

# fostering perspectives

Sponsored by the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

Vol. 20, No. 1 • November 2015

## Parenting a Child of a Different Race

by Tonia Jacobs Deese

If you're a foster parent, chances are you'll have the opportunity to care for a child whose race or culture is different from yours. The same is true if you are considering adopting a child or youth from foster care.

One reason for this is that there are more children of color in foster care than would be expected based solely on their numbers in the general population. For example, in 2014, African American children made up about 15% of U.S. children in the U.S. but accounted for 24% of the children in foster care (US Census, 2015; ACYF, 2015). The term for this is "disproportionality."

Though disproportionality has decreased nationally in recent years, transracial foster care and adoptive placements are still common. Critics of transracial placements argue that children do better when placed with families of the same race, but research also tells us that transracial placements do not in themselves cause problems for children (Smith, et al., 2008). Still, these children face unique challenges, often struggling with:

- **Feeling different.** It may be obvious the child was not born into the family; the child may be the only one of their race at their school; or may feel excluded by their peers (de Haymes & Simon, 2003).
- **Developing a positive identity.** These children are often confused at how to identify themselves. The most poorly adjusted are those who struggle to be a member of two different races and never develop a clear affiliation with either (Smith, et al., 2008).
- **Racial discrimination,** especially learning how to cope with prejudice and racism.

### Suggestions for Parents

Here are tips for parenting children facing these challenges (IFAPA, n.d.;

Kim, et al., 2010):

**1. Acknowledge and discuss differences.** Children will have questions about why they look different than you. Minimizing racial differences won't make them disappear, and acknowledging them won't make your child self-conscious. As one child said, "My parents never discussed race with me. EVER. I think they felt that if they ignored my ethnicity, it would kind of go away. And a lot of other kids would ask me questions. But by the time I was 10, the questions turned into insults" (Samuels, 2009).

Show children it's OK to talk about race and differences. We want them to turn to us for help instead of struggling on their own (Smith, et al., 2008).

Pre-school children (ages 2-4) may not understand the concept of race, but they are aware of physical differences. For example, a 4-year-old may say, "Mommy, why am I brown and you are pink?"

Answer these questions honestly but simply. Acknowledge that differences are normal and celebrate them. For example, you might say "people have different skin colors and all are beautiful." If your child asks a question you aren't ready for, say "Let me think about it" and revisit the question later (LCCRE, 1995).

Talking to children between age 5 and 8 is especially important. At school, children interact with people whose values are different from yours, and kids are impressionable at this age. Talk regularly about acceptance and inclusion now, as kids' beliefs become more rigid around fourth grade (LCCRE, 1995).

**2. Prepare yourself for prejudice and racism.** What if someone asks where your child "came from?" What if your child comes home crying because someone called her a racial slur?

These are things you may face as a transracial parent. Think through in advance how you want to respond. One parent's advice: "You don't want to pass it over when your child gets called a racist name...by saying something like "All children get called names"...Some children get called names because they wear glasses. That's a whole different issue than racism" (Kim, et al., 2010).

Clearly communicate to your child that these actions are not OK, that you will advocate for them, and that your family believes in diversity and acceptance.

**3. Prepare your child for prejudice and racism.** Many children struggle with identity once they notice racial differences at school. "Some girls in [my daughter's] class made comments about her race. Our daughter didn't know quite how to handle it....She wants to be the same as everyone else" (Kim et al., 2010). Acknowledging and

celebrating differences early can prepare your child for these comments from their peers.

Children need to know about stereotypes and racism they may face. African American families tend to talk about this with their children regularly and coach them on how to respond. This coaching is a buffer against prejudice and gives children skills to navigate a race-conscious society (Butler-Sweet, 2011; Samuels, 2009; Smith, et al., 2008).

**4. Celebrate your child's race and culture.** Expose them to books, TV shows, and toys that include characters and historical figures of their race. Celebrate holidays that relate to the child's culture, such as Kwanzaa or Dia de Los Reyes Magos. Link the child to activities in the community where he can interact with other kids who look like him. Consider finding a mentor of the same race for your child.

**5. Think about where you live and where your child goes to school.** Will your child consistently be the only person of their race in their environment? Will their differences be accepted or will they be treated differently? One child said, "I would advise a family who wanted to adopt transracially to find out what the neighborhood is like where they are going to live....Make sure people will not treat the kids as outcasts, but like normal children, which is what we are" (Kim, et al., 2010).

As you can see, a challenge of transracial caregiving is having difficult conversations with our children--but we must not stop at race! We must also have conversations about things such as gender, age, and sexuality. This encourages the child to explore all parts of their identity, to define themselves, and to prepare for any form of oppression they may face.

*Tonia Jacobs Deese is a clinical instructor with the UNC-CH School of Social Work.*

## Parenting and Learning Resources

### Books

*Black, White, Just Right*, by Marguerite W. Davol (ages 6-9)

*Dancing Home*, by Alma Flor Ada (ages 8-12)

*I Love My Hair!* by Natasha Anastasia Tarpley (ages 1-6)

*Jim Thorpe's Bright Path*, by Joseph Bruchac (ages 6-11)

*Let's Talk About Race*, by Julius Lester (ages 4-8)

*Mooncakes*, by Loretta Seto (ages 4-8)

*Muskrat Will Be Swimming*, by Cheryl Savageau (ages 7+)

*Shades of People*, by Shelley Rotner (ages 3+)

*The Skin You Live In*, by Michael Tyler (ages 4-8)

### Websites

**Pact (an adoption alliance)**

[pactadopt.org](http://pactadopt.org)

*Great information on transracial adoption; has an online support group*

**North American Council on Adoptable Children**

<http://bit.ly/1jW82YZ>

*Includes a database of parent groups*

**New York State Citizens Coalition for Children**

<http://bit.ly/1NxZCUj>

*"Ask the Experts" page has helpful advice*

**AdoptiveFamilies**

<http://bit.ly/1Or6EKO>

*Also has parent support groups*

[Click here for references](#)

~ [Family and Children's Resource Program, UNC-CH School of Social Work](#) ~