

## 7 Tasks for Parents

# Developing Positive Racial Identity

*Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year, she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people.*

In her description, in *The Bluest Eyes*, of a young black girl who wishes that her eyes were blue so she would be as beautiful as all the blond, blue-eyed children in her school, author Toni Morrison captures the struggle that many transracially and transculturally adopted children face: judging their own beauty by the standards of a culture that is not their own.

Although transracial adoption and foster care have been a controversial topic for more than a decade, the number of children entering such placements continues to increase. In 1997, approximately 17 percent of all domestic adoptions were transracial placements in which at least one of the parent's race was dif-

ferent from the child's. In 1998, 15,774 children born outside of the United States were adopted by Americans. The largest number of these children were adopted from regions of the former Soviet Union and from China. As of March 31, 1998, at least 110,000 children were in foster care with the goal of adoption. Twenty-nine percent were white, 59 percent were African American, and 10 percent were Latino. Twenty-seven percent (3,601) of the African American children who were adopted and 7 percent of the white children were in transracial adoptions. The reality of children living in transracial families raises many questions:

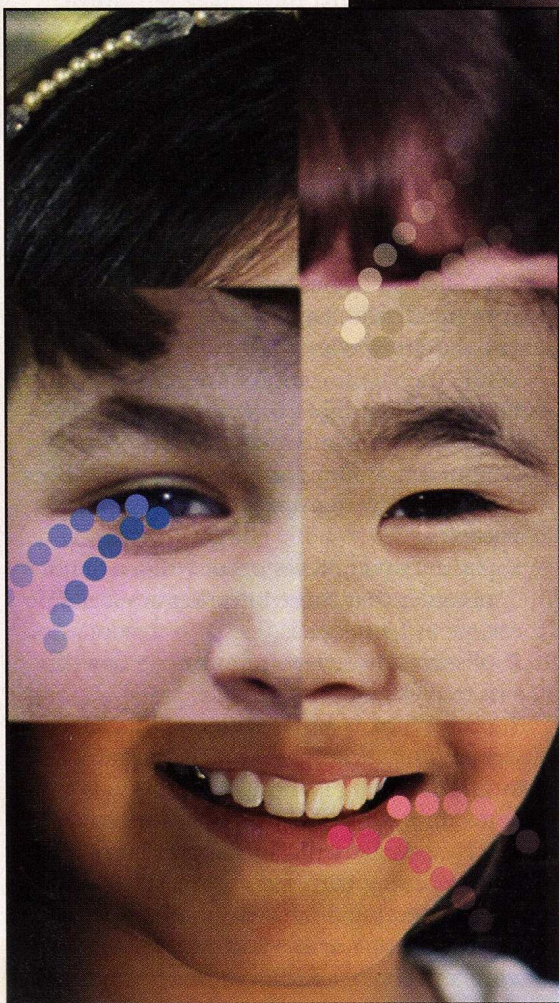
- How does a child develop a positive racial or cultural identity?
- What are the affects of transracial adoption or foster care on a child and his or her family?
- What are the special needs of adopted or foster children living in transracial families?
- What are the parenting tasks specific to transracial families? and
- What skills, attitudes, knowledge, and resources must parents in transracial families have or develop?

### HOW POSITIVE RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPS

Theories on social learning, object relations, and identification are useful in explaining how a child's identities (racial, religious, ethnic, class, and gender) develop. These theories are also useful in understanding the similarities and differences in how identities develop in children from dominant groups and from children in minority groups experiencing discrimination.

Object identification suggests that a child's identity is influenced by significant role models and





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relationships to which the child is consistently exposed in his or her environment (family, school, society, and the media). The child from the dominant group—the group that has power over the distribution of goods, services, rights, privileges, entitlements, and status—begins his or her identity formation by:

1. observing what group is in power,
2. observing that members of the group in power are like him or her (i.e., in race, gender, or religion), and
3. assuming that because he or she is like members of the group in power, he or she has the same rights and will achieve similar accomplishments and power as members of that group.

The ultimate result of the child's identity is a sense of positive self-esteem, confidence, worth, entitlement, and goals.

In contrast, the child from the minority group—the group subject to the power, control, discretion, and distribution of goods and privileges by another group—begins his or her identity formation by:

1. observing what group is in power,
2. observing that group members who are like him or her are not in positions of power and control,
3. observing or experiencing prejudice, discrimination, and exposure to stereotypes, and
4. assuming that because he or she is like members in the minority group, he or she has the same limited rights, can only achieve the same accomplishments, position, and status as similar group members, and that members of the minority group are not as good as those in power.

The minority child's identity affects his or her self-esteem, confidence, goals, worth, self-respect, sense of entitlement, and expectations by making him or her feel inferior. This inferiority is not the result of identifying with or being a member of a minority group but from exposure to discrimination, prejudice, and negative stereotypes about the group. A child from a minority group that is celebrated, held in esteem, or that shares power and control with the dominant group can have identities that are just as positive as a child's from the dominant group.

To counteract a minority child's formation of negative identities, he or she must see and be told:



1. that members of his or her minority group can also make positive achievements if given equal opportunities,
2. that he or she and his or her minority group should also have the same rights and entitlements as members in the dominant group,
3. that he or she and his or her group are equal to and as good as any other group,
4. that stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are wrong, and
5. that there is proof that prejudices and stereotypes are untrue. The child must be able to see it to believe it.

*Feeling self-confident about his or her ability to cope with and appropriately respond to discrimination reinforces a child's positive self-image and identity.*

This last task may be the most difficult and challenging to accomplish if the minority child's group is not in a position of power, control, and success in the child's environment. Alternatives may need to include:

1. exposing the child to historical figures and information about his or her group's accomplishments, capacities, values, and culture,
2. redefining and reframing the child's definitions of success, strengths, and accomplishments by not using standards and definitions based on those of the dominant group (e.g., highlight individual accomplishments, family commitment, group survival, spiritual and moral integrity, and civil rights activities against discrimination),
3. exposing the child outside of his or her environment to members of the minority group in positions of power and control (e.g., geographically, in other countries, through films and other media).

#### **PARENTING TASKS THAT FACILITATE POSITIVE RACIAL IDENTITY**

Because children from minority groups (Asian, Latino, African American, or Native American) who experience prejudice or discrimination are subject to developing negative racial identity, they require monitoring, with attention paid to their perception of racial identity. They should not be expected to develop positive racial identity without support and reinforcement from their families, role models, and the

community. Parents can provide support and reinforcement through the following 7 tasks.

#### **TASK 1: Acknowledge the existence of prejudice, racism, and discrimination.**

Adoptive parents must recognize not only that racism, prejudice, and discrimination exist, but that they, too, have been victims and survivors of it. By admitting the existence of inequities, parents can avoid racist, prejudicial, or discriminatory behavior. By admitting being a victim and survivor, parents are able to: 1) recognize inequities and how they affect others; and 2) elicit strategies for intervening on behalf of their child, based on personal experiences and knowledge.

While the victimization of minority groups is fairly obvious, that of members from the dominant culture and race may not be. Children in the dominant group are victims of racism by inadvertently developing superiority complexes.

Superiority complexes occur when a child:

1. observes that those in power are racially the same as he or she is,
2. observes those not in power are of a different race or color,
3. observes or is exposed to prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs and practices against a minority race,
4. assumes, therefore, that he or she and his or her race are better than the minority group.

By identifying with the dominant group, a child can develop a sense of superiority without being told he or she is better or without having any contact with a minority group.

Once parents understand how racism victimizes members from both the dominant and minority communities, they are prepared for the second task.

#### **TASK 2: Explain why the child's minority group is mistreated.**

Parents must explain and define racism, prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry, and why such behavior exists. Understanding the behaviors beyond their simply being "good or bad" will enhance the child's coping skills. Understanding the functions and reasons for the behaviors increases the child's range of responses beyond anger or retaliation.

#### **TASK 3: Provide the child with a repertoire of responses to racial discrimination.**

Parents must work to minimize their children's feelings of helplessness. A child's identity can be more positive if he or she perceives



him- or herself and members of racial groups to be empowered with choices, resources, and the ability to acquire and protect their rights. This repertoire of responses may include:

1. selective confrontation or avoidance,
2. styles of confrontations (passive, aggressive),
3. individual, legal, institutional, or community resources and responses (i.e. grievances, suits, NAACP, protests),
4. priorities and timing (when to avoid and when not to avoid issues),
5. goal-oriented responses rather than unplanned reactions,
6. institutional/organizational strategies (positioning, coalitions, compromising).

**TASK 4: Provide the child with role models and positive contact with his or her minority community.** Parents of a different race from their child are quite capable of modeling and helping the child develop various identities (i.e. gender, class). However, counteracting the racial identity projected by a racially conscious or discriminating society requires positive exposure to same-race models or experiences. These contacts and experiences require: 1) interacting with the child's minority community, 2) providing the child information about his or her history and culture, and 3) providing an environment that includes the child's culture on a regular basis (i.e. art, music, food, religion, school, integrated or same race community). This task requires that the parent be comfortable with: 1) being a minority when interacting in the child's community, and 2) sharing the role of modeling with members from the child's race. Same race contacts and experiences function to: 1) counteract negative stereotypes, 2) teach the child how to implement the repertoire of responses, and 3) provide a respite from being a minority (i.e. the only child of color, the object of stares, or needing to prove one's equality).

**TASK 5: Prepare the child for discrimination.**

Providing the child with information on how his or her racial identity might be degraded helps him or her develop better coping skills and methods of maintaining a positive identity. Feeling self-confident about his or her ability to cope with and appropriately respond to discrimination reinforces a child's positive self-image and identity. Same-race role models may be a helpful resource for information and preparation if an adoptive parent has not ex-

perienced discrimination similar to the child's minority group (i.e. double standards, slander, interracial dating, gender issues).

**TASK 6: Teach the child the difference between responsibility to and for his or her minority group.**

This task relieves the child of: 1) feeling embarrassed or needing to apologize for his or her racial identity or group, 2) not having to overcompensate or prove his or her worth because of his or her racial identity or negative stereotypes. However, the child is able to develop a commitment to both his or her individual and minority group's accomplishments, resources, and empowerment.

The Clark Doll Test suggests that children are aware of differences in race as early as four years old. This study also found that African American children became aware of stigma associated with race as early as seven years old. Although parents cannot stop the minority child's exposure to racial prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes, parents (adoptive, birth, same or different race) of any minority child must help develop the positive racial identity necessary to counteract the effects of racial inferiority.

**TASK 7: Advocate on behalf of your child's positive identity.**

The purpose of this task is to provide the child an environment that is conducive to the formation of a positive identity. The parent should advocate for family, social, and educational experiences that are respectful, reflective, and sensitive to cultural diversity. Therefore, the parent may need to be prepared to correct or confront individual or institutional racism, prejudice, or discrimination that the child might encounter.

As an advocate the parent models for the child how to advocate for themselves. The child also sees and feels their parent's protection, loyalty, and commitment which are essential in attachment and bonding. Confronting prejudice and discrimination on the child's behalf is no longer optional once a parent adopts transracially. AF

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