

What is transracial adoption?

By Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall

Transracial adoption means the joining of racially different parents and children together in adoptive families. Most transracial adoptive parents are white. Most transracially- adopted kids are of color. Transracial adoption includes children adopted from other countries as well as those born in the United States. This means that kids of color in transracial families usually must learn to negotiate the racial issues they encounter in our race conscious society without the benefits of having parents of color who have experience dealing with racial bias and racism.

Very often transracially-adopted children of color grow up thinking of adoption and race as the same thing. When they are young and concrete thinkers, they notice that people see their adoption by noticing their race. This leads to a sense that sorting out their racial identity is inextricably linked to understanding their adoptive one. Both the experience of being adopted and that of being part of a multiracial family are profound and important to the understanding of self. Together they are more and not less than either alone.

The society we live in tends to oversimplify rather than appreciate complexities and confusing dualities. When we look at race -and all of us from every race and culture classify strangers by skin color and other racial characteristics)- individuals are generally perceived to be part of the racial group they resemble the most (their phenotype), no matter what the truth of their genetic origins might be. One of the important ways we all find out who we are in the world is by the messages we get from others. Parents must help their children understand who they are by virtue of their adoption and also by virtue of their genetics and phenotype.

Becoming a transracial adoptive family is a process, not an event. Competence and self-esteem grow by repeating successful acts, including the discovery or rediscovery of belonging to the family. Parents and children move through these stages according to their own experience and the realities of the societal biases they encounter. Parents must work to reinforce the value and importance of family membership, because the outside world will often question how members belong to each other when they are of different races and genetic heritages. The good news is, this means lots of opportunities for behaving like a family – since that was the reason most adoptive parents came to transracial adoption in the first place – a very welcome by-product of this experience.

Principles of Transracial Adoption

- Transracial adoption is more complex than same-race adoption.
- Visible differences between parents and children increase challenges to their acceptance as a family unit.
- There are predictable developmental stages for transracial adoptive families, which are different from those of same-race families.
- Issues regarding racial or ethnic awareness and development of positive racial identity must be addressed.

When parents are raising a child of a race different from their own, the parents' lack of experience with the race or ethnic background of the child's birth heritage creates challenges for all members of the family. When those parents are white and lack first-hand experiences with racial bias and stereotyping directed towards them, their learning curve to understand and anticipate their children's life experience is likely to be a long one. Facing the issues that come with a multicultural life increase opportunities for intimacy and family cooperation. These experiences help to form families that are closer and stronger than most.

Family is where belonging starts. One of the challenges is how you and your child can rest securely in the feeling of belonging together when you experience daily life differently because others treat you differently. "To belong" means "to have a rightful place." Sooner or later, if things go right, no matter whether you join your family, by birth or by adoption, no matter your age, or how weird, or boring, or amazing your family is, you come to believe in an absolute way that you have a rightful place in your home. You learn how to love and be loved, to become yourself, to feel safe, and to accept your family members even when they're weird when you belong to a family. With the foundation of family life, you have what you need to find your rightful place in your racial group, neighborhood, kindergarten class, church, synagogue, or ashram etc

Feelings of belonging do not come in halves; one either feels part of or separate from. If a strong goal of any child who has been disconnected from birth family is to feel the reassurance of fully belonging to their adoptive family, their peer group, their community, their culture, their ancestry, their country, their universe, then they have the right to skills to help them meet those goals. What is required is a racial identification that can remain fluid and contextual ...an ability to locate self between identities and make a seamless transformation at will, somehow continuing to be oneself in various identities. This comes from being able to understand the cues and being able to identify with *ALL* that one is. This means that parents have to give their children the opportunity to experience both (or all) of their birth heritages so the child can learn the cues and become equipped to negotiate their own identification in the context of both groups. It also means parents will need to give their child explicit and implicit permission to identify as they feel comfortable so the child does not feel they risk losing membership in their family by trying on any of the different identities that are their birth right. This is easier said than done for adoptive families who, unlike their interracial married counterparts in birth families of multiracial children, have not necessarily had first-hand experience of dealing with issues of racial difference before becoming a parent. These parents need opportunities to normalize their own experiences through interactions not only with other transracial adoptive families but also with other families of color who have experienced racial bias and have cultural strengths to pass along to their children in ways that whites in America generally do not.

Finding our rightful place may be the work we are put on earth to do. Even though you and your child will never share a racial experience, the roots he grows within your family can be so formative that deep inside they will be the means by which he comes to recognize himself. Adoption exists because most of us agree that if kids don't have a family first and feel secure in their own place within it, their chances of feeling part of the larger world are usually enormously diminished. Family is the beginning for all that is possible beyond. Transracial adoptive families rest on the capacity to love one another without the common markers of "sameness." We don't look alike; the world doesn't treat us like other families;

each member in our family comes with a different history. But when we ask, “Who is on my side?; “the answer is “Our family members.” Wrapped together under a splendid quilt that holds us warm, holds us up and tucks us into our daily lives, we act like a tribe, because that’s what we are. We serve as allies for one another, because we must. We pool our resources because that’s what families do. Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts; all we ask is to be.

Transracial families are pioneers. Our lives are miracles. We share a respect for difference and an appreciation for diversity that are models for all people and all communities. Life provides us with more opportunities every day than most people get in a lifetime to:

1. **F**ace hurts and celebrate blessings together
2. **A**ddress our differences and celebrate our sameness
3. **M**arvel when we are stupid and repair the mistakes we make with each other.
4. **I**nteract even when it feels overwhelming.
5. **L**ive with the pain of our losses.
6. **Y**ell, laugh, shout, scream, and praise our funny, crazy, totally cool adventures.

All of this builds our sense of common identity and common purpose, a heightened ability to perceive each of our members as the unique person he or she is. We must not allow ourselves or our children to believe that our families are marginal. Though we may rarely acknowledge it, the truth is just the opposite. We are trailblazers. Racial and cultural issues present difficult questions. We can be their victims or we can rise to their challenges. As families and as individuals, we can reap great benefits, becoming adept and flexible, well equipped to respond to the ever-increasing complexities of our world.

In the end, our task is like that proverbial jigsaw puzzle. There are many pieces, and each is necessary. Nothing can be either overlooked or overemphasized if we are to complete the full picture. Let’s pledge our vigilance and honesty regarding *all* of the issues. Let’s not abandon our children to facing the issues on their own.

Beth and Gail are the co-founding directors of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, as well as adoptive parents to children of different races and ethnicities. Their book, *Inside Transracial Adoption*, is filled with personal stories, practical suggestions and theory combined in an encouraging and supportive style that reinforces the message that race matters, racism is alive, and families built transracially can develop strong and binding ties. Filled with warmth and humor, this book has already been hailed as a classic! Pact is a non-profit organization whose mission is to serve children of color in adoption. They participate in the placement of infants of color as well as pre- and post-adoption education for families all over the county. Beth is available for speaking engagements as well as one on one consultation, they can be contacted at www.pactadopt.org or 510-243-9460.

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