

Post Adoption Information Sheet No 43

Helping your child deal with racism

Racism is an unfortunate reality in our society, and one which all transracial and intercountry adopted people encounter at some time. It tends to be invisible to those who don't experience it and deeply felt by those who do. Many transracial adopted people say in adulthood that, while growing up, they felt unable to speak of their encounters with racism with their parents.

Research also suggests that, whilst transracially placed and same-race adopted children do equally well in terms of adjustment, experience of discrimination and discomfort about appearance are significantly correlated with adjustment difficulties (Feigelman, 2000).

This information sheet has been prepared to help parents build an environment where racism can be dealt with openly. When parents develop their own effective ways of expressing their commitment to their child's racial identity and of dealing with racism, they are providing their child with a "roadmap" for dealing with these issues. In turn, your child will shape your responses in an interactive process.

Building a positive sense of racial identity

Building self-esteem

As with all children, build self-esteem through affection, attention and clear, consistent limits.

The dimension of building self-esteem, which includes a positive sense of racial identity, is all about showing that you're not only comfortable with their racial/cultural background, but also proud of it. In time, hopefully, they'll follow your example and be not just comfortable with their background, an inextricable part of their identity, but proud of it.

Overcoming our own prejudices

Become more aware of your own prejudices and try to overcome them. Remove all racial terms and jokes from your repertoire, because your child could take them personally. It is important to model consistent standards of non-judgmental behavior. It is not OK to stereotype people of particular racial or cultural backgrounds (or worse still, your child's own background) and then tell your child that these kinds of stereotypes do not apply to them.

Social context choices

Mix socially with people of your child's racial origin at least some of the time. Support groups or other adoptive parents may be able to help you with ideas or introductions. It may mean associating with people and networks with whom you are not naturally comfortable. Make ongoing relationships, where possible, even if this is not initially welcomed. Persistence may be required. If your child grows up feeling awkward around people who share their racial and cultural background it can lead to confusion and a lack of positive knowledge to dismiss racial and cultural stereotypes.

If it is possible, choose to live in an area which is multicultural, specifically with a view to sending your child to an ethnically diverse school. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence from adopted people that racism is less evident in areas which are ethnically diverse.

Valuing your child's racial background

Promote role models specifically of the same racial background as your child, and generally of a variety of "non-white" racial backgrounds. These may be community leaders, sports people, entertainers, authors or scientists. It's important to try to tackle stereotypes about people from the country of origin e.g. people being defined by poverty, drug wars.

Show that you value people of their racial background e.g. buying books written by, or featuring, people of your child's race; watching films, buying magazines and listening to music from their country of origin; providing a variety of alternative dolls and action figures.

Compliment your child on their features from time to time. Encourage them to have certain pride in their appearance.

There's no one right way

Don't go overboard on the above! For example, recognise that identity is multi-dimensional, so racial identity is just one aspect of it. If your child wants to mix with children with similar interests, e.g. in soccer or music, much more than with children of similar ethnic background, who don't always share common interests, this deserves attention.

Listen first and foremost to your child and take your cues from their level of comfort and interest. Each child has their own temperament, preferences and ways of coping with challenges.

It is important that you are prepared to help your child develop an all-round healthy identity including pride about their racial background. Help your child to feel proud, not afraid or ashamed, about people who share their appearance and cultural background. Older transracial adopted people have taught us that this kind of confidence doesn't develop on its own.

Build an environment where racism can be spoken of

Spend time with your child

Spending regular one on one time with your child builds your relationship. It tells your child that you like being with them. It provides an opportunity to talk and to build trust.

Choosing when and how to talk

Pick your time carefully. No child likes to be lectured or cornered to talk about uncomfortable topics, so pick your time and place carefully. Think about your child's preferences for how and when to talk about important things. Is it in the car? Out walking? Let them be your guide.

The news, TV programs, images in magazines, stories in books, scenes in your neighbourhood, can all provide you with places to start. Where bias is evident, weave it into conversation in a non-threatening way. Name the problem and make it clear that the problem is with the people who have the wrong attitude. In all of this, try not to take on a lecturing style.

Create times in each week where there can be leisurely conversation – there needs to be space for a child to speak.

Opening up the subject

Recognise that being of European descent in Australia tends to be privileged – in advertising, in politics and the professions, and when the media wants an expert in any field of interest. However, this does not mean “white” people are relatively more important. Acknowledge that it is sometimes difficult being of a “non-white” racial origin. People are not all treated equally.

Starting at a young age, invite your child to tell you if at any time they feel hurt by any exclusion, name-calling or other forms of racism, giving assurances that you will give support, and that if action is taken it will be in consultation with your child. Honour that trust. Try to make this the model for handling other problems also.

Valuing diversity, opposing racism

When an opportunity arises express your admiration for role models who have suffered the indignities of discrimination and become successful.

Promote an environment of acceptance and honouring of difference at school and other groups you are involved in. You might join with groups of others who promote tolerance, equity and multiculturalism, or who take a stand against various forms of racism.

If your child seems unsettled or upset

Timing

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Try to be sensitive to your child's readiness to talk – this may mean being there at the time they choose to talk and then listening. This will sometimes not be the time which is most convenient for you. The conversation may need to be held in stages.

Give your full attention, in the particular ways which suit your child as an individual. Make enough eye contact for your child to know you are interested without having them feel uncomfortable. If they have chosen a time when you are occupied, e.g. cooking, driving the car, they may be indicating that they are more comfortable talking alongside you.

Encouraging free expression

Try not to make assumptions or jump to conclusions. Keep an open mind.

Go slow, steady – don't pressure. Try not to quiz your child, or make too many suggestions of what "might" be "wrong". Don't put words into their mouth.

Ask open-ended questions such as "You don't seem as happy today as usual." "What happened at school?" or "Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

If your child likes drawing this may be a good way for them to show you what happened. Children can also use dolls or action figures to demonstrate what happened. At pre-verbal or younger ages you can discover what's on their mind by being with them while they play. Try not to interpret out loud but gently ask them to describe what is happening.

Ask questions which indicate your interest, without pushing for details which are felt to be embarrassing. The objective is more to help your child feel fully heard, rather than getting the full picture. Deal with your own wish to know everything later on.

You will very likely be upset to hear if your child is being hurt. Try to put your own upset feelings to one side and stay as calm as possible. Otherwise your child will need to cope with your feelings as well as their own.

Focus on your child's needs. Make sure you give a clear message that they don't need to protect you from their feelings – you'll get your support from somewhere else. At the same time, use language that demonstrates your genuine concern, e.g. "It makes me sad that you had to go through that."

Separate your own feelings and reactions from those of your child. They can be quite different. Plan ways of unloading your own feelings onto your partner/friend/a counselor later.

Acknowledging feelings

Focus on their feelings. Help them identify their feelings with, “I feel ... do you feel the same or different?” How about “It sounds like you felt? Is that right or was it something different?”

Your child will feel acknowledged and supported if you verbally reflect back what has been said, emphasising whatever feelings they seem to have experienced as a result of what happened, e.g. hurt, embarrassment, confusion, anger. Reinforce that it’s OK to feel that way.

Avoid creating roadblocks to communication. These can understandably arise from parents feeling deeply for their child’s distress and wanting to “fix things” quickly:

1. Easy solutions such as “You should just tell the teacher” or “Don’t worry about it”
2. Blaming: “You take these things too personally” or “What did you do to him before that happened?”
3. Lecturing: “When I was a kid ...”
4. Denying their feelings: “You shouldn’t feel that way” or “Sticks and stones ...”
5. Minimising: “I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way” (when it’s clear he did)
6. Excusing: “Johnny may have been having a bad day”
7. Over-reacting: “Let’s go up to the school right now and insist that Johnny learn his lesson!”

Your overall responses

Discern smaller issues from the larger ones. Someone commenting that your child’s hair is frizzy, for instance, is unlikely to warrant a strong response. Sometimes comments are made and questions are asked in all innocence, especially by young children, and it would be better to help your child towards keeping perspective rather than take offence. However, aggressive name-calling, taunts or physical bullying, can be very damaging. You know you’re dealing with a serious issue if you see noticeable shifts in mood or behavior over time, bedwetting, aggression which is out of character, school avoidance, stealing, regression to a younger stage of development.

Be reassuring, particularly when the issue is serious. Say, “I’m glad you told me. It must have been awful to have a secret like that and not be able to tell anyone.” Tell your child, “You’re safe now, with me.”

Make sure your child is clear that unjust attitudes or actions are not deserved.

Model appropriate anger. Model, also, an appropriate acceptance of reality. People do act in ways that are unfair, and there’s only so much any one person can do to change this. Perhaps the most important change to seek is the self-esteem to know that unjust attitudes reflect badly on the offending person, not on us.

A parent can re-frame the meaning given to a situation. For instance, people who are racist can be understood to be acting out of fear, or out of a felt need to put other people down because they feel small and it's one way to make themselves feel bigger, or out of jealousy because they are less talented than the person they are targeting. They haven't figured out a better way of feeling OK about themselves. A child could be coached to see that they are much "bigger" than the racist person, who is basically scared or envious of them.

Don't make any promises that you can't keep e.g. "I'm going to make sure this never happens to you again."

Considering options for taking action

Research options for paths to take from here. Many schools have anti-bullying policies and procedures for dealing with incidents. You or your child could let a teacher know about what's been happening, but it would be important to have your child's agreement to this. Perhaps it can be negotiated that the teacher tries to catch the offender red-handed. That way, there isn't as much risk of a backlash for "dobbing" e.g. intensified bullying directed in more covert ways. Whether or not the bully finds out who made the complaint, if the school's process has integrity, a concerted effort could be made within the school to stop the hurtful behavior.

Understand that policies and procedures can give the impression that justice can be achieved without too much difficulty, but that the reality is more complex. Understand that parents can be viewed positively or negatively by school authorities when they make complaints and that these authorities may or may not rise to the challenge that is being offered. Confronting injustice can evoke further victimisation.

Making choices

Include your child as far as possible in the decision making but do not ask them to make decisions beyond their ability. Without rushing the process, present the options and ask for your child's opinion of them. Depending on the age of the child and the severity of the problem, take this into account when deciding on a plan of action.

Weight should be given to the seriousness of a situation which involves physical risk, or repeated overt bullying. Assaults, threats, offensive phone messages and harassment are unlawful and legal action could be taken.

It is a valid choice to take the more personally costly path of taking action against the racism even if this means legal action – this has the potential of lessening the likelihood of others suffering in the same way. It can also be valid to choose to let things go, given the particular circumstances, understanding that no one person or family can solve all problems. You are not a failure as a parent if you choose not to fight; nor is your child a failure if they choose not to fight.

Ultimately our children need to develop their own skills at facing their own dragons, rather than have us slay their dragons for them. Assist them to develop their own strategies and self-confidence.

Build strategies for dealing with racism when it is in front of you

Each family and individual will have their own preferred approaches to problems and sometimes personal resources available and particular circumstances will decide which approach will feel more comfortable. There is no one optimal way to handle problems. The Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) has developed some practical guidelines on dealing with comments or questions about adoption. These skills can also be useful to deal with racial content.

The tool is called “Wise Up” and suggests that children and families use the following strategies when confronted by questions or comments:

- W - Walk away or choose to ignore
- I - Say It’s private
- S - Share some information about my story
- E - Educate others about adoption in general

Note: Your child is likely to need some role-playing to practice using some of the above strategies.

References

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