

## How to Be an Anti-Racist Adoptive Parent

For years, many white adoptive parents of children of color have sought to claim the relatively passive “not-racist” identity, but now is the time to push beyond self-examination into action and become an anti-racist family. Learn how to interrogate your own white privilege; talk with your child about systemic racism, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others, and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests; and commit to working toward justice.

by Beth Hall and Michele Rabkin

TAGS: [Racial Identity](#), [Racism](#), [Talking About Race](#)



“The opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It’s ‘anti-racist’....There is no in-between safe space of ‘not racist.’”—Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*

As an adoption professional, and as the white parent of two children of color (now adults), I have been learning, talking, and writing about anti-racist adoption and parenting practices for decades. I often felt I had to walk on eggshells around other white people, anticipating what Robin DiAngelo has so accurately termed “[white fragility](#).” Everyone knows racism is bad, but no one wants to admit they might harbor racism themselves—particularly not [adoptive parents of children of color](#). Many of us want to claim that “not racist” identity. And many of us struggle to confront not only how racism has benefited our family for generations, but how our white identity continues to confer privilege every day. Talking to “my people,” I often encountered resistance or denial.

Maybe now the tide is turning. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others have resulted in large-scale uprisings across the country, and an increased willingness in many Americans to attest that Black Lives Matter. Despite the pandemic, record numbers poured into the streets to protest police brutality and systemic racism. Honestly, it's about damn time.

[Conversations about race and racism](#) that have been going on for years in BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) communities have entered the mainstream media, corporate boardrooms, and city council and PTA meetings. Will it be enough to effect real change? Will the momentum last beyond the first wave of horror and guilt? If we are going to create a society in which Black Lives Matter, there is so much that must be improved, undone, and repaired. For the sake of our children, we must choose the anti-racist path and keep pressing forward.

And for those of us connected to a Black adopted or foster child, whether by love or service, we need to be having conversations about this *every day*, because they are watching and noticing to see what we will do.

## **So, Where Do We Start?**

First, some definitions. What do we mean when we talk about systemic racism?

### Racism

*“Race was never just a matter of categories. It was a matter of creating hierarchies.... When I [teach about racism](#), the first thing I say to my students is that racism is not ignorance. Racism is knowledge. Racism in some ways is a very complicated system of knowledge, where science, religion, philosophy, are used to justify inequality and hierarchy. That is foundational. Racism is not simply a kind of visceral feeling you have when you see someone who is different from you.... It is not about how you look, it is about how people assign meaning to how you look. And that is learned behavior, you see. And that is why you can't think of racism as simply 'not knowing.' That is not the case at all—on the contrary.”*

—Robin D.G. Kelley

### White Supremacy

*“By ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”*

—Ta-Nehisi Coates

Both Robin D.G. Kelley and Ta-Nehisi Coates point out that racism and white supremacy are not just personal animus or hatred, but *systems* set up intentionally to benefit one group of people at the expense of others. These systems work really well. That's why the *Washington Post* recently

reported that the wealth gap between white and Black households in the U.S. has not decreased over the last 70 years.

America is founded on white supremacist ideology, which, like a toxic mold, has permeated the foundation of our nation. Most of us learned nothing of this in school; we must re-educate ourselves about how Black people have been intentionally and systematically prevented from voting, from acquiring property to pass on to their children, from running profitable businesses, from moving into desirable neighborhoods, from attending well-resourced schools—and have, if they attempted to do these things for themselves and their families, faced consequences ranging from harassment to death. Many of these systems operated far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and some are still active today (the re-segregation of public schools, for instance).

White supremacy is a term that often makes us, particularly those of us who are white, uncomfortable. I invite my fellow white people to lean into, rather than defend against, the discomfort of recognizing that many of our accomplishments and successes (not to mention second chances and do-overs) were generated by an unfair system that placed our needs at the center. We must get comfortable with being uncomfortable, and not lash out at those who are calling out our privilege or naming the oppression that enabled our gains.

## **Black Parents Matter**

What does this have to do with adoption? Everything! People of color make up a high percentage of the parents who end up making the heart-rending decision to place their children for adoption, or have the even more heartbreaking experience of having their children removed and placed in foster care. Think of all the racist systems and histories that bring them to these moments of crisis. Would the parents of color whose children get adopted have been able to parent their own children if they and their own parents and grandparents had more money, more resources, more support, and were less stigmatized and criminalized? In so many cases, the answer is a resounding yes. Our society, designed since its inception to promote and protect white supremacy, *creates* the vulnerability these families experience. In an anti-racist society, fewer children would be available for adoption—and that would be good thing, because it would mean more families were healthy and thriving.

Our society conveniently makes children available to white people who wish to adopt, and perpetuates the [myth that Black people don't adopt](#), despite research that demonstrates that, in the U.S., African Americans adopt at a higher rate than whites.<sup>[1]</sup> Many child welfare and adoption professionals still buy into the racist assumption that white families are better families, and that children of color are better off in the care of white parents (“white saviors”). These practitioners neglect to seek out prospective adoptive parents of color and often pressure first/birth parents of color to go through with placement (“your child will be better off”) because their first priority is the “business” of making their (white) clients happy. People of color are ready to adopt and tell us what they need, we just have to listen<sup>[2]</sup>.

Let me be clear: I am not anti-adoption, but I work every day to be anti-racist. I can't imagine my life without my son and my daughter, but I know that my gain was a life-changing loss for their first parents, and for my children, and I can and do imagine a future in which fewer adoptions are necessary.

If you are a white adoptive parent of a child of color, [anti-racist parenting](#) is more than just teaching your kids about Rosa Parks or Cesar Chavez. It's finding age-appropriate ways to discuss the systems that trap so many families of color in poverty, that leave so many people of color incarcerated and separated from their families, that so often provide latitude and support to white people in crisis while denying these things to people of color. It's acknowledging the privileges you live with, and how your identity has benefited you. In other words, your child should grow up understanding systemic racism because you have educated *yourself* about it and have not left your child to figure out its machinations alone.

## **Being an Anti-Racist Family**

In this country, talking about race is never easy—but you can get more comfortable with practice. I have written extensively about how to talk with your children about race and racism; there are steps you can take that will prepare you to have these difficult conversations—and to have them frequently. Because that's what our children need and what the state of our society demands.

By school age, children are thinking a lot about fairness. This makes them natural social justice advocates, which is something you can model and nurture. No matter what your child's race, talk with them about all “-isms,” including anti-Black racism and the history of white supremacy. Name racial group membership, including theirs and yours, and involve them in your own analysis about the systems they inhabit, including their school, neighborhood, and faith community. And of course you need to have conversations about what is happening right now:

*Child: “Mama, why are people marching in the street?”*

*Parent: “People are angry because a Black man named George Floyd was killed by a policeman who wanted to punish him, and nobody stopped the policeman or told him that wasn't OK. Some people act like anyone who has dark skin is dangerous. That's racist and wrong and we don't believe that in our family.”*

*Child: “That makes me scared; are police mean?”*

*Parent: “Police officers are people; some are nice, some are not. But no one should ever hurt people because of the color of their skin. Police are supposed to protect us, not hurt us, and if they can't do that then something has to change. It's good to see that so many people agree with us—look at all of them marching and saying that Black Lives Matter! Protesting is a way to stand up for what is right and make sure that something like that never happens again.”*

*Child: “Should we march?”*

*Parent: “Today’s march is for grown-ups, but we could make a sign for our house. What shall we say?”*

By the tween and teen years, your children are developing independence. During these years, it is critical that you check in with them about racial violence, as well as racial pride and justice movements. Some may not be ready to be activists themselves, but that doesn’t mean they are not looking to see if you are. They need to see that you consider racial justice your personal mission; they need to believe that you will have their backs. As your children mature and develop their own racial awareness, have conversations with them in which you do more listening than talking. Be prepared to hear hard truths: If you are white, part of your child’s journey may be naming and rejecting your whiteness. True love means finding the inner strength not to be defensive about your complicity in white supremacy.

## **Mistakes to Avoid**

As we strengthen our anti-racist muscles, those of us who are not Black have much to consider.

- Don’t act like nothing is going on when major racialized unrest or tragedy is occurring. Understand that your friends and colleagues of color are raging, grieving, and re-traumatized.
- Work through your grief and confusion about racism within your own racial community—don’t place that burden on Black people. Follow the leadership of Black people, but don’t ask them to be your personal anti-racist trainers. Join with other like-minded folks in your own racial group to learn together and hold one another accountable.
- If you find yourself wanting to give advice to those who are Black, dig into where that is rooted. Do you see your white point of view as more valid than that of the people living the experience of anti-Black racism? Instead, look for ways of offering long-term support, whether that is taking to the streets, being an interrupter of conversations and systems where you work and live, or otherwise finding ways to be in service to Black people.
- Some of us have grown up hearing family members refer to Black people in offensive and derogatory ways. When we do not challenge overt and unconscious bias, even within our families, we contribute to anti-Black racism.
- If we have learned conflict-avoidant behaviors, we avoid discomfort by obeying authority or being “respectful.” These patterns can be particularly challenging to unlearn when it comes to people we love or who have power over us.
- Caring about anti-Black racism doesn’t mean we ignore other oppression, including bias and violence against immigrants, people living in poverty, and non-Black people of color. The social structures of white supremacy divide all of us based on proximity to whiteness and allowing or denying access to privilege based on that proximity.
- If you’ve thrown yourself into the Black Lives Matter movement for the first time and now, a few months later, you’re feeling exhausted and nothing seems to have changed—welcome to the

work of change and resistance! Prepare yourself for the long haul, for incremental change, for setbacks and changes of course. Black people have been living with anti-Black racism for 400 years; it's not going to go away overnight and non-Black allies need to stay the course. Take care of yourself and stay engaged.

- Don't become paralyzed by guilt or shame. Remember, power and privilege don't make you a bad person, but they do come with responsibility to work toward justice.
- Don't become paralyzed by perfectionism, the fear that "I need to get it *exactly* right before I speak or act." You may need to overcome the fear that talking about race will make you appear racist or lead to racial division.

Remember, silence speaks volumes. All of us, and white people in particular, have to push beyond self-examination into action. This requires that we interrogate our own privilege and think seriously about what it means to be not just an ally but to stand in solidarity with the mission of the Black Lives Matter movement—which is essentially that all people be treated fairly.

Finally, for those of us parenting Black children across racial lines, we must think about how to instill in them not just the horror of racism but the beauty, creativity, resilience, and resistance of their racial heritage. Our children deserve to grow up with parents who celebrate the courage and persistence of Black people and never shrug off or ignore racism and injustice.

If you haven't already, join the conversation today. It matters.

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[1] Marketing Black Babies Instead of Recruiting Black Families

[2] Pact's 2019 Survey of Adoptive & Foster Parents of Color

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## Anti-Racist Parenting Resources

### Videos

- Dr. Ibram Kendi: *Becoming an Anti-Racist*
- Dr. Robin DiAngelo: *Debunking the Most Common Myths White People Tell about Race*

- *Sesame Street* on Black Lives Matter & Protesting
- Economics and Race: Kimberley Jones — How Can You Win?
- Young Adoptees Speak

## Articles

- How Latinx People Can Fight Anti-Black Racism in Our Own Culture
- Asian Americans and Black Lives Matter Conversations
- Helping Kids Process Violence, Trauma, and Race in a World of Nonstop News
- Dear White People... 10 Ways You Can Show Up for your Black Friends and Colleagues
- Being Anti-Racist — Losing ‘Friends’
- Talking About Race with Our Children, Whatever their Race

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