



Transracial Adoption: Love Is Not Enough

By Joseph Crumbley

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Adoption counselors know that parenting an adopted child is different from parenting a biological child and that it requires special knowledge and skills. Many counselors are less clear about specialized strengths and abilities needed in transracial adoption and may be unsure of how to assess and enable families seeking such adoption.

Adoption counselors and adoptive families learned more last fall about meeting these challenges. Dr. Joseph Crumbley, DSW, a Philadelphia family therapist with expertise in transracial adoption, conducted a two day workshop sponsored by the Center for Adoption. This article is based on Dr. Crumbley's presentation, with much of it taken directly from handouts he provided.

Families planning to adopt any child often begin with a number of *assumptions* such as:

- Love is enough. All a child needs is love and a caring family.
- Anyone can be an adoptive parent. No special skills or learning are necessary.
- Once adopted, a child's problems and adoption issues disappear quickly.
- The adoptive family can be all things to a child (i.e. history, culture, identity).
- The adopted child should blend into the family; the family should not have to adapt.

Families are told during the adoption preparation process that these assumptions are not accurate. When a child is placed, they come to **know** the *facts* of adoption:

- Love is only the beginning. Issues such as separation, identity, lack of trust, and low self-esteem are as important as attachment.
- The needs of adopted children require special parenting skills, knowledge and insight.
- Adoption issues must be recognized and dealt with throughout life.
- The adoptive family can never replace completely the child's loss of birth family. The fantasies, memories, loyalty and identity will remain.

- The adoptive family must adapt and become, with the child, a blended family, incorporating the adopted child's history, values, identity and uniqueness.

Transracial adoption presents additional issues, including:

- Children are at risk of loss of racial and cultural identity and lack of acceptance by individuals of their own and their adoptive family's culture.
- Children need to develop and maintain positive racial identity in order to cope in a race conscious society.
- The family needs to incorporate and value the child's racial identity and history.
- The family should be willing to accept and celebrate the fact that society will view them as a minority family.

Families planning to parent any child will examine their lifestyles, considering whether their environment will be positive for a child. They may talk with neighbors and friends about schools. They will notice the make-up of their neighborhood; are there other families with children nearby? Will friends accept their child and be a positive influence? They will pay attention to enrichment opportunities - music, sports, libraries, their church's programs for children. If important qualities are lacking, a family may change their lifestyle, cultivate new friends or move to another area.

Families thinking of adopting transracially may need more sweeping changes than those adopting a child of the same race. Some questions they might ask themselves:

- How many friends (not acquaintances) do we have of the race or culture of the child we wish to adopt?
- How often do people of another race visit our home or invite us to their homes?
- How do our extended families feel about other races? Will they accept our child?
- What is that racial makeup of our neighborhood, the school our child will attend, our church or other organizations we frequent?
- How many events have we attended in the last year that were multicultural or related to a race other than ours?
- Do we have knowledge of dietary, skin, hair and health care needs for a child of another race?
- How will we assure that our child has positive adult role models among people of a race different from ours?

The family must consider how to proceed if their current situation would not be positive. Would they be willing to move to another neighborhood - one with a mixture of races? Would they be willing to seek organizations where they can make friends among another race? If their church is predominantly one race, are they willing to locate and join a culturally diverse congregation?

The family should consider whether they have ever experienced prejudice or discrimination. If not, how will they help their child cope with prejudice? To prepare, the family may put themselves, a number of times, into group situations where they are of a

different race from the rest of the group. In this way they will experience the feeling of being in the minority and learn to understand and relate to what their child would experience every day if placed in a school, church or other group where everyone else is of a different race. Conversely, after such experiences, they will discover that entering a group of people who look similar to them allows their minds, bodies and spirits to relax.

In an article from *Adoptive Families* (November/December, 1994) entitled "Facing Prejudice," Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb wrote:

"If your child is nonwhite living in America, it is inevitable that, at some time, he or she will encounter racism in one form or another. He may be called a name, picked on, or excluded by other children - or worse, by adults. Most white parents wait until that first injury to talk with their children about racism. Most African-American families, and other people of color, warn their children about the cruelties of racism before they encounter it firsthand. Telling your children about racism before they encounter it is like having your children vaccinated for measles before they're exposed to the virus."

Bartels-Rabb and van Gulden add that, whether warning your child about racism or discussing an actual occurrence, the basic points to talk about are:

- that such things do happen and do hurt,
- that your child is a good person and does not deserve such treatment, and
- that people who act this way don't really know your child and, therefore, have no right to comment on what type of person he or she is.

For anyone, aggressive response to every unkind word or act would be exhausting and not always productive. The important things for you and your child to know is when to act or react. For example, if racism is directed at a child by adults, adoptive parents will need to step in and decide how to respond.

The African-American child, says Dr. Crumbley, must be prepared for being perceived often as a minority member first, an individual second and for being judged on the basis of prejudice and stereotype. Although it is unfair, the child must be aware that his or her behaviour will impact society's perceptions of other minority members. Adoptive parents will need to help their child to be politically aware, active and committed to advocating for equal rights for the minority group as well as for the individual.

With so many specialized abilities need to parent transracially, where are such families found and how can we recognize them when they appear? What assistance can they be given during the study process to better prepare them for success?

Desirable capabilities for transracial parents include:

- Understanding of their own personal history and how it helped to form their values and attitudes about racial, cultural and religious similarities and differences
- Understanding of racism, how it works and how to minimize its effects

- Empathy with children's birth families regardless of cultural, lifestyle or socioeconomic differences
- Ability and commitment to provide for their child racial and cultural experiences as well as information and knowledge about his or her race and culture
- Availability of a strong support system
- Ability and willingness to make available to their child same race adult and peer role models and relationships
- Acknowledgement that interracial adoption will make their family part of a minority group AND that they will experience discrimination as do other minorities
- Interest in and ability to learn skills to care for the child's skin, hair and health
- Appreciation of the child's uniqueness while instilling a sense of belonging and full family membership

It is true that love is not enough to make any adoptive placement successful. However, without unconditional commitment and the development of love, a placement will not succeed. One of the best things parents can do for children is simply enjoy them, to treasure and celebrate likenesses and differences and to let them know that they are wonderful people!

Joseph Crumbley DSW, is in private practice as a consultant and family therapist. He is the author of Transracial Adoption and Foster Care: Practical Issues for Professionals and co-author of Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care. Dr. Crumbley was a keynote speaker at the 1997 NYS CCC annual conference. For information about Dr. Crumbley's publications, including training video tapes on Transracial Adoption, or to contact him about presenting to your group, visit his web site at: <http://www.drcrumbley.com>.