



## Caring for the Hair of Your African American Child

When you adopt a child transracially, there are many things that you worry about. For many adoptive parents, thinking about hair care can easily fall to the bottom of the priority list until it becomes clear that new skills are required. Parents who adopt transracially, specifically white parents who adopt African American children, may not know the steps needed to take appropriate care of hair that is so different than their own.

Culturally, hair is an especially important reflection of an African American person. Appearance is a powerful component of how we create our own individual identity and, regardless of whether or not it's right to do so, others make assumptions about us based on how we present ourselves in the world.

Knowing how to instill self confidence and build self-esteem in your children isn't an easy task. When your child doesn't look like you, those challenges may be multiplied. For African American children especially, hair care relates directly to self-esteem; the better they look, the better they feel about themselves. Acknowledge and celebrate your child's uniqueness, including their hair. By taking time to learn about and use appropriate hair care techniques for your children, you are also helping build their self-esteem and

encouraging them to like the way they look.

No two people have the exact same hair. Just because your child is African American doesn't mean that his or her hair texture and type will be the same as that of others. That being said, there are major differences in caring for the hair of your African American child compared to Caucasian hair. Following are some tips that will help you care for your child's hair.



### Combing

The hair's texture lends itself to becoming tangled more easily and a simple act like combing can become painful if the hair is tangled. Here are some ways to help things go more smoothly:

- When removing a previous style, carefully take out any rubber bands by cutting them with scissors, rather than pulling them out, so that hair isn't broken.
- Wetting the hair will make the process easier. Keep a spray bottle of water nearby to re-wet the hair if it begins to dry while you are working. Adding a conditioner to the water will also help in detangling.
- Separate the hair into sections either with your fingers or a wide-tooth comb and only comb one section at a time.
- Start at the ends of the hair and work back toward the head. Hold hair with one

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hand and comb from hand to end moving hand up toward the head.

- Be gentle; this process can be painful.
- Allow ample time. If your child has especially thick hair, combing can require additional time.
- Repeat daily as needed. Some styles may last longer and will not require daily combing. For these styles, make sure the hair stays moisturized.

### Washing

African American hair is prone to dryness and breaking; therefore, it needs to be washed less often than Caucasian hair so that it can retain moisture.

- Wash every week to two weeks, depending on child's hair.
- Shop for appropriate products. Choose a shampoo that has a pH level of 5-6.5. If you aren't sure, ask for a recommendation from a stylist.
- Have your child lean over the sink or bathtub and wet her hair thoroughly. Divide hair into sections so you can see the scalp and put shampoo there first.
- Work shampoo out towards the ends of the hair, stretching the hair out rather than working in circles, which can create tangles.
- Rinse well.



- Be flexible. Take seasonal changes into account when purchasing products. Different products may be needed at different times of the year. Your child's hair may need something different during winter when the air is dryer or during the summer months when there is more humidity.
- After rinsing the conditioner from the hair, remove all excess water by squeezing the hair gently with your hands.

- Section the hair with your fingers and apply the conditioner working from the scalp to the ends. Use your fingers or a wide-tooth comb to move the conditioner down, making sure that plenty of it makes it to the ends, which are the driest part of the hair and, therefore, most likely to become tangled or break.

- Leave the conditioner in the hair for several minutes. If you have time, place a shower cap over the hair and allow your child to play during this time so he or she is not uncomfortable waiting.
- Rinse well, making sure that all of the conditioner is removed from the hair.
- After conditioning, you might consider using a leave-in conditioner, which will keep necessary moisture and help make combing easier.

### Conditioning

Adding conditioner to your child's hair after shampooing will replace moisture that the hair needs to remain healthy. Keep the following in mind:

### Blow Drying

Choosing to blow dry your child's hair rather than allowing it to air dry will smooth some of the natural curl and may make the hair easier to style.

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- Separate the hair into sections after it has been combed, but while it is still wet. For ease of drying, try twisting the individual sections and clipping them to your child's head. Work with only one section at a time.
- Dry the ends first and work your way up to the scalp. The ends of the hair will require less time to dry as they are already the driest part of the hair.
- Use a blow dryer with a comb nozzle attachment that will pull the hair through it or a natural bristled brush.
- Pay special attention to the heat settings on your blow dryer; be careful not to use too high of a heat level that will make your child uncomfortable.
- Using oil (like jojoba or coconut) applied to the scalp and hair when it is dry will help moisturize and can help smooth frizz and add shine.
- Once the hair is dry, it can be braided, twisted, put into a pony tail, or pulled back with clips, barrettes, or a rubber band with protective coating.

### Hair Care Products

Shop for appropriate products for your child's hair type. You don't have to buy products from a salon—you can find them at drug stores, on the internet, at department stores, etc.

- You can buy conditioners specifically for African American hair—some you rinse out, and others are designed to leave in.
- Look for products that are not water based. After blow drying, a water-based product can cause hair to revert to the previous state and tangle or wave and curl.

### Learning Curve

If you are struggling with caring for your child's hair, you may want to get help from a professional stylist to see how they recommend caring for your child's hair.

As with any new skill, there is a learning curve. Allow yourself enough time to learn the process and get it right. Helping your child look well groomed can build self-esteem and instill confidence. Have fun and use this time to talk with your child and be together.

Making a parent-child ritual out of caring for your child's hair can create special memories that you will both have as your child grows up and becomes able to care for him or herself.



### Resources

#### Books

- *Kids Talk Hair: An Instruction Book for Grown-Ups & Kids*, by Pamela Ferrell
- *Kinki Kreations: A Parent's Guide to Natural Black Hair Care for Kids*, by Jena Renee Williams
- *Brown Babies, Pink Parents: A Practical Guide to Transracial Adoption*, by Amy Ford
- *It's All Good Hair: The Guide to Styling and Grooming Black Children's Hair*, by Michelle N-K Collison

#### Websites

- [Florida Perry Smith: Hair Care](#)
- [Hair Matters](#) by Sherri Gragg
- [Transracial Parenting in Foster Care: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family](#)
- [Tis the Season to be Curly: Winter Hair Care Tips](#) from Mahisha Dellinger
- [Caring for Your Child's African American Hair](#)



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