

## The Elephant in the Room: Handling Racism

When it comes to handling racism, Caucasian parents may not always know where to start.

by Deborah H. Johnson

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When she was in third grade, my daughter, Allie, who is half-Korean and half-Caucasian, asked me a question. “Do you think people would step on your shoes [because you’re Korean?](#)” At first, I was confused, but I said, “I’m not sure. What’s going on?” “The kids step on the backs of our shoes when we’re waiting in line,” she said. “It just happens to me and my friend, Crystal. Do you think it’s because I’m Korean and she’s African-American?”

There comes a time — often sooner than you expect — when your child will be teased, pushed, or otherwise harassed because she looks different from other children. It may happen even before elementary school. In Minnesota, where I live, an [African-American](#) girl had to sit on the floor of the school bus because none of her fellow kindergarteners, who were white, would let her sit with them. (This didn’t happen in 1955, by the way. It happened five years ago.)

For families who’ve adopted transracially, the first brush with [racist behavior](#) can be confusing. After telling your child again and again how wonderful it is to be adopted and praising the features that make her different from you — her skin, her eyes, her hair — now you have to tell her that not everyone will feel that way.

As a parent, the last thing you want to do is to put negative thoughts into your child’s head — after all, you love her deeply and don’t want to hurt her. Yet adult transracial adoptees often say that they desperately wish their Caucasian parents hadn’t raised them to believe they lived in a colorblind world. They felt they were left vulnerable and unprepared for handling racism. By

helping your child understand there is a darker side to human behavior, you'll improve the chances that she won't feel vulnerable, unprepared, or angry.

## Explaining Racism

Let's be honest — talking about racism makes most of us uncomfortable. The sheer ugliness of the topic, coupled with anxiety about using the wrong words, leads us to avoid the subject altogether. Still, resist the urge to put it off. Ideally, kids should hear about racism before they experience it, typically early in grade school, when children start to perceive differences among themselves.

Let your child know that, while your family values people of different races and cultures, not all families do. Some kids grow up in families who are afraid of people who are different, you can say. They may not know how to react when meeting a kid who looks or sounds different, and that may make them afraid. And when kids or grownups are afraid, they can do mean things, you can explain. Reinforce that your family feels differently. "Isn't that sad?" you can add. "I'm glad our family isn't like that."

Explain that she might get teased about the kind of hair she has or the color of her skin, simply because it's different. "Some kids may call you names or not invite you to play with them because you have darker skin," you can suggest gently. Stress to her that she is not causing the bad behavior — the child doing the teasing or harassing is the only one responsible for such thoughts and actions.

## Talk, Then Talk Some More

Even after such preparation, your child may choose not to tell you if she has been teased or harassed. (The girl who was forced to sit on the floor of the bus didn't say anything. Her mother found out only after she asked her daughter why her school clothes were so dirty.) Kids can sense that such incidents will upset you. Talking about it can also make them feel like they're reliving the hurt or embarrassment of the incident. They may even feel that Caucasian parents won't be able to understand. *What does mom or dad know about this? They're white, so this never happened to them,* they may think.

This no-tell tendency is another reason why it's a good idea to discuss racism early and often at home. What you want to avoid, though, is asking your children directly whether they've faced it. That will put them on the defensive and shut down the discussion. Instead, bring up a racist incident in the news, something that happened to someone in your neighborhood, or even the examples given in this column. Then say, "I hope if anything like that happens to you, you'll share it with me. I may not know exactly what you're experiencing, but we can learn together how to handle it." Your child may groan, but at least she'll know that you're thinking about these issues and are open to discussing them.

It may help to know that some parents talk with their kids about racism as a matter of course. Many parents of color prepare their children for it from a very early age. Many religious minorities, including Jewish families, teach their children the historical lessons of persecution and discrimination. Caucasians, on the other hand, have typically had little direct experience with

racism. The lack of competence they feel on the subject may lead them to avoid discussing it with their children.

Even if you haven't experienced racism yourself, you can help your child by understanding this: Racism is, ultimately, an attempt to define who belongs in the human race, in our world, and in our community — and who doesn't. While exclusion is tough for anyone to handle, it can be especially difficult for transracial adoptees, who may wonder about whether they belong in their families and communities. As a parent, you'll have to make yourself a credible resource on this topic. Talk to other parents of children of color, read about parenting children of color, or seek a mentor.

Help your child understand that, no matter what is said on the playground, her place in the world is assured. Let her know that she is loved and safe with you, and help her grow into a confident young adult who, instead of being defeated by racism, sees it for what it is and knows how to challenge it.

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