pressing. Hurt feelings, anger, and worries all need immediate attention. Sometimes we may decide to talk with other parents or teachers about an incident. We will preserve our children’s trust if we involve them in decisions about what actions need to be taken, or at least let them know about our intentions.

Creating Community – the Difference Between Victim and Victor

My African-Canadian daughter is seven years old. I recently found her scrubbing her skin with a nailbrush. She told me she wanted to be white just like me. I have read many books with her that portray people from other races in a positive light, I have also always talked very positively about her color, and she has black friends at school. I am upset by her desire to change color and I am not sure how to deal with this. Someone recently suggested that having our child be in a setting where she is the only or one of few people of color may be damaging to her self-identity.

We have an African American son, aged 10, who is just finishing elementary school. He is happy, popular, plays sports and has a lot of friends. He does not ever mention having any issues around race or seem to have any problems at school. He

actually seems more comfortable in settings with his white friends than he does in settings with a lot of black people. Do you think this is an issue we should worry about?

There are two common experiences in transracial families: Geographic Isolation and Demographic or Residential Segregation. Geographic Isolation is defined by families who live in white-majority areas that are geographically isolated from people of color—very few if any people of the same racial or ethnic background as the transracially adopted child (or even people of color of different backgrounds) live within the child's field of experience. Not only is it likely that the child growing up in this circumstance is the only person of color in their classroom or school (with the occasional exception of other adopted children), they may also be the only one in their school district, county, or region.

As articulated by Beverly Daniel Tatum in her important book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, this kind of isolation is often debilitating for children. Without community, children's ability to develop an integrated feeling of belonging is compromised. Often the goal of parents who live in this circumstance is to minimize what they may see as the dangerous emphasis that society places on race. Ironically, their choice to live in this kind of isolation tends to produce an internal sense in their child that race is central and a multiracial community is critical to feelings of belonging. Many adult adoptees say that their own experience was so out of line with the worldview of their parents that they felt an overwhelming pressure to flee the environment where they grew up in order to find a diverse community where racial identity exploration is commonplace.

When adoptees in such situations become adults, they often disconnect (physically and emotionally) from their adoptive family because they cannot feel comfortable in the parental environment, or they disconnect from their racial group because they cannot feel comfortable in their own skin. The first choice is sad, because of course the adopting parents desire closeness with their children that is at odds with the adult child's need to leave and find a new and often entirely different environment where they see themselves reflected. But perhaps the second outcome, adults of color who do not feel comfortable with people of their own racial and/or ethnic group, is even more painful, since that has been defined by most psychologists as a symptom of self-hate, something that is unlikely to lead to long-term happiness or a well-adjusted life. Adoptees who have grown up in these circumstances are more likely to suffer from depression and/or low self-esteem.

Demographic or Residential Segregation is defined by transracial families who live in white-majority suburbs or neighborhoods that border neighborhoods or areas with many people of color. Here, a different set of messages is delivered to the children in the family. These children often assume that their adoptive parents have made a conscious choice to keep the people of color who live nearby at bay. This sets up a "loyalty test" that puts the adopted child of color in the position of feeling that they must choose between their adoptive parents and making connections to people of their own racial and ethnic heritage. The irony here is that parents leading this lifestyle usually see themselves as accepting towards people of their child's race and often bemoan how "hard" it is to make true friendships across racial and ethnic lines. They insist they have chosen their home's location only in the name of a "better" school district or a "safer" neighborhood. But better for whom? Safer for whom? These parents are making choices that ultimately isolate their child and set up a dynamic that can get very volatile during the teen years. Of course, motivated families can learn to create connections without moving. Interestingly, those families who invest in such connections often find that they become more comfortable with the idea of living in a diverse neighborhood and end up moving.

Children who grow up in this kind of isolation often seek peers of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds during their tween and teen years in a way that exhibits poor judgment in terms of values and/or trustworthiness on the part of the "friends" with whom they connect. Their view often reflects the main stream media's understanding that people of color live in the "ghetto" because they have no personal familiarity with local neighborhoods of color. This is almost always an inaccurate and very dangerous point of view that stems from low self-esteem and an unbalanced view of what it means to be a person of color in America. Transracial parents often do not understand their own role in setting their children up for this kind of imbalance and flirtation or immersion in dangerous behavior and settings.

Parents in transracial families who live in Geographic or Demographic Isolation often protest that their children seem happy and well-adjusted, but children typically try to fit into the life in which they find themselves. However, it is important to remember that being different or "other" is a central reality of these children's existence, and at the same time they are not learning a cultural language that will connect them to people who share and understand this experience of otherness—so even among other people of color, they feel like outsiders. This double-edged sword of racial or ethnic isolation often causes great angst and pain during the teenage and adult years, and can lead to a real disconnect between adoptees and adoptive parents later in life, when adult adoptees realize the cost to them of the choices their parents made (or didn't make).

Don't Pretend the Danger of Racism is Not Real.

The more I read about Trayvon Martin being shot, the more it sounds like his only crime was being black in the wrong place at the wrong time. I want to believe that somehow my own children will be immune to this, but I know that is my fear speaking. I want to blame his parents or his neighborhood, anything to convince myself that I can keep my own black son safe. He is comfortable with so many of our family and friends that are white, sometimes I am proud because he knows so well how to trust and be close but sometimes I am terrified, what if we haven't taught him how to recognize and react to danger when it comes from an unexpected source through no fault of his own?

Courageous conversations about race and adoption take just that – courage. Why does it so often take tragedy, like the murder of Trayvon Martin, to remind us of the dire risks to children of color in the too often dangerous racial landscape that is America? Supporting children while they make sense of race can feel overwhelming, particularly for parents who are white. As young people experience racism in both overt and subtle ways, adults must learn not only to effectively support adoptees of color but also to provide guidance that will help them stay alive and safe. How can adults master their own anxieties about the dangers of raising their children? How do white children in transracial families understand race? How do we have conversations about racism that feel empowering rather than depressing?

Parents need community where they are allowed to process their fears and have them validated AND they have to move beyond the fear into

action and reaction that both acknowledges and empowers their children.

The reality of the danger for children of color of becoming targets of community reactions because of racial profiling is real. If youth are to be prepared, important adults in their lives must step up to the task of warning them about the hazards that exist AND teaching them how to stay as safe as possible in perilous situations.

Real conversations about how to handle confrontation in safe ways are critical. Often this means teaching children to take a non-confrontational stance in the critical moment; and then after the immediate danger has passed, encouraging them to find productive and prioritized ways to fight the racism inherent to the profiling they experienced. Both parts are critical, teaching children how to recognize danger while remaining calm in the immediate face of unfair reactions AND how to fight back once they have found allies and know they are safe.

**The goal is strong, proud, racially-connected children
who know their parents are anti-racist allies that they can rely on forever.**

Knowing who you are and feeling good about yourself doesn't just mean being strong enough to stand up against racism, it means being encouraged to own and embrace all the positive pride that is the experience of being part of a targeted group that refused to succumb to -isms and takes hold of the legacy of being victor rather than victim. This is the essence of handling racism, and for transracially adopted children this means having the opportunity to be loved and embraced not only by their adoptive parents' community but also by the racial community that is their birth right.

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