

Transracial Adoption: Love Is Just the Beginning

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When my husband and I adopted our first child 18 years ago, agency staff told us, “Take him home and love him. Everything will be fine.” Now we have five children and our family is a beautiful blend of African American, Native American, Latino, and European American races and cultures. Loving our children has been easy. As transracial adoptive parents, however, it has been much more difficult to develop strategies for dealing with individual and institutional racism. In our experience, the best lessons we can offer are those that teach our children to externalize racism and assure them we will always be there for them.

Externalizing Racism

Because my husband and I do not share our children’s racial or cultural backgrounds, we must work extra hard to help them develop skills and strategies to deal with the everyday reality of racism. To live authentically in our racist society, each of our children must learn to externalize racism: *to understand that racism is NOT about him or her, but a reflection of other people’s ignorance.* Externalizing racism is not about dismissing racism or pretending it does not exist.

The alternative—internalizing racism—will lead children to believe the destructive messages of racism are true and directed specifically at them. When children externalize racism they can develop a strong racial identity, self-esteem, and attachments. When children internalize racism, their racial identity suffers, their self-esteem ends up in shambles, and their attachments are in peril.

Through the years, with help from many experts (especially adult transracial adoptees), we have identified a number of strategies for teaching our children to externalize racism. Four of those strategies are explained below.

Cultural Membership

One of the most important ways our children learn to externalize racism is through cultural membership. From adult transracial adoptees I’ve learned that a central

theme in their lives is the need to establish meaningful relationships with adults and youth who look like them and share their culture. Through these relationships, our children learn the subtle and not so subtle norms of their cultural community—how to dress, to talk, to be.

We parents must help our children engage with their cultural community in meaningful ways. By choosing where we live, where we worship, what schools our children attend, and the YMCA to which we belong, we can facilitate cultural membership. For us, these institutions have provided cultural membership, mentoring, friends, and community. Just as I need to find a tutor to teach my children physics, I need to find a tutor to teach my children how to be African American, Latino, or Native American in our society.

When our children become members of their cultural community they learn to refute stereotypes, develop survival skills, and make positive connections with a broader range of people. Cultural membership offers a solid foundation for externalizing racism.

Family Language about Racism

Within the family, we help teach our children to externalize racism through a shared language about racism. For instance, when we are out in public and someone says to my husband, “You are a saint to adopt these kids,” he replies, “No, you don’t understand. I am the lucky one to be their dad.”

“You don’t understand” is our family language to redirect the ignorance behind the comment back to the stranger. The stranger’s ignorance is the issue, not the fact that the members of our family don’t all look alike, or the myth that only a saint would adopt our children.

Inevitably, strangers will ask intrusive or inappropriate questions such as “Where did she come from?” or “How much did they cost?” or “Do you provide day care?” My typical response is, “Why would you ask?” Again, my response turns the question around, and puts responsibility back where it belongs: on the stranger.

As my children have gotten older, I hear them use this same strategy to address questions such as, “Why are your mom and dad white?” and “Why did your real mom give you away?” Their response is “Why would you ask?” Indeed, why would you ask?

Honoring Feelings about Racism

Recently I was in a grocery store with my 3-year old when I felt my neck

tighten—my body’s usual response to the discomfort of racism. As I quickly put the items we needed in our basket, it became obvious a woman was following us. She got closer and closer to us with each turn down the aisles until she finally approached us at the check out. She abruptly asked, “Is that your son?”

“Why would you ask?” I replied. Then I scooped up my son and left the store. As we walked to the car, I held him close. He clung to my neck and said, “Mommy, I not like that lady.”

“Honey, where does your body not like that lady?” I asked him. He answered, “In my tummy.” We went on to talk, in developmentally appropriate language, about his body’s response to racism.

It is extremely important to honor our children’s feelings about racism so we can help them to externalize it. For example, if my child says a person does not like him because he is Native American, that is his reality. I don’t question or try to talk him out of his feelings.

Instead we talk about externalizing the experience, discuss options for handling the situation, and decide whether he needs my help in other ways. Teaching our children to honor their feelings about racism is teaching our children to be safe. They will often “feel” racism before they are cognitively aware they are vulnerable. By tuning in to their intuitive signals, our children can avoid or better prepare themselves for racially charged situations.

Modeling Safe Responses to Racism

Parents are role models for their children. When we encounter racist behavior or institutional racism, our children are watching, listening to, and internalizing our responses for future reference. Our response is not about the other person or institution; it is about our relationship with our child. Every time we respond, act, react, or ignore behavior, we are building or tearing apart the relationship (and attachment) with our child.

A few months ago, I took my sons to the zoo. While we were waiting for the dolphin show to begin, the woman behind us began harassing my two multi-racial teenage sons. At first I sat quietly, allowing my sons to handle the situation. When the woman in front of us turned around and said to the woman behind us, “Shut your racist mouth!” it became obvious it was time for me to get involved.

I told the woman behind us, “That’s enough. Leave my sons alone.” She then began to berate me. The woman’s tone, the look on her face, and the two young children with her convinced me we needed to disengage.

I turned my back to her and began talking to my sons loudly enough for her to hear. “Just ignore her,” I instructed them. “She is ignorant. She doesn’t understand. This isn’t about us; it’s about her ignorance.”

After the show ended, my sons and I still refused to engage with the woman. She finally gave up and left. We then left, and spent several days processing what had happened and what could have happened if we had responded differently.

As a woman with white privilege, my range of responses to racism is different than the range of safe responses available to my children of color. In all situations, I must remember my children are watching and learning from me. While I was sorely tempted to respond to the woman at the zoo in a way that would ensure she would not soon forget us, that response would not work if my sons used it in the future. I must respond in ways my children can use, not in ways my white privilege allows me to get away with.

Keeping Life Real

Confronting racism is painful, and while it may be tempting to try to make things easier, it is essential we strive to make things real. An adult transracial adoptee told me her mother tried to make things “easy” by downplaying racism. When the adoptee’s white mother took her to an all-white church, she would express her discomfort at the stares and whispers. Her mother would then say, “Those people are staring and whispering to each other because you are so beautiful.” Because it did not acknowledge her reality, this seemingly nice but dismissive response left my friend feeling very alone. Even as a young child she knew the attention she received from the church-goers was about race and culture.

Though they may not mean to, extended family members may ignore the reality of racism for their nieces, nephews, or grandchildren. These relatives often love and accept the transracially adopted child into their family, yet harbor prejudices about the child’s race and culture. As illustrated by the church story, transracially adopted children will long remember the pain of having relatives deny what the child knows is real.

When it comes to racism in our extended family, we must have a “zero tolerance policy.” If our child tells us someone we love and have known all our life has done or said something hurtful, we must not minimize it. If we say, “Auntie Marie didn’t really mean that,” or “Honey, you are just too sensitive,” we are aligning ourselves with the person who hurt our child. Instead, our child needs us to make it clear we are on his or her side.

Being There for Our Children

For our children to feel secure in our families, we must be clear and consistent in the way we support and back up our children. Our children need to know whose side we are on—even when it is downright agonizing. If we are teaching our children to externalize racism by working to make things real, helping our children to become members of their cultural communities, and teaching our children to honor their feelings about racism, our children will know we stand with them.

My husband and I have also worked hard to make our family a safe place to talk. When our children are dealing with peer relationships, making decisions about priorities, or are feeling burdened, we want them to come to us. Talking allows us to infuse our values and perspectives into our children's decision making.

When our daughter was in preschool she came home one day and announced, "Mommy, I have a new friend!" I replied, "Wonderful! How do you know she's your friend?" My daughter innocently said, "She told me I am her favorite vigger!"

I had to process this for a few hours before I was ready to discuss it with my daughter. Our daughter did end up being good friends with this young classmate, and over time we had many more talks about things our daughter heard from her friend—things learned in a family with a very different world view than ours.

For our children to feel safe and "at home," they must feel sure we are trying to understand their experience in the world as a persons of color. Open conversations about difficult subjects like racism, sexism, current events, and family dynamics are great ways to lay the foundation for ongoing attachment and relationship.

To build our children's trust in us, we must also keep working to understand our own white privilege, stereotypes, and racism. We must explore our country's history from the perspective of our child's cultural community and commit to fighting racism even when we pay a personal price. We need to be there with our children when they are mistreated, denied access, or struggling to comprehend the cruel injustice of racism.

Love is just the beginning of the transracial adoption journey. There is no end. My husband, our children, and I continue to learn and grow together. We are a family.