January 2013

# A Family for Every Child

Parenting a child of a different race

One father's account of his experience with transracial adoption.

## White Dad, Black Son

"Whose baby is that?" "Is that your child?"
Shortly after my newborn son arrived through a transracial adoption, we began drawing frequent stares and questions from strangers whenever we were out in public. Though we live in a racially diverse neighborhood, I didn't expect the sight of a middle-aged white man carrying an African-American infant, peering out from a chest-worn sling, to be such an attention-grabber.

When white people looked at us, they often seemed curious about the nature of our relationship, but few would ask questions. The unspoken code of etiquette was feigned "color-blindness," trying not to notice racial difference. Some genuinely expressed how cute my son was, while others over-emphasized the point, as if to prove their racial tolerance. Some tried to touch my son's hair, perhaps feeling license to explore a seemingly exotic feature. I'd quickly reposition my son beyond their reach.
Black adults and children were more direct, asking whose kid this was and where I got him. Though often abrupt, they seemed sincere in looking out for this child as one of their own. Viewing me with suspicion is justifiable when you look at the big picture; even well-intentioned white people still don't have the best track record for effectively dealing with privilege, cultural differences, or persistent inequality.

As an educator by profession -- and one who leads trainings about racial justice -- I approach these interactions as "teachable moments." They're also "learnable moments" for me, for each has its own nuances to navigate. Instead of taking offense to intrusive questions or avoiding difficult conversations, I try to face them with patience and openness. I make exceptions when someone's downright rude, but that's rare. Sometimes I get things right, but, often, I figure out later what I wish I had said.

## BEING CONSCIOUS ABOUT RACE

Whatever the racial composition of your family, we are all living in a highly racialized society. Parenting amidst a growing pretense of post-racialism poses challenges that require new consciousness and skills.
For years, I deliberated my options for creating a family. I knew the choice of an open, transracial adoption of a newborn black child by a single, gay, white dad would involve daily, and lifelong, learning. Since I wasn't making choices about just my own life, my concerns provided plenty of fodder for sleepless nights. My hope was, and still is, that we'd find a way through the challenges, becoming wiser and, perhaps, even closer. I plunged into parenthood, fully embracing the steep learning curve ahead, but still unprepared.

As a white person traveling solo, I can go about my business mostly unnoticed and uninterrupted. With my son along, a lot changes. I begin to imagine him, as a black youth or grown man, traveling these same places on his own. He's sure to encounter a whole different set of reactions from pedestrians, shopkeepers, teachers, prospective employers, landlords, or police officers. These seemingly mundane interactions will be connected to a web of cultural stereotypes, media images, biased institutions, and unfair laws.

The way he'll need to respond will be different from the way I choose to respond. And we have to stay in sync when we're together. My white skin gets me over in ways his dark skin will not. I'm given the benefit of the doubt that I'm a normal upright citizen doing the right thing. I carry my racial privilege in all routine matters, regardless of how anti-racist or racist I may be. My son won't be given such a pass, and he'll need to be prepared.
As my son nears seven years of age, our public interactions are changing. On our last airline trip, a security agent, upon noticing our racial difference, looked my son directly in the eye while pointing at me, and asked him, "Who is this man?" Fortunately, my son didn't make a joke, as he's quite capable of doing. I realized I hadn't prepared him for airport scrutiny, where he could easily be racially profiled.

Last year, as a kindergartner at the local public school, when my son took another child's show-and-tell toy and hid it in his locker, he was sent to the principal's office with a formal disciplinary referral for stealing. It landed him an in-school detention and a call home from the principal. I never imagined I'd have to discuss with school personnel the absurdity of applying zero-tolerance policies to five-year-olds.
As members of a "conspicuous family," we know that race will always be a part of our daily lives. But being conscious about racism shouldn't be limited to families of color or mixed-race families, just as being unconscious about racism shouldn't be a luxury for so many white families.

---

## FACING, AND CHANGING, REALITY

By all key indicators -- economics, health, education, and more -- the average white family fares better than the average family of color because of past and continuing bias. Yet we downplay the disparities and dally with the delusion of a color-blind and post-race society. Racism won't disappear because of wishful thinking or blind magic. Replicating this denial in our homes and families only perpetuates the inequities.
Instead of color-blind parenting, trying to protect our kids from racism by pretending it doesn't exist, we need to embrace racially conscientious parenting, preparing our children and ourselves to deal with reality, so we can change it. It means choosing to become, consciously and actively, part of the solution instead of, unconsciously and passively, part of the problem. Parents have a particularly influential role to play in shaping the awareness and abilities of our children, and in breaking down the barriers and bias of our

neighborhood institutions, from schools and businesses to government agencies and social services.

Racially conscientious parenting involves awareness and action, commitment and courage, patience and persistence. These are all transferable traits we hone in other aspects of parenting. Racism insidiously replicates itself, but, as parents, we are well-positioned to be on the front line of change. If we keep our eyes on the prize -- racial equity for all -- we can start at home, then work outward in our communities to build real and lasting change. Teaching, by example, how to create a more just world is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children.

Terry Keleher is the Program Director of the Applied Research Center's Racial Justice Leadership Action Network. These articles were originally published on Colorlines.com. Source.

## Racially Conscientious Parenting

1. Acknowledge and discuss the reality of racism. I began talking with my son about race at an early age. We've discussed how sometimes people don't get treated fairly because of their skin color, and how they've had to stand up for their rights. I've explained that I'm called "white," even though my skin is tan, and he'll often be called "black," though his skin is brown. We talk about relevant current events. These conversations are as natural as talking about the changing weather. I'm helping him understand his reality, so that he's equipped to deal with it. And I want him to know that it's OK to talk about race.
Addressing racism involves seeing and listening carefully, and speaking up when something's wrong. Don't be color-blind or "race mute," for avoidance is unhelpful and silence is complicity. We must illuminate racism in order to eliminate it. As adults, we can initiate ongoing and age-appropriate discussions about race. We can learn through practice how to lead and demonstrate constructive, validating, and enlightening conversations.

It's helpful to connect with allies with whom you can talk about race issues. Look around to see if there's such a local organization, or find an online community. Don't be afraid to start a local group, if needed, by pulling together interested acquaintances who are willing to meet regularly. My son and I have found a genuine community of people engaged in racially conscientious parenting through a summer camp run by Pact, an organization that provides services to families with adopted children of color.

2. Understand and challenge institutional racism. Racism is not simply personal prejudice, but rather, a system of institutional inequality. It's not enough to try and change individuals. We also have to change institutions that have biased practices and unfair policies. Schools are a great place to start challenging institutional racism, since most families have direct experience with them. When parents at my son's racially diverse school learned of a proposed policy change that would make it easier for the district's wealthier, and whiter, schools to obtain more computer equipment, we started a petition and presented it to the school board. We know that the "racial achievement gap" is often a reflection of a "resource gap," where unequal inputs yield unequal outcomes.
If the advanced placement classes are filled with mostly white students, if the curriculum is perpetuating stereotypes, if there aren't many teachers of color, you can do something about it. Ask questions, talk with students about their experiences, request public documents, organize parents, talk to elected officials, notify the media, and take action. If you're white, you don't have to wait for people of color to complain first. You can be change agents and agitators by speaking out when something's wrong, as well as allies to people of color.

Love Isn't Enough is a helpful blog for gaining a deeper understanding of "raising a family in a colorstruck world," featuring commentaries on parenting and race. As its name suggests, it takes more than love to create a family that is prepared to address racial inequality.

3. Skip the name-calling and offer solutions. Reacting to racism is necessary, but not sufficient, to bring about change. Instead of dwelling on "Who's a racist," ask, "What's causing the racial inequality?" and "What can be done to make things fair?" These questions take you from a reactive to a proactive framework. They also shift the focus from individuals and their intentions, to institutions and their impacts.
In Chicago, near where we live, parents and students in some schools with highly biased and punitive disciplinary practices have introduced restorative justice programs. Some schools have implemented new curricula to accurately teach racial histories and cultures. The possibilities are endless. Perhaps your public library needs more computers for those who don't have them at home; maybe your local hospital could divert some of its profits to health care for low-income families. Positive models already exist. It just takes proactive thinking and persistent action.

The Internet has made it easier to find organizations and campaigns that engage different communities in efforts to advance racial justice. Colorofchange.org features a variety of campaigns and actions that specifically affect black Americans, while helping "to bring about positive political and social change for everyone." Similarly, Presente.org focuses on the political empowerment of Latinos and allies by organizing people online and through grassroots networks. SURJ: Showing Up for Racial Justice is a national network of anti-racist white individuals and organizations engaged in collective learning and action.

4. Learn by taking action. Most racism is not perpetrated with intent or malice; it's perpetuated through silence and inaction. Only when we move from words to action will real learning and change begin. You'll gain clarity and confidence as you take action, risks, and leadership. You'll expand your insights, skills, connections, and support. The path forward may not always be clear and direct, but moving from where we're stuck to a place of new possibilities is well worth the journey.

## Have you completed a transracial adoption?

If you have completed a transracial adoption, and have suggestions for other families who are seeking to adopt a child of another race, I would love to hear them! Send your stories, struggles, epiphanies and advice to nora.sharp@afamilyforeverychild.org