



ADOPTION EDUCATION, LLC

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

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TO ACCESS THE QUIZ FOR TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION:

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TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

In adopting a child, we may seek certain characteristics, but humans are complex creatures. We cannot select a child's characteristics based on his or her ethnic background. Every child has her own unique characteristics that need to be valued and cultivated. Children will be who they will be, a fact of life that is as true when adopting as when you have a biological child.

A child's race or ethnic background does not predict the child's characteristics, but it may well predict the reactions of others. That is why the first question that comes to mind when you consider adopting a child outside your racial background (a transracial adoption) is often, "What will my family think?" Perhaps you do need to consider the responses of family and friends, especially if you think your family would have difficulty accepting such a child. Often the lack of acceptance, however, has more to do with what your mother's Aunt Edna may think rather than what your immediate family will think. Sometimes people use nonacceptance by family as a way to cover up the fact that they would find it difficult to raise a child who does not look like them or who belongs to a certain race or ethnic group.

If you are truly comfortable with a transracial or international adoption, expecting acceptance from every last relative, including those you see once a year, is unrealistic. If you are concerned that closer family and friends may have difficulty, you may want to discuss some of their concerns with them and let them know that you want to consider their feelings. Your parents may have to go through the stages of grief related to the loss of having biological grandchildren, and from there they may need to come to terms with having grandchildren who do not look like them. It may have taken you months or years to process the decision to adopt transracially; expect your family members to need some time to process their feelings as well.

Remember, grandparents and other close relatives who say they cannot accept a baby of a certain racial or ethnic background will probably be enthralled with him once he arrives. If they can't accept the child, you may ask yourself, in the words of one adoption attorney, "Do you really want to be around someone who cannot accept a sweet innocent baby because of the color of her skin?"

WHAT TO CONSIDER

If you are Caucasian, for example, and are considering adopting an African-American, biracial, or international child who will look very different from you, here are some questions you may need to ask yourself:

1. How do I feel about raising a child and providing him with a sense of his heritage?
2. How would I handle the comments from others about how my child looks different from me?
3. How would I feel about my child marrying someone of the same racial or ethnic background and having grandchildren of that heritage?
4. How would I feel about my child marrying someone of a different race?
5. Do I have friends or relatives outside of my race or culture?
6. How will I feel if people tell me how lucky my child is to be adopted by an American family?
7. Will my expectations for the child be based on his race or culture?
8. Do I feel differently about adopting a black or Asian girl versus a black or Asian boy?

If you did not answer the questions "correctly," relax. These questions are not designed to trap you; they are there to help you explore your feelings and what biases you may need to overcome.

Some of our biases are sexist as well as racial. For example, there is such a disproportionate number of couples who want to adopt Korean girls that at least one agency will not allow couples to request a girl unless they already have a son. Why the desire for a girl and not a boy? Perhaps it is because we perceive Asian girls and women, who generally are petite, as fitting into our American stereotype of what is feminine, or maybe it is because we have difficulty thinking about

having sons—who are supposed to pass on the family name and traits—but who do not look like us.

Even if you have worked through any sexist or racial biases you may have, you may believe that because you live in an all-white neighborhood and did not sign up to lead the diversity weekend retreat at work that no agency is going to accept you for a transracial adoption. One Caucasian couple said they considered adopting a biracial or black child but decided against it after an agency sent them a list of questions regarding the racial makeup of their neighborhood, friends, church, employers, and so on. You should not be intimidated by such questionnaires. If you are open-minded, you can change your lifestyle so that an international child of another race or a black child can feel comfortable with your family and friends while retaining a sense of his heritage and culture.

BROADENING YOUR OPTIONS

Just as people dream of the ideal biological child, you may dream about the ideal adopted child. At first this fantasy may be to adopt a child who looks like you and your spouse. Expecting a child to look like you, however, even if you were to find biological parents who resembled you, is unrealistic. Even to expect biological children to look like you is unrealistic. Accept the likelihood that a child will probably not look like you—although we've seen lots of children who look like their adoptive parents, even those of a different race or ethnic background. Once you arrive at this realization, you may find yourself expanding your ideas about what kind of a child you would be able to accept.

This is not to say that someone who is uncomfortable with adopting a child from outside his or her race is nonaccepting. There are many things to consider when adopting a child, including the child's age, health background, and prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol. Sometimes, looking at what you can accept emotionally culturally, and financially allows you to move beyond preconceived ideas about what your child will be like and challenges you to consider adopting a child who does not fit into your original, often unrealistic, fantasy.

Regardless of background, every child needs to be loved and accepted for his unique qualities. We do not adopt children to make a social statement, out of pity, or because we feel some kind of social guilt. We adopt because we want children and because children need a loving and supportive home. The positive environment you provide may not compensate for every challenge your child may face, whether she is biological or adopted, but we know that, regardless of their backgrounds, children do better in stable, loving homes.

WHAT IS TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION?

Transracial adoption is adopting any child outside of your racial background. Many international adoptions are transracial adoptions because most of the world's children who are available for adoption are from China. Indeed, most transracial adoptions involving Asian children are international. Since only 15 percent of Asian births in this country take place out of wedlock, this chapter is primarily about Caucasian parents adopting biracial or African-American children born in the United States or Asian children born in another country. Many of the studies cited and issues discussed about white parents adopting black children could also apply to those adopting Asian and other international children. However, in the United States the experience of being an Asian raised by white parents can be very different from being black and having white parents. Historically, overall race relations between Asians and Caucasians have been more positive than those between blacks and whites. Asians and whites also tend not to segregate socially as much as whites and blacks. For example, Asians are less likely to live in racially distinct neighborhoods, except in very large cities.

Also, the adoptive couple's extended family members may initially be more accepting of an Asian child than a black child. Perhaps this is because interracial marriages between Asians and

Caucasians have been historically more acceptable. In addition, many may feel that only African-Americans should adopt black children, a view regrettably shared by some social workers.

BIRACIAL CHILD PLACEMENT

For those who are Caucasian and are considering adopting a biracial child of white and black heritage, there are some considerations that need to be explored. According to Beth Hall of Pact, An Adoption Alliance, Inc., which places children of African, Asian, and Latino heritage, children are identified by the racial background that they most resemble. Most biracial children appear to be black and will therefore be identified by others as black. In our culture, which is very race conscious, to be identified as black is a very different experience from being identified as white.

Hall asks prospective adoptive parents to explore their reasons for wanting to adopt a biracial child, as opposed to one who is fully black. She says perhaps it is because a white couple has difficulty accepting the “blackness” of that child. If a family has difficulty with the “black” part of the child, that message is going to be sent to the child in some form.

Hall’s organization does not permit couples to select a birth mother who will deliver a biracial child instead of a black child. She believes that to accept a biracial child is to accept his black and white background equally, meaning that parents should feel comfortable adopting either racial background. Some biracial children, after all, look fully black. A white couple needs to be willing to accept the biracial child regardless of what she looks like.

When adopting a biracial child, some adoptive parents plan to wait until after the child is born to determine how dark she is before they proceed with the adoption. Such parents have clearly not accepted the child’s black heritage. Yes, some biracial children will look nearly entirely African-American. Biracial siblings with the same two biological parents can, like other siblings, look very different.

Hall is right that prospective adoptive parents need to think through why they want to adopt a biracial child and not a black child. However, it is not necessarily right to say that parents need to be willing to adopt a black child if they plan to adopt a biracial child. Parents have different reasons for wanting to adopt a biracial child. Biracial children are both black and white, and some white parents want the child to match part of their heritage. Other parents are attracted to the “distinct” look that can characterize a biracial child. What about couples who are multiracial themselves? They may want to adopt a child who shares both of their heritages. One African-American couple who describe themselves as being “light-skinned” said that they would prefer to adopt a biracial child so that the child would resemble them.

We believe that to say biracial children are black because they are perceived as black by society detracts from who the child is. Is a child more what he is perceived to be or what he identifies himself to be? Indeed, because biracial children are neither fully black nor fully white, some do have difficulty in how they identify themselves. Biracial children who do not try to be either black or white, but both, tend to have the strongest sense of identity.

THE ADOPTION PROCESS

When you adopt an African-American or biracial child, the same laws and methods apply as with any other adoption. The only difference is the time frame for finding a child—about three to six months. If you want to adopt an infant, it is best to contact several agencies and private attorneys who are permitted to do direct placements. If you have your heart set on a newborn baby, you should plan to wait three to six months, although most couples who are serious about adopting don’t wait that long. If you are an African-American or interracial couple, you may not wait long at all before the attorney or agency calls to tell you that a child is ready to be placed.

Private Adoption

If you live in a state where it is legal for an attorney to place a child directly with a couple, the first thing you may wish to do is find a reliable attorney and get yourselves on her waiting list. Some attorneys may waive or lower the retainer fee for placing your name and home study with their office if you are seeking to adopt a black or biracial child. Like many agencies, attorneys like to have couples on hand who are ready to adopt a black or biracial child because many attorneys have too few prospective adoptive parents to present to a birth mother.

What happens next, as with any independent adoption, is that a birth mother either contacts the attorney directly or calls the office after being referred by adoption clients. These are clients who have placed adoption ads and are seeking to adopt a white child. When a birth mother expecting a biracial child answers an ad, the clients refer her to the attorney's office to find another couple.

In our own experience, we have recently seen more African-American women place their babies for adoption. In the past, the pressure to rear the child or to have a family member rear the child is great, not only from her own family, but also from the birth father's family. Private adoption expenses are the same regardless of the child's racial background. Sometimes an attorney will reduce her fee when placing an African-American or biracial child, sometimes not. This is not always possible, especially if the adoption is a complicated one.

The cost of an adoption for a black child is a sensitive issue. The reality is that most families who are seeking to adopt an African-American infant expect a discount since there are fewer families seeking a black infant than those seeking a white infant. Many times, agencies and attorneys do reduce their fees to accommodate these parents so that the child can be placed. Recently an agency from another state said that they had an African-American infant available for adoption and that the fee was \$18,000, not including legal fees. We had no families who could afford to pay this much for an adoption. On the other hand, if the same agency had called and said they had a white infant available and the fee was \$18,000, there are couples who could and would pay the agency's fee.

Another sensitive area is the birth mother's living expenses. As more families are seeking to adopt biracial and African-American children, the birth mothers are also expecting and receiving reasonable living expenses from the adoptive parents. Although no attorney or agency would have a policy of not paying for a black birth mother's living expenses, the reality is that it may have been difficult to find a couple to pay these expenses since many of these families sought to have a lower cost adoption and would select a birth mother who did not need to receive assistance.

Also, in the past many African-American birth mothers and those expecting biracial babies made more "eleventh hour" decisions to place their children for adoption. Now, this is changing, and these birth mothers are making plans more in advance.

A few times per month a posting will be made of African-American or biracial children available for adoption on Listservs. (Two that you might try are at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/2adopt/> and at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Transracial_Adoption_or_Placement/.) Usually the fees for these adoptions are higher than if you are working with a local attorney.

Advertising

Most advertising is done by Caucasian parents looking to adopt Caucasian children. In fact, years ago a typical ad would read, "Couple looking for healthy white newborn." Most ads today are not so candid, and many couples get calls from birth mothers expecting African-American and biracial children. If you know of someone advertising who wants only a Caucasian child, let that person know you are interested in phone calls from other birth mothers.

Even if your attorney cannot legally serve as an intermediary, he can tell his clients who are advertising to call you if they receive a call from a birth mother expecting an African-American or biracial child. Joining a local adoption support group or a RESOLVE group can also help you hook up with couples who are advertising.

PRIVATE AGENCY ADOPTION

An agency adoption of an African-American or biracial child will be handled much the same way all other adoptions are handled. However, the agency policy may require you to attend classes so that you can understand some of the issues related to adopting transracially. Also, many agencies have different standards about matters such as age or length of marriage for those adopting transracially.

Private agencies want to place the babies born to birth mothers who come to them. They do not want to send a birth mother away and are usually more than willing to place transracially.

Most private agencies, like all attorneys, permit the birth mother to select the couple. One agency reports that most of their birth mothers expecting biracial children want to place the infant with an interracial couple. Many other birth mothers do not care about the parents' ethnic background. Sometimes a birth mother will specify that she wants to place the child only with an African-American or Caucasian couple. In these agency adoptions, the birth mother's wishes are respected. Sometimes it is difficult, however, to find the match that she desires since there is often not a large pool of prospective adoptive parents.

Some agencies have a different fee scale for those adopting African-American and biracial children, especially agencies of a religious affiliation that raise support. A private adoption agency without outside support will generally charge you its standard fee plus birth mother living expenses, though it may reduce the application fee to increase the pool of applicants.

There are not as many African-American and biracial newborns available as there are Caucasian newborns, but there are also far fewer couples seeking to adopt these newborns—although the number is growing very quickly. The best way to adopt quickly is to make as many contacts as possible. Join an adoption support group and let people who are in adoption circles know of your desire. It often happens that a couple is sought out suddenly to adopt a new baby, and you could be that couple.

PUBLIC AGENCY ADOPTION

Adopting through your social services department essentially means adopting children in the foster care system. If you are flexible and are willing to adopt a toddler age child or older, you can have a child fairly quickly. Although dealing with the bureaucracy can sometimes be very frustrating, the fees for the adoption service are minimal, and in some cases the state may provide monthly subsidies if the child is considered to have special needs. In some states, coming from a minority ethnic background is considered in itself to be a special need.

Although no social services department or agency that accepts federal funds can discriminate against you because of your ethnic background if you are seeking to adopt a biracial or black child, many of the public agencies have had policies against transracial adoptions in the past, and because of this, their staffs may make the process more difficult for you. You may be asked numerous questions about your neighborhood and your ability to provide the child with a sense of his culture, as well as the acceptance level by your friends and family. Although yours and other people's attitudes are important to explore, you do not want to be excluded just because you live in an all-white neighborhood. People's acceptance level has more to do with their attitudes than with where they live. Nor does every last relative have to favor your decision. If you live close to parents who will be involved in the child's life, you will certainly want your child to feel as loved and accepted as any other grandchild, and if this seems to be a serious issue, it makes sense to

think carefully before insisting on more flexibility than your family is ready for. But if their hesitation is a normal one of getting used to a new idea, this should not be a serious obstacle.

It is generally difficult to adopt a newborn child through social services, but get your name on their list just in case. This will mean attending a series of classes and having a home study conducted and approved by your social services department.

THE CONTROVERSY OVER TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Why was transracial adoption prohibited in the past? During the 1950s and 1960s, transracial adoption increased sharply as a result of the rise in the number of children in the social services system and the lack of minority homes in which to place minority children. In 1972, however, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) came out strongly against transracial adoption. Within a year, the number of transracial adoptions was cut in half to 1,569, and by 1975, the number was down to 800.

The NABSW policy was and still is that a black child needs to be raised by black parents in order to develop a positive racial identity and only black parents can help the child develop skills for coping in a racist society. This view, seconded by many others, has had an unintended side effect: children languishing in foster care because no family of like ethnic background can be found. Until recently, many state agencies simply would not place African-American or biracial children with Caucasian parents.

Waiting Children

Despite this, the NABSW continues to argue that placing black children in white homes is black cultural genocide. But does this really make sense? Are there really enough transracial adoptions to wipe out black culture? Even supposing there were, shouldn't the child's best interest prevail over a culture's interest? As Peter Hayes observes, "To compromise a child's welfare in the name of culture, especially when the cultural benefit is slight or nonexistent, is inimical to the purpose of child placement and violates the best-interests standard mandated by law."

Consider these statistics. African-Americans and people of color make up 12.3 percent and 17 percent of the total population, respectively; yet African-American children and children of color make up 34 percent and 47 percent of the children waiting for homes. According to research by Elizabeth Bartholet, nearly half of the children in the United States waiting for homes are children of color. In Massachusetts, for example, about 5 percent of the population is African-American; yet nearly half of the children in need of foster or adoptive homes are African-American. The number of children in foster care went from 276,000 in 1986 to more than 500,000 in 2000, and these statistics hit minority children the hardest.

Bartholet's research into the practices of adoption agencies responsible for placing African-American children shows that agencies do typically practice racial matching, leading to delays in permanent placement. The costs to the children are great—too great. Six months may be a short time in the life of a bureaucracy, but for a small child, it can have significant impact. Racial preferences can also mean that a two-year-old child can be torn from the foster parents who want to adopt him so that he can be placed with parents of the same ethnic background. There are many cases where foster parents have gone to court to contest such disruptions.

It is useful to remember that racial discrimination is against the law. Since the Multiethnic Placement Act, effective as of October 1995, ethnic background can be a consideration for placing a child with a family, but it cannot be the only consideration.

Some felt that allowing ethnic background to be a consideration slowed the process of placing African-American and biracial children into families; so this law has been further strengthened. As of January 1, 1997, a child's or adoptive parents' race or ethnicity cannot be a consideration if it delays the placement of that child. The new law is so strict that it appears that transracial

adoptions must take place. However, a child's cultural needs will still be considered as a factor in deciding what is in his or her best interest.

In short, the harmful consequences of transracial adoptions remain merely speculative, while the social and economic costs of keeping children in the foster care system are obvious and monumental.

TRANSRACIAL FAMILIES

What can be said in answer to the argument that only same-race placements give a child a positive racial identity? Our response is that it is not necessary for a child to identify with his entire cultural system whether he is black, Asian, Latino, or white. Many white adoptive parents successfully teach their children about their ethnic/racial culture and help foster in them a sense of ethnic pride.

How well white parents do in raising children transracially has been researched for more than twenty-five years. According to Elizabeth Bartholet, however, few of these studies were designed to look at the positive aspects of transracial adoption, and virtually none were set up to assess the negatives associated with same-race placements only. No studies have been done to compare the experience of children placed immediately with white families to those of children held in foster or institutional care while they waited for a same-race home.

In a long research study on transracial adoptions that focused on African-American, international, and Native American children who were placed transracially, adoptees have been found after twenty years to be stable, emotionally healthy, and comfortable with their racial identity and to have positive relationships with their parents. Most of the children in the study were adopted before the age of one.

According to Bartholet, there are no data to demonstrate that transracial adoptions have a harmful effect on children. On the contrary, the evidence is that those who were adopted as babies into transracial homes do as well as those adopted in same-race homes. In an extensive twenty-year study, 90 percent to 98 percent of transracial adoptees were found to enjoy family life, were well adjusted, and had a strong sense of racial pride.

Another longitudinal study also showed positive results. In 1970, the Chicago Child Care Society began a study of the family lives of African-American and biracial children adopted by Caucasian families and African-American and biracial children adopted by African-American families. The following conclusions are drawn from thirty-five transracial adoptees, twenty interracial adoptees, and their parents when these adoptees were seventeen years old. It was found that: (1) the children's developmental problems were similar to those found in the general population; (2) most of the adoptees had good self-esteem; and (3) 83 percent of those adopted interracially said they were black, 33 percent of those adopted by white parents said they were black, and 55 percent said they were of mixed ethnic background.

Some other interesting facts emerged. Among those with white parents, 73 percent lived in primarily white neighborhoods, while 55 percent of those with black parents lived in primarily black neighborhoods. Those with white parents had primarily white friends, while those with black parents had primarily black friends. Of the adolescents with Caucasian parents, the girls were more likely than the boys to date African-Americans. All those adopted transracially knew of their adoption before they were four years old, while 80 percent of those adopted interracially did not learn about their adoption until after they were four. Finally, 83 percent of those adopted transracially and 53 percent of those adopted interracially had interest in meeting their biological parents.

PROVIDING YOUR CHILD WITH A POSITIVE ETHNIC IDENTITY

One of the arguments against transracial adoption is that black children need a cultural identity. It is logical that a black child should have a positive racial identity; however, it is not necessarily true that black culture is the only route to that positive identity. Several studies have indicated that Caucasian parents of African-American or biracial children usually offer those children a healthy sense of racial identity. Studies conducted by both black and white researchers, proponents and opponents of transracial adoption, show much evidence that adoptees have a strong sense of racial identity while being fully integrated into their families and communities. The studies' positive outcomes also apply to those adopting internationally.

Caucasian parents can support African-American culture and ethnic pride in their children by providing books and music about black culture, encouraging friendships with other African-American children, and participating in African-American cultural events. These activities appear to be associated with being middle class, whether African-American or Caucasian. It is questionable whether a black single parent living in poverty can provide a child with the same positive black cultural background as a white family, though a black middle-class family could probably provide more cultural opportunities and more of the subtle day-to-day experiences distinct to black communities.

What of the argument that only black parents can teach the survival skills needed in a racist society? It is believed that a child's racial identity can affect his ability to cope with the world, and it is true that transracial adoptees are generally less comfortable with African-American children than are intraracial adoptees.

However, transracial adoptees associate more comfortably with Caucasian children and do as well as same-race adoptees in interpersonal relationships. African-American children who identify with the dominant cultural values also have higher levels of academic achievement, and transracial adoptees are statistically more likely to get better grades in school than intraracial adoptees.

Children can learn to cope with racism. Caucasian parents who adopt transracial children are in general less race conscious than those who adopt intraracially and so are at an advantage to teach children to be less race conscious. The message from the Caucasian parents that all ethnic backgrounds are equal can carry more weight than the same message coming from an African-American parent, who may seem to have more personal interest in protecting her status as a black person.

Professor Joan Mahoney, who has adopted transracially, reports that she and her daughter have African-American friends, she sends her daughter to integrated schools, and she provides the child with books and toys that will help her relate to her culture. Mahoney recommends investigating your neighborhood for black role models, churches and other cultural institutions, and postadoption counseling.

ASIAN ADOPTEES

The raising of Asians by Caucasians has been less controversial since nearly all Asian adoptees come from other countries, and there are no vocal groups in the United States questioning the practice. It is mostly because of poverty as well as culture that Asians do not adopt. Today, the number one country from which U.S. citizens and Canadians are adopting is China. Guatemala and South Korea are also countries that place a great number of children in the United States, and most of these children will become part of multiracial/ethnic families.

What we have learned about racism as it relates to Asian adoptees is primarily from adult adoptees from Korea. The adult adoptees from Korea have provided a wealth of information on what it is like to grow up in a Caucasian home. The first generation of these Korean adoptees are now approaching fifty, since Korean adoptions to the United States began in 1956. Asian children

tended to view themselves as Caucasian while growing up, and then as adults tend to view themselves as Korean-Americans or Vietnamese-Americans, depending on their country of origin.

The adult adoptees expressed that they wished their parents understood more of what it was like to experience discrimination, and they wished that they could have had more exposure to their culture. In addition, these adults wished their parents interacted with the culture so that all members saw themselves as a multiracial family. Looking back, these adult adoptees wanted their parents and other siblings to be part of this racial integration—not just the Asian child being exposed to white and Asian culture.

The attitudes of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s may have changed, but children still experience isolation if they are the only Asian child in their community and still face teasing and discrimination.

ADOPTION POLICIES AND PRACTICES

The North American Council on Adoptable Children believes that a child should be ethnically matched when possible but that children should not have to wait for long periods of time to find a same-race family. How long is too long is not an exact science. The detriments associated with being in foster care while waiting for a family must be weighed against the advantages of ethnic matching.

Some assert that if immediate placement is given automatic priority over ethnic matching, not enough effort will go into recruiting African-American families to adopt. Others believe that agency standards for adoptive parents are biased in favor of Caucasian parents. If more single parents and those with lower incomes could adopt, they say more African-American parents would do so. This may be true, but a child or a sibling group may need the energy of two parents, not just one. Humans are finite, and sibling groups probably need the financial security and time that only two parents can provide.

Still, greater efforts need to be made to recruit African-American families and to build trust in the African-American community so that more African-American families will adopt. Agencies need to provide more thorough training and literature to educate prospective adoptive parents about adopting transracially. In the meantime, Caucasian children are primarily going to Caucasian families, and biracial and African-American children are going to both Caucasian and African-American families. Children are adopted because they need love, and parents adopt because they want to extend their love to the next generation. No child should have to wait for a home because of the color of his or her skin.