

## RACE AND IDENTITY IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION: Suggestions for Adoptive Parents

By Nicole M. Callahan<sup>†</sup>

### Introduction

Transracial adoption, once rare in this country, has grown significantly since the 1950s, primarily due to the rise of intercountry adoption. Intercountry adoption peaked in 2004, when more than 22,000 foreign-born children – the majority of them nonwhite – were adopted by American families. Despite a recent and continued decline in the number of intercountry adoptions, this trend, together with transracial domestic infant and foster care adoptions, accounts for the large and growing number of American families that are multiracial by adoption.

Transracial and transcultural adoption, now commonplace in America, raises a set of complex and sometimes controversial issues in adoption practice and policy. While the federal Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA) makes it illegal to prevent an adoption based solely on the race of the child or adoptive parents, transracial adoption has its detractors as well as supporters, and a number of people question whether it is in the best interests of children of

color to allow them to be adopted by white parents.

NCFA affirms transracial adoption as a means of providing children with what they need and deserve above all else: a loving family of their own. No matter what type of adoption is being considered – domestic infant, intercountry, or adoption from foster care – each adoption case should be evaluated based on what is in the best interest of the individual child in question. For many children who have been orphaned or abandoned, or removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect, transracial adoption may represent their only chance at securing a safe, loving, and permanent family of their own. A longtime and principled advocate for intercountry, foster care, and domestic infant adoption reform, NCFA believes that there is no “one size fits all” solution to the plight of the staggering numbers of children worldwide who lack families of their own. It is the position of NCFA that intercountry and transracial adoption should remain a part of a holistic, complete, and well-rounded child wel-

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fare policy – one that must also include services to help keep struggling families intact whenever possible, as well as the development of domestic adoption programs within those countries that have large numbers of orphaned or abandoned children – in order to help as many children as possible find the love and permanency they deserve in a timely manner.

This issue of the *Adoption Advocate* is by no means intended to serve as a complete or exhaustive resource for families that are considering or planning a transracial adoption; the issues surrounding transracial adoption are many and complex, and as such can always warrant further exploration. With this article, NCFA hopes to contribute to the broader, ongoing discussion of issues in transracial adoption, and offer a few suggestions for prospective adoptive families as well as those already parenting transracially adopted children.

## Exploring issues of race and adoption

“Growing up as an Asian American adoptee was often like stumbling through a maze blindfolded,” says Marijane. “When my parents adopted me, I was automatically [initiated] into a white society, shut off from my birth culture. My parents did not know how that would impact me growing up.”

Some white prospective adoptive parents might question their ability to parent children of color, while others may underestimate or prematurely dismiss potential issues and challenges. Most adoption professionals and child welfare experts agree that parents should not adopt across racial lines unless they are prepared to – at minimum – help their child learn about her racial identity and cultural heritage, help her find and encourage quality relationships with individuals who share her heritage, acknowledge the continued existence of racial prejudice and help her learn to confront and cope with it, and assist her in developing a positive, mature, and healthy self-image (which

will, by necessity, include her racial and cultural identity). None of this is possible without entering into *a realistic and ongoing discussion of race*, both the child’s and that of others, and dealing with any questions and issues that arise in a thoughtful and age-appropriate way.

Yet talking about race in America can prove difficult for people of *all* races – for people of color who lack safe, nonjudgmental spaces to share their experiences honestly and without fear of prejudice or misunderstanding; and for white people who may sometimes feel attacked when others discuss the continued existence of ignorance, racism, and white privilege in our country. Many white Americans, including some prospective adoptive parents, shy away from frank and open discussions about race; some even claim that such discussions are unnecessary. It is easy to understand their apprehension. Some may be afraid of giving offense, or worried that even mentioning someone’s race might provoke anger or suspicion. They may be of the opinion that America has overcome its long history of racial prejudice, and that only the most blatant, intentional, and obviously offensive instances of racism are worthy of the name. They may believe that good people with good intentions cannot harbor racist thoughts or prejudices. Or they may simply hope that, by ignoring race entirely and taking a so-called “colorblind” approach, they can keep prejudice and racism from harming their children and their families.

However, prospective adoptive parents who are considering a transracial adoption cannot afford to ignore the issue of race or explore it only superficially. When it comes to adoption, and in particular transracial and transcultural adoption, *love and good intentions are not enough*. Parents must be their child’s first and strongest allies when facing every difficulty or challenge that may arise – including those resulting from prejudice, racial stereotypes, and the still fraught state of race relations in our society. Adoptive parents must also be pre-



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pared to educate others and advocate for their children even within their own families and networks of friends.

“For white parents, it’s essential to become comfortable thinking and talking about race,” says Dr. Betsy Vonk, PhD, a professor and director of the MSW program at the University of Georgia, and the adoptive mother of two daughters from China. “You have to start while the kids are young – that way, both the parents and children will have a chance to get used to thinking and talking about race before the teasing and the really tough discussions begin.”

Dr. Vonk suggests that white parents listen to and talk with trusted friends who are also parents of color: “One of the things that I did, personally, was to talk to people of color I knew who were also parents, and share with them, honestly, my own worries and insecurities in parenting children of color. Later, when situations arose with my kids, if I had even a slight suspicion that there had been something racially motivated behind a comment or question they received, I would talk to one of my friends and ask for their help and advice as I tried to sort it out and respond and talk with my children.”

Staci, a mother of three biological children as well as one adopted Ethiopian-born son, recalls feeling blindsided when a visitor to their home remarked on the fact that her son, unlike his siblings, had “darker skin”: “Until that moment, my sweet four-year-old [daughter] had never noticed that she and her brother were different. And now it was done. I came to the conclusion that I will never let another human teach my children things I want to have first dibs on, if I can help it. Later, sure, I don’t want to be the Be All and End All of my children’s worldviews. But on sensitive, important

topics like where babies come from, the fact that our family looks different, racism...I decided I want to lay the groundwork for these vital dialogues with my kids, not do damage control after someone brings up the topic for me, possibly in ways I don’t like. This means starting earlier than I ever intended. So we talk about color a lot more. We notice it... We bring it up. We buy and check out books that help facilitate our conversations.”

While she knows that educating her children about race is important, Staci admits it can also be exceedingly difficult for her. Yet, as she points out, she is unwilling to allow any of her children, particularly her adopted son, to be shocked and unprepared when confronted with these issues outside the safe confines of their family. “[My children] can no longer believe in a world

where it doesn’t matter what you look like. Because in our family that might be true, but it’s not true everywhere,” says Staci. “I feel I’ve done the right thing. I hope it will make them stronger. I hope it will set the stage for more talks.”

## **Suggestions for Prospective Adoptive Parents and Families**

***Evaluate your neighborhood, your community, and your activities based on the needs of a multiracial family.***

The moment you adopt across racial lines, your family is a multiracial, multicultural one. And when it comes to transracial adoption and multiracial family life, unfortunately, not all communities in America are created equal. Thanks to both adoption and interracial unions, the number of multiracial families in America is growing exponentially, but there are plenty of

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communities and towns in which such families are still few and far between.

Before adopting a child of color, take a close look at your town, your current neighborhood, your school options, your social activities, your religious community, etc. Try and view all of these through the eyes of a nonwhite child. This proves difficult for some prospective adoptive parents; for many members of the majority, “diversity” within their communities may be viewed as something “nice” or even desirable, but not necessarily very important. White people living in the U.S. who reside in mostly white neighborhoods, work and/or socialize almost exclusively with other white people, send their children to predominantly white schools, and live in mostly white communities, may never have had cause to examine or question the lack of racial or cultural diversity among the people with whom they regularly associate. They may well be comfortable with the status quo, and that is understandable. But when white parents intend to adopt a child of color, it is their responsibility to look at their communities, organizations, activities, and even their primary social relationships through the eyes of that child.

How comfortable will your child feel as a member of a minority group in your area? Would your child be the only person of color in her school? At your church? On your street? Would she regularly see many faces that looked at all like hers? Can these places and people help provide her with an environment in which she could be comfortable, easily find friends, feel confident and thrive?

If not, it is a problem. Not necessarily an insurmountable one, but one requiring some changes – including some that may seem radical at first. You may feel strongly called to adopt across racial lines, but if you primarily live and move and socialize in a community in which your adopted child would be one of only a

handful of minorities – perhaps the only one from a particular group – then transracial adoption may require you to make some changes first.

In her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (Perseus Books, 1997), Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, PhD asserts that white adoptive parents must be prepared to “confront racism and stretch their own cultural boundaries” in order to help their transracially adopted children “emerge into adulthood with a positive sense of their identities intact.” For adoptive families, this may mean moving to a new area, sending their child to a different school, or seeking out a religious community or other organization in which white people are not necessarily the majority group. Yet, as Dr. Tatum points out, many transracial adoptees will, from a young

age, spend their whole lives as members of a racial or ethnic minority in this country. Their parents should not allow their own fears about temporarily being in the minority themselves keep their children from moving within environments and coming into contact with individuals who could prove to be sources of great comfort, knowledge, and understanding.

“I remember when we first started researching adoption, we read someone’s opinion that white folks shouldn’t adopt unless they live in a diverse area, or should consider moving to a more diverse area,” says Staci. “At the time, I thought that was a forceful or strong attitude. But now, living as a multiracial family, I notice when my boy is the only black child somewhere, and I get uncomfortable with and for him. We breathe easier in more diverse towns and places and hanging out with friends of color. We didn’t know how strongly we would feel about that.”

Moving to a different neighborhood or town, changing schools or churches, or finding

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a new community may seem like difficult – even drastic – actions for adoptive parents to take, allows Chuck Johnson, president and CEO of the National Council For Adoption and a former adoption agency director. But, as he points out, “Parents move for all sorts of reasons – to get their children into a certain school district, or on a particular sports team, or for a variety of vanity reasons – and they may sacrifice certain things in order to do so; accept a higher cost of living or a longer commute to work. If parents are willing to take such steps for the sake of their children’s extracurricular activities, how much more important is the identity and self-worth of their adopted children?”

***Help your child learn about her culture and background and, if possible, visit her country of origin.***

More than one adoptive parent has told me, “My child has never expressed any interest in his ethnicity/language/culture, so we don’t really discuss it. It’s just not an issue for us.” These parents, however, made these claims when their children were still quite young – some of them not even school-aged – at other words, at an age when any level of interest (or confusion) might prove difficult for children to express, even to their parents.

It is not uncommon for transracial adoptees to notice from a young age that they are different from their family members and friends. They may feel as though talking about and drawing attention to these differences will serve to widen the gap between their experiences and those of their parents. It is also natural for a transracial adoptee’s interest in his or her country and culture of origin to wax and wane throughout childhood and adolescence and into adulthood. Certainly, not every transracially adopted person will possess the same level of interest in their background and heritage; in some it may always be present, while in others it may appear slowly and, if not encouraged, recede.

It is important for parents to make it clear that they support and want to be a part of their

child’s cultural exploration. The child may also be more interested if his family lives in a diverse community where he can see that his culture is represented, and if his family also fosters relationships with individuals who share that culture. Otherwise, the isolation felt by many transracial adoptees, the sense of being different from family and friends, could overwhelm the natural interest and curiosity they might feel. Many transracial adoptees that live in primarily white communities spend their childhood and adolescence simply wanting to “blend in,” and these feelings are not very conducive to meaningful exploration of their cultures and countries of origin.

“[My parents] did not talk about my birth heritage nor encourage me to investigate, but rather minimized my ethnicity due to this lack of awareness,” says transracial adoptee Marijane. “For many years, I downplayed it and tried to fit into the ‘whiteness’ all around me, never quite feeling like I was good enough, or that I fit into the social norm.”

A great deal can depend on whether the adopted child perceives that her parents are open to and comfortable with her curiosity and exploration. Children, especially young children, will naturally take their lead from their parents. If they sense that their parents do not wish to draw attention to or discuss their racial identity, their cultural heritage, or their country of origin, they may shy away from raising these issues themselves – or else wait until they are able to explore them without their parents’ participation or encouragement. This is why many transracial adoptees report never learning about their heritage until adulthood – meaning that they lost years of opportunity, years during which they had a decreased understanding of who they were and where they came from.

For the sake of adopted children’s curiosity, development, and personal wellbeing, it is up to the adoptive parents to take an early lead in discussing these issues with their children in age-appropriate ways – not to make them feel “different,” but to let them know that their fam-



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ily and their home are safe places in which questions and concerns about race, culture, and the child's personal history can always be raised. Adopted individuals should not have to wait until adulthood to learn about where they came from; they should be given the opportunity and encouraged throughout their lives to know and understand this part of themselves.

If you adopt across racial or cultural lines, it is not enough to celebrate certain holidays, display art, or eat food from your child's culture or country of origin. These gestures can be a start, but they should be practiced alongside a deeper and more meaningful exploration of your child's heritage. Stories can also be read, music learned, history studied, and other connections, traditions, and interests encouraged. It is always worthwhile to consider enrolling the entire family in a language class; apart from the many benefits of being multilingual in our multicultural society, your child will possess a real and hopefully lasting link to his culture and others who share it – one you can also learn and share with him. Helping him explore and understand his country and culture of origin will prove an important part of helping him to develop a whole, positive self-image that includes his racial and cultural identity. Involving the entire family in a language class benefits everyone, and guards against the possibility of the adopted child being made to feel too "different" if he is the only one enrolled.

A good question for a family raising a transracially adopted child is: *If my child ever wanted to move back into his born culture – whether that means living in his country of origin, or seeking out a community or having closer contact with people who share his ethnic or cultural heritage – would he be able to feel at home there?* This is a tall order and will not be possi-

ble in all cases, but it is still a worthwhile goal, and one that will help keep parents focused on encouraging and cultivating the entire family's exploration of their adopted child's racial and cultural identity.

"Those who plan to adopt a child or children from another country *must* help their child develop an appropriate sense of cultural and racial identity, which further increases their chances of developing a strong sense of self," says Marijane. "It is the adoptive parents' responsibility to ensure that their child is given opportunities to learn about his or her birth culture beginning at an early age. Otherwise, an injustice is imposed on the children of transracial adoption, whether they are aware of it or not."

***Enable your child to establish genuine, fulfilling relationships with individuals who share his racial, ethnic, or cultural background – and individuals from many other backgrounds as well.***

It is not enough to live in a diverse area or even send your children to a diverse school if your family has no significant relationships with people of color. Having a multiracial family by no means guarantees that all of your family members or friends will be sensitive to or even understand the work people of color – including transracially adopted children – must do to adjust to and move within a society that is still, in many ways, deeply prejudiced. Furthermore, adopted children cannot learn about or come to appreciate the experiences of people of other races, as well as people of their own race, if they never come into contact with them.

In one conversation I had with a fellow transracial adoptee, a ten-year-old girl adopted from Korea, she told me that she didn't think

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she was “a real Asian” because “real Asians are smart and good at math.” It was clear that she was repeating a generalization she had often heard before about Asian people. Why, I wondered, would this girl – who was certainly a “real” Korean – give any credence at all to such an obvious stereotype?

I asked her if she knew or was friends with any Asian Americans. She said no; she just saw a few, occasionally, in passing. Her family had three adopted children, all from different countries, but “all my parents’ friends are white,” she explained. “All my friends at school and at church are white, too.” She was a Korean American who had never had the opportunity to meet or get to know other Korean or Asian Americans, and as such found it a matter of course to believe a common stereotype about them. After all, she had no one – and no personal experience of her own – to disprove it.

Her situation is far from unique. The mother of an African American child adopted via domestic infant adoption reported that her biracial daughter, now seven years old, asks of every black woman she sees, “Is that my birthmom?” Her family lives in an area where there are few people of color, and African Americans are especially underrepresented. Her daughter, who was adopted at the age of two months, has grown up with so little contact with African Americans that she views each and every one she notices as a possible relative or connection.

Of course ignorance of the challenges, experiences, and lives of people of color can harm white children as well; it can cause them to embrace stereotypes, fear differences, or perpetuate inherited, ingrained prejudices simply because they never had the opportunity to know better. But such ignorance can be especially harmful to adopted children of color, who must then work out their own racial identities without recourse to family members, friends, or trusted mentors who share it.

It is especially important to provide transracially adopted children with the opportunity to cultivate relationships with individuals who

share their racial and cultural background – to help them understand and appreciate their origins and history, to give them more allies, and to provide them with greater support as they navigate a racially diverse, but still prejudiced society.

***Learn about racism, prejudice, and white privilege, and work hard to be a strong and proactive ally to your child.***

“I’m grateful that I was adopted. But I strongly believe that those who intend to adopt children from abroad must be made aware of the unique challenges that surround raising a child of color,” says Marijane. “Parents must consider the challenges that will confront their child regarding ethnicity and race, and considerations should be made regarding how to impart coping skills and facilitate open discussions with their child to address issues such as racism and prejudice.”

For many adoptive parents, who feel secure in their adoption plans, sure of their good intentions, and admirably prepared to love their adopted children unconditionally, the notion that an adopted child’s race could matter to anyone else – and matter profoundly at that – is not always easy to accept. “It doesn’t make a difference to *us*,” they may think, “so why should it matter to others?”

Of course an adopted child’s race or ethnicity should have no bearing on how much his parents love him. But his race will, at some point in his life, almost certainly matter a great deal to *him*, and will affect how he is viewed by some people and what sorts of experiences he may be subject to throughout his life. A “colorblind” approach, one that ignores race entirely, does not serve adopted children well. What many white people mean by “colorblindness” is actually a myth: the belief that race is or at least should be irrelevant to a person’s understanding of herself, as well as her experiences throughout life. This is an unrealistic view, and it is also a luxury that cannot be afforded by people of color living in this country.



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An adoptive parent who claims that his or her child's race and ethnicity is of little or no importance ultimately fails to recognize, accept, and know a crucial part of that child's identity – and thus fails to love and celebrate the whole and unique person their child is. There is the very real risk that the adopted child will feel that her adoptive parents are rejecting a part of her. Finally, insisting that a child's race "doesn't really matter" often means ignoring – and thus failing to prepare him for – the very real challenges he could face as a member of a racial and/or ethnic minority in the United States.

"Transracial adoptees have to deal with two potential types of teasing – taunts about adoption, based on a lack of understanding about it, and comments that are racially motivated," says Dr. Betsy Vonk, who for the past five years has facilitated a play therapy group for transracially adopted children between the ages of 9 and 13 to help them explore issues of identity, grief, and loss. "We always talk about racially based teasing and experiences with racism. In the many groups I've facilitated, I've never had a single transracial adoptee that didn't have *at least* one experience of racially based teasing to share."

Our country has not and may never overcome its long and painful history of systemic racism and cultural prejudice. Schoolyard taunts may be just the beginning. For adopted children whose families fail to recognize and legitimize their circumstances as members of a minority in America, experiences of prejudice could prove a greater, more isolating, and more unpleasant shock than they might have been otherwise had their parents had helped them to learn about, cope with, and confront racism and prejudice from early childhood.

"I was constantly teased on the playground, on the school bus, in my neighborhood

for looking different from all my white classmates," recalls one transracial adoptee. "I went home and told my parents, and they told me they were sorry my feelings had been hurt, but it really wasn't any different from being teased for wearing glasses or any other reason. But this felt different to me. I could always take my glasses off – but I couldn't do anything about the way I looked, and I *was* ashamed of that. After my parents acted like it was no big deal, though, I just stopped telling them when the racial teasing happened. I felt so humiliated by it, and meanwhile they didn't even seem to understand what it was about."

Adoptive parents must learn to be on guard for possible issues that may arise, particularly once their children start attending school. This may require learning a whole new way of thinking about and reacting to hurtful or inappropriate racial statements – as well as learning to recognize them in the first place. "One thing especially stood out to me during one of

the transracial adoption classes we took. A white adoptive mother talked about *learning* to be angry and offended when anything disparaging was said about her adopted children," recalls David, the adoptive father of a two-year-old African American son. "In that moment I realized that, as a white man, I would need to *learn* how to take personal offense at certain words and behaviors. According to this parent, there is never a time when it is appropriate to minimize or explain away racism in any form. This remains a bit intimidating to me, but this kind of personal, parental identification has come to be very important to me."

Parents need to educate themselves so that they are in a better position to combat stereotypes and other dehumanizing effects of ignorance and racism. "Adoptive parents should develop a number of different ways of

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approaching those kinds of questions or comments, so they can talk to their children and teach them how to respond,” says Dr. Vonk. “Parents need to talk to their children about racially based teasing starting at an early age – before the teasing actually occurs – so the child doesn’t internalize the injury. Parents have to make sure their child learns *this is not about me personally; this is someone else’s problem*. Of course it’s going to be difficult for a child not to take racially based teasing personally. But they need to be able to tell themselves: *There is nothing wrong with me or how I look. Rather, there is something wrong with this person and how they think*.”

In her workshops with adoptees, Dr. Vonk often uses Marilyn Schoettle’s *W.I.S.E. Up! Powerbook*. “By teaching the W.I.S.E. Up! model, we try to give children at least four possible ways to respond to intrusive questions or comments that make them uncomfortable. The first choice, the ‘W,’ is to ‘Walk away’; simply leave that uncomfortable situation. The second choice, ‘It’s private,’ lets them tell the other person that this is none of their business. The third choice, ‘Share something,’ gives them the option to share a more personal response – only if they are comfortable doing so. The fourth choice, ‘Educate,’ is an opportunity to educate the other person about adoption in general, perhaps transracial adoption specifically. We practice role play in our groups so the kids learn that there are different times and places for different sorts of responses, and they have the power to choose what their response will be based on what feels right to them. They understand that they cannot control what questions or comments they receive, but they can control how they choose to respond.”

Know how you will respond and talk to your child when he witnesses or experiences firsthand the pain caused by ignorance or racism. He should know that he has a right to feel hurt or intruded upon, and that you are hurt and angry for him; but at the same time, it is your job as his parent to find a way to move

beyond your *own* fear, anger, and sense of injustice in order to allow your child the freedom to share with you those exact same feelings on his part. Do all you can to facilitate *his* healing, because his feelings and his pain are the priority. Remember that it is your job as the parent to support your child, and he may not feel as comfortable sharing with you if your reaction puts the focus on your anger and your feelings rather than on his.

You may also have to work to educate others who come into contact with your children, including family members, friends, educators, and other parents. At the same time, recognize that it will be impossible for you to prevent your children from ever being hurt by the prejudice or ignorance of others. Experiences of racism, both subtle and overt, are nearly universal among people of color living in the United States. Try to read as much as possible about prejudice and racism before you adopt a child of color, so that you are prepared for the issues that will arise. Keep these books and other sources on hand, and continue to search for and ask for recommendations for other books or videos for children, to facilitate future discussions within your family.

Learning about and being aware of the continued existence of racism and its ability to harm your adopted child does not mean being paranoid, taking offense preemptively, burdening your child with your own anger or defensiveness on his behalf, or verbally attacking others and stooping to their level if offense is given or feelings hurt. Above all, being a real ally to your transracially adopted child means listening to her and creating a safe space for her to share all of her thoughts and feelings. When it comes to addressing and confronting ignorance and racism, being a parent as well as an ally means making it clear that you are always willing to answer your child’s questions, always available to talk about even the most difficult or hurtful experiences, and always there to advocate for her, assist in her healing, or simply share her pain in any way you are able.



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“I once read that not preparing our children for racism because it might make them oversensitive or [because] it might not happen at all is like sending them into a football game without a helmet,” says Staci. “Sure, they might not get hit. They might not need it. And just maybe knowing they need padding and a helmet might initially result in fear of the hits. But this is life. They are going to be in the game whether they like it or not. ... It’s not about creating an attitude of *I am a victim*. Or *people are jerks when they say insensitive stuff*. It’s about preparing [our children] to deal with it.”

## Conclusion

Given its potential and unique challenges, it is understandable that some parents may feel daunted by or ill equipped to pursue a transracial adoption. Just like adoption itself, it is not for every parent or every family. But while transracial adoption does raise a set of issues not found in same-race adoptions, it can bring its own joys and rewards as well. Through

transracial adoption, many children find loving families of their own, and their parents, extended family members, and friends have the opportunity to witness, learn about, and better understand the history and experiences of people of color.

Parents of transracially adopted children must work diligently to practice *empathy* – to make it their business to know about the experiences of their children as young people of color, foster the positive development of their self-image and identity, and share in their hurts and triumphs, joys and sufferings. It is very possible for open and thoughtful parents to create healthy, happy, well-adjusted, culturally rich, and emotionally whole multiracial families through transracial adoption. Like any other type of adoption, a successful and mutually fulfilling transracial adoption requires a great deal of time, trial, and effort on the part of families, but the benefits – for both children and parents – make the challenges more than worthwhile.

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