



transracial
& transcultural
adoption

A PRIMER



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Are you considering international, transracial or transcultural adoption?

We've all seen them: the images of celebrities with their internationally adopted children taken by paparazzi photographers. A celebrated actress accompanies her Cambodian-born son to school. The most talked-about pop singer in the world visits an orphanage in Malawi and returns to her home in London with a newly adopted son. The photographs of these families are intended to sell magazines and drive traffic to celebrity gossip websites. However, they highlight one very crucial detail: international, transracial and transcultural adoptions are gaining in prominence.

WHAT IS TRANSRACIAL OR TRANSCULTURAL ADOPTION?

Transracial or transcultural adoptions occur for a couple of reasons. Some families choose to adopt internationally through adoption agencies based in Canada or the United States. These agencies work with similar agencies in other countries to bring children and families together. You may know a family who has adopted from China, Russia, Guatemala or India.

Other families adopt domestically, either through adoption agencies or through their provincial or state child welfare authorities. Because both Canada and the United States have a diverse population, the children that families adopt often do not share the same racial or cultural background.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

So, if you've been thinking about adding to your family through international, transracial or transcultural adoption, what do you need to know in order to meet the cultural needs of your child?

Find out as much as you can about his or her culture and country of origin

Is the country you are adopting your child from a global trouble spot, a war zone? What was the religion or religions of this area, or the customs? Knowing these things will help you better understand your child's background and the circumstances that he or she was born into. Depending on the age of the child, you might want to learn his or her native tongue.

Tolerate no racially or ethnically biased remarks

As adoptive parents in a transracial or transcultural family, it's important to never tolerate any kind of racially or ethnically biased remark made in your presence. Make it clear that it's not okay to make fun of people who are different, and it is not okay to assume that all people of one group behave the same way. Teach your children how to handle these remarks by giving the person a chance to back off or change what has been said. For example, by saying something like, "Surely you don't mean to be critical, you just don't have experience with this group of people." This way you'll teach your child to stand up to bias without starting a fight. Positive exchanges about race will always be more helpful than negative ones.

Surround yourselves with supportive family and friends

When you were thinking about adopting, did you find some people in your circle of family and friends who were especially supportive of your plan to become a multicultural family? If so, surround yourself with them! Seek out other members of your child's racial or ethnic group. You will be surprised by how helpful many people will want to be, whether it is to show you how to cook a special dish or teach you some words in their language.

Celebrate all cultures

Teach your child that every group of people has something worthwhile to contribute and that diversity is strengthening for your community and your family. Incorporate art, music, literature, clothing and food from both your child's ethnic group and others. Invite friends from other cultures to celebrate holidays and special occasions and attend their events as well. While it is important to teach your child that differences among people are enriching, it is also important to point out similarities. You might say, "Your skin is darker than Daddy's, but you like to play music, just like he does, and you both love strawberry ice cream." Your child needs to feel a sense of belonging in the family.

Talk about race and culture

Talk about racial issues, even if your child does not bring up the subject. Just because a child doesn't come to you with a concern or question doesn't mean it's not on his or her mind. Use natural opportunities, such as television shows or newspaper articles that talk about race in some way. Let your child know that you feel comfortable discussing race--the positive aspects as well as the difficult ones. Confront racism openly. Rely on adults who have also experienced racism to share their insights with both you and your child. Above all, if your child's feelings are hurt, let him or her talk about the experience with you, and acknowledge that you understand.

Expose your child to a variety of experiences to build self-esteem

While society has made strides in overcoming certain forms of discrimination, there remain many subtle and not-so-subtle race-related messages that are discouraging and harmful to young egos. Point them out as foolish or untrue. Emphasize that each person is unique and that we all bring our own individual strengths and weaknesses into the world. Frequently compliment your child on his or her strengths. Self-esteem is built on many small successes and lots of acknowledgement. A strong ego will be better able to deal with both the good and the bad.

Take your child to places where most of the people present share his or her background

It's important for your child to experience being part of a thriving community where he or she is not always in the minority. Churches, cultural festivals, restaurants--these are all places you can go and interact with people from your child's same background. If your child is from another country, you might consider taking a trip to that country when he or she is a little older and can understand what the trip is all about. Another benefit of these experiences is that it might be an opportunity for you to feel what it's like to be in the minority. This will increase your awareness and ability to understand your child's perspective.

TRANSRACIAL AND TRANSCULTURAL ADOPTION CHECKLIST

- ✓ Understand your own sense of personal history and how that helped form your values and attitudes about racial, cultural and religious similarities and differences.
- ✓ Understand racism, how it works and how to minimize its effects through life experiences.
- ✓ Commit yourself to demonstrating empathy with your child's family of origin regardless of socioeconomic and lifestyle differences.
- ✓ Provide your child with same race adult and peer role models and relationships on an ongoing basis.
- ✓ Acknowledge that transracial and transcultural parenting makes your family a family of diversity and that this will have an impact on all family members forever.
- ✓ Prepare for the fact that diverse families will experience discrimination.
- ✓ Develop parenting skills that will help your child understand and accept his or her racial identity, and that will help your child if he or she begins to deny that identity.
- ✓ Learn to meet your child's particular dietary, skin, hair and health care needs.
- ✓ Appreciate your child's uniqueness and, at the same time, help the child have a sense of belonging and full family membership.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The challenge

Annie comes home crying one afternoon and tells her mother, Jessie, that another little girl in her class has refused to invite her to her princess birthday party because, as she said, “I’ve never seen a princess with hair as kinky as yours.” Annie, upset that she is being excluded, says to her mother, “I want to cut off all my hair. I hate it! It’s so ugly.”

The response

Jessie cuddles Annie in her lap and says, “I’m sorry you’re so upset. It hurts to be left out. You know, there are plenty of princesses with hair just like yours, it’s just that the girl in your class hasn’t heard of them. Why don’t we go to the library tomorrow and see if we can find some story books with princesses who look like you? Then, we can read all about them and show the pictures to your class so that they can learn too. And sweetheart, one more thing: I think your hair is beautiful.”

The challenge

Tyler is 15 and goes to a school where there are very few Aboriginal students like him. He has a large group of friends, but none of them Aboriginal, and most of them don’t seem to even notice that he’s different from them. However, when a new Aboriginal student enrolls in his class, things change. This new student, Claire, is proudly Métis, and often speaks of her family and the struggles they’ve been through with addictions and racism. She even brings it up in class when they begin to study the chapter on Louis Riel. The other students don’t seem to like her much and Tyler’s friends talk about, “Teaching that squaw a lesson,” or “Knocking her off her high horse.” One night, Tyler comes home and tells his parents, Kim and Hugh, that he wishes he wasn’t Aboriginal and that “Natives are troublemakers, or they’re drunks.”

The response

Kim and Hugh ask Tyler why he feels this way and realize that much of it has to do with the lack of Aboriginal contact he receives at school. Quietly, Hugh says to his son, “Maybe you’re feeling this way because you feel different at school, or that you have to be less Aboriginal in order to get along with your friends.”

When Tyler doesn’t say anything, Kim adds, “It might be a good idea if took a little trip this weekend to visit with your birth grandparents.”

Tyler responds, “What difference is that going to make? Just because my birth family is Native, it doesn’t mean that I have act like them or live my life the same.”

Hugh says, “No, you don’t have to live like them if you don’t want to, but what happens if you choose to deny them just because they’re Aboriginal? It means you’re denying a really important part of yourself, a part of yourself that you can’t change. You’re Aboriginal, Tyler, and that’s a really great thing. Aboriginal people have a long and proud history in this country. Why don’t we read up on it together? Maybe we can even ask the librarian at your school for some pointers. In fact, I’ll bet this new girl Claire might have some ideas. Maybe we could invite some of your friends with us the next time we go up to see your birth grandparents so they can see where you come from and understand it a little better.”



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