

Transracial Adoption: It Will Change Your Family Forever

by Carolyn Berger, LCSW

As a white person, my understanding of what it took to bring a black, Latino, or Asian child into my family was straightforward. You either adopted a black or biracial child domestically or you traveled to Guatemala, Columbia, Ethiopia or somewhere in Asia to bring a child of color home. You made sure that your child had role models within her race and you incorporated the holidays and traditions of your child's family of origin into the life of your family. You joined a support group for people with families like yours so that your child could make friends with others of her race and you could share advice and support.

My early thoughts about transracial adoption barely scratched the surface. Since we live in a country in which racism persists—Condoleeza Rice aptly called racism our nation's "birthmark"—the process is far more complex. People considering this option should become very familiar with the terrain before proceeding. I will focus on whites adopting children of color in this article.

Many white pre-adoptive parents believe that they are ready to adopt transracially because they are at ease with people of color. But we must look at life through the children's eyes. They will be living in a society that is not yet fully comfortable with race nor color blind. People who are black, Latino, or Asian already know this—it's in the air we all breathe, although the whites among us are often unaware.

Peggy McIntosh, in her article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," says that whites are taught not to recognize their power and privilege. She says, "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks." Her article, written in 1989, still resonates today. If you are white you need to recognize that your child of color will not come equipped with this knapsack of privilege.

When we talk about transracial adoption by whites we are talking about a significant number of adopted children. In 2004 there were 1.6 million adopted children under the age of 18: 16% were black, 7% were Asian and 2% were American Indian. Of these children 17% were of a different race than their adoptive parents (U.S. Census Bureau). And transracial adoption through foster care is on the rise. In 2004, 26% of black children were adopted transracially, almost always by whites, compared to 14% in 1998 (Clemetson and Nixon, NY Times, 2006).

There are many children of color here in the U.S. and abroad who are in need of families, and many white couples and individuals who want to provide them. The question is not whether we should adopt transracially. Rather, it is how we can do a better job of it. And this can mean turning ourselves and our lifestyles inside out.

John Raible, Ed.D, a black man raised by white parents and an authority on transracial adoption, points to one way we can do this. He uses the term

“transracialization” to describe the change people can undergo when they take part in close, long-term relationships with people of other races. Transracialization emerges when people develop a “deep and sophisticated understanding of race and racism.” Adoptive parents can begin this process before they bring a child of another race home by immersing themselves in their child’s culture.

Probably the first and most important step is to make friends among members of your child’s race. Sounds a bit contrived? Maybe so, but don’t you do this when you are entering some other new phase of your life? Like a new job? Or when you marry someone and put forth your best effort to get acquainted with your spouse’s family? Begin to read books about race and by members of your child’s race. Open yourself to discussions about race. You might be startled to discover that you’ve never had such discussions since the subject is taboo: How often did Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton skirt comments about race in their quests to become the Democratic nominee in the 2008 presidential election?

The transracialization of your family will be an ongoing, endless, rewarding, frustrating and exciting experience that will reverberate through future generations. Complete transracialization is not always achieved by white adoptive families—perhaps it never can be-- but we need to strive for it if we want our children to develop healthy identities.

In the ideal scenario, a child from a transracialized family will feel connected to, and supported by, his adoptive family and deeply connected to some people of his own race as well. He will live in a city or town that is diverse and where he can find successful role models. White adoptive parents need to have friends who have navigated the shoals of racism in ways they have never had to, and who are willing to guide their child through.

In their book *Inside Transracial Adoption* (2000)—a must-read for people who plan to adopt transracially--Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall tell us, “When you choose to become a family that is different from most, you must be prepared to confront your own biases in both overt and subtle ways...You can expect to find that you carry within yourself both negative and positive internalized attitudes about adoption and race.”

Hold on to those positive attitudes. Confront the negative ones before you adopt! Why? Because these are the same attitudes your child will be brushing up against on a regular basis. How can you help a child cope with something you have not acknowledged to exist?

Your adopted child will need to grow up in a family where issues of race are discussed and where his experiences of racism are confronted and dealt with rather than ignored or glossed over. If you are a white person adopting a male black child, for example, you need to think about how he will fare in the schoolyard and on the street. You will need to teach him to stand up for himself when he hears a racist remark or feels the effects of racism in his everyday life. You will have to teach him how to sidestep racial profiling as he grows into adulthood—or he may never reach adulthood.

Or, let's say you have adopted a daughter from China. Get ready for the possibility of her coming home from school one day to say she hates her eyes, and that the kids on the playground are teasing her by pulling their own eyes back in a clumsy imitation of what they call "Chink eyes." You and other Chinese people in her life will be charged with the task of teaching her to appreciate her looks in a culture that already makes it difficult for girls to develop positive self-images.

If you are beginning to wonder whether you are up for the challenges of transracial adoption, this is a good sign—for it means that you are thinking critically about the impact of racism on adoption. And if you can think critically about it, you are already a giant step ahead of most people. Besides loving your child and giving her the family every child deserves, there are many things you can do to stack the deck in her favor.

- Live in a diverse community where there are many people of your child's race. This is one of the most important things you can do!
- Send your child to a racially diverse school.
- Educate your extended family about your child's race and culture.
- Find same-race role models and mentors for your child.
- Learn to speak your child's language of origin.
- Choose vacation spots and camps where your child's race is well represented.
- Go to social events attended by adults and children of your child's race.
- Fight racism. Let your child know that you will not tolerate racism whether it's subtle or overt.
- Incorporate the music, food, and holiday traditions of your child's race into your family life.

Your overarching goal can be found in "A Transracially Adopted Child's Bill of Rights," adapted by Liza Steinberg Triggs* from "A Bill of Rights for Mixed Folks," by Marilyn Drame:

Every child is entitled to find his multiculturalism to be an asset and to conclude, "I've got the best of both worlds."

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**Find this in its entirety on the website of Pact, An Adoption Alliance: www.pactadopt.org/press/articles/transracial.html*