

On Building a Transracial Family A Position Paper of The Cradle

Every child is entitled to a family that will help him or her develop positive self-esteem. Developing a healthy racial identity is an important aspect of how children feel about themselves. Many prospective adoptive parents express that they are only open to adopting a child who fully shares their racial heritage, or at most, is biracial; they do not feel they can be open to adopting a child of a wholly different race. What few recognize is that adopting a biracial child has the same social implications as adopting a child of a fully different race. This is evident throughout literature and research, and will be explored and discussed below.

For those prospective adoptive parents who are open to adopting a biracial child, this preference may be based on concerns about skin color, although they may be uncomfortable stating these concerns. Such apprehensions may relate to prospective adoptive parent's desire to look like the child they adopt, share a common ethnic heritage, or their wish to be an inconspicuous family, among other things. They may believe that a biracial child will have a lighter skin tone, and therefore blend more easily with the "look" of their family. However, genetic research reveals that there are no definitive means through which human pigmentation is determined [Sturm (1998) and Kalla (2007)]. Rather, variation in skin color is unpredictable, meaning that any given child of biracial birthparents is just as likely to be dark in skin tone as to be light in skin tone. Simply put, there is no way to predict a child's skin color simply by knowing the child is biracial.

Knowing that biracial children will likely look different than their adoptive parents, it is vital that families learn how to approach the questions and possible judgments of those around them just as it would be for families who adopt a child of a wholly different race. In her article "Motherhood as the Work of Revolution: On Raising Bi-Racial Children," Cheryl Seelhoff (2006), who is Caucasian and in an interracial marriage, shares her experience in raising biracial children who are African American/Caucasian. She describes the way that her children were treated by individuals of all races:

"...White friends treated them as though they were invisible at times..." "...Black friends... resented their lighter skin...and treated them as though they viewed themselves as superior, even when, in reality, my daughters felt excluded, marginalized, and inferior to, or different from, just about everybody..."

Seelhoff goes on to describe acts of racism and discrimination encountered by her family, such as her sons being targeted by the police and sales clerks following her children in stores. The difficult circumstances experienced by Seelhoff's family are ones that adoptive parents may anticipate if they adopt a child of a different race than themselves. This occurred for Seelhoff's family even though Seelhoff and her husband are an interracial couple, meaning that these parents shared, in-part, the race of their children. Because Seelhoff and her family learned first-hand of the challenges facing biracial families, she stresses the importance of offering children a culturally diverse upbringing to lessen the frequency of such discriminatory treatment.

Regardless of race, the impact that peers, teachers, neighbors and strangers have on a child's self-esteem and development must not be underestimated. While all children are influenced by these relationships, the impact can be considerable and lifelong for children of a different race than their parents. In her article "Effect of Transracial/Transethnic Adoption on Children's Racial and Ethnic Identity and Self-Esteem: A Meta-Analytic Review," Leslie Hollingsworth (1997) discusses historical findings in which African-American children experienced identity imbalance, meaning that there was a mismatch between these children's personal and group identities. These children felt uncertain of who they were and how they fit in within the different groups in which they participated and encountered on a daily basis. Similarly, as one young biracial woman wrote in *What Are You? Voices of mixed-race young people*,

"...these issues continue even though you think you've settled them and you've put them away. They can flare up again when you're reminded of having to choose, or of not fitting into a group. They aren't really ever settled. You're going to continue to deal with them for a long time until our society changes."

Gaskins, 1999, p.200

Furthermore, Northwestern University researchers found that "individuals who identify as multiracial on the in-school survey score on average significantly lower than single-race students on social acceptance." [Quillian and Redd (2009)]. Therefore, in order to help their children develop positive self-esteem, adoptive parents must be cognizant of the cultural surroundings and influences that they are able to offer their children – a need equally relevant for parents who are adopting biracial children as those adopting children of a fully different race.

Another aspect that unifies the experience of both biracial children and children of a different race than their adoptive parents is the children's birth families. Although adoptive parents often believe it may be "easier" to adopt and raise a biracial child, it is important to remember that the child will have at least one birth parent, as well as birth relatives, who are a different race than the adoptive parents. In today's environment of open adoption, it is necessary for adoptive parents to consider how they will help birth families feel welcomed in their family and community as well as how they will feel interacting in the birth relatives' family and community, irrespective of race.

There are multiple issues for prospective adoptive parents to consider when deciding whether to adopt a child of a different race. While some adoptive parents feel that they may be open only to adopting a child who is biracial, it is The Cradle's belief that the joys and challenges of adopting a child who is biracial or of a wholly different race than their adoptive parents are the same. A child of a fully different race than their adoptive parents, as well as a biracial child, has the same needs for loving, accepting parents who can help him or her form a positive identity as a person of color. It is The Cradle's position, therefore, that prospective adoptive parents working with The Cradle, other than interracial couples, may decide which race(s) of children they are open to adopting, inclusive of biracial children, but may not choose to be open only to children who are biracial.

References

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