



## Racism and inter-country adoption

Children joining our families through inter-country adoption are often visible because of their difference in skin colour, hair colour and/or facial characteristics (depending on which country the child is from). Although parents who have made the decision to create or enlarge their families through inter-country adoption usually embrace the diversity their child brings, it is a common experience of families to encounter some issues around racism. These issues may be ongoing and may arise unexpectedly. Many of these issues will be connected to, or lead to, questions about adoption. Some suggestions about how you might prepare yourself and your child (or children) to deal with potential issues are given here, but they are by no means exhaustive. In order to help keep you informed about how your child prefers these issues to be dealt with, start by having open and ongoing discussion with your child about racism as they grow, along with discussions about other issues affecting all children growing up. Be aware that your child may not want you to 'champion' racism issues for them.

### 'Positive racism'

Many adoptive parents find that their young child is seen by others as particularly special and beautiful because they are different in appearance. Although there is of course no argument about how special and beautiful our children are, their specialness comes from who they are, not what they look like! However, this 'positive racism' can be utilised as a tool to teach your child about racism through explaining to them that comments from others come from their own perspective, and are not about whom the child is and their worth as an individual. This can help equip your child to not personalise the racism of others for later occasions if racism is experienced in a more negative and unpleasant way.

### 'Positive racism' in blended families

Some of the children within your family may stand out as being ethnically 'other' to you and your other children, and you may find people give your 'different' child special attention and make comments which may make your other children (or their friends) feel less valued. This 'positive racism' can be particularly difficult as you try to balance agreeing with how special and beautiful your ethnically different child is, while not diminishing how special and beautiful your other children are. Discussing with all your children racism in all its forms as being the other person's problem and collaboratively coming up with some humorous or 'gently educating' responses to discriminating comments may be helpful. Some answers used by blended families to the comment 'Isn't he/she so beautiful', when accompanied by ignoring the siblings are: 'Yes, he/she takes after his/her big brother/sister', or 'Yes, all of my children are so beautiful, aren't they?'. Often a comment which simply includes all of the children is enough to remind people of the exclusion they are acting on. This focus on one child may also be experienced by families with a new biological baby.

### Racism from extended family and friends

You may be hurt and surprised if a relative or a friend has not embraced your family becoming culturally diverse through inter-country adoption, as you want the child you are bringing into your family to be loved and accepted by everyone. In many cases, once your child arrives, the person that was previously unsupportive about the adoption will quickly accept and love them, but this is not always the case. Your first responsibility is to your child and demonstrating your solidarity with them as your precious and valued son/daughter. Your child also needs to see that you do not think racism is okay and that you will support them in dealing with it. If you see this as an issue within your extended family or friends,

try having discussions between yourselves as prospective parents and with the individual before your child arrives. However, if these issues emerge later, discussing them without your child being present is recommended. Try to establish boundaries without your child being exposed to racism from someone he/she should be able to feel safe with. Sometimes just talking with the person may dissolve the problem, as they just may have not had an opportunity to explore issues of diversity and become comfortable with it. If not, perhaps you may need to limit contact.

## Language around skin colour

Once a child starts mixing with children outside the family, they may be asked why their skin is a different colour to the majority or why it is that their mum/dad are a different colour to their child. Little children who are not used to seeing children with different coloured skin to theirs may even name the skin colour in negative ways and it may help to give them positive language around colour. such as, Acknowledge the skin colour, but connect it to positive things such as chocolate, or alabaster. To help your child respond to these comments and retain self esteem, discuss the diversity of skin/hair colour with them and explain why their skin is different so that they have information that they can respond with confidence and knowledge. Your adoptive child will also benefit from understanding a little about adoption as questions around this often accompany questions around skin colour.

Assisting your child's kindergarten/school to develop resources around valuing and normalising diversity is helpful. World Families Australia has an information sheet for schools around adoption which may be a helpful tool (you can download this from the AFIS web site).

You may feel confident to talk to the class or the parents and teacher body about your child's birth country. Your child can assist by showing their knowledge and special items from their country of origin. Consider looking around to find a school or kindergarten which is culturally diverse so that the environment is more comfortable for your child.

## Celebrating differences and similarities

A child as young as two or three will notice physical difference, so showing them how they are the same and how they are different and showing them that difference is normal is helpful. For example looking in the mirror together and showing them how they have brown hair and eyes like mummy, whilst daddy has grey eyes and grey hair, and how mummy and daddy have pale skin whilst he has brown skin like his friend, that everyone has a pink tongue and white teeth, etc, will help your child to be familiar with their body and to not be surprised by comments which point out differences. Likewise, take opportunities to show diversity elsewhere, such as the different colours of dogs, cats and bunnies – show that difference is normal!

## Other children and name calling

It is not uncommon for young children to name call and sometimes it might be worth talking around this with your child before presuming they have been victim to racism. One parent reported that his child's teacher called him into the school to discuss how to deal with an issue of racism directed towards his Ethiopian born daughter. On exploring the situation with his daughter he discovered that she in fact had called the boy 'fat and smelly' first! It was then decided that the situation was not about racism, but more about an issue of talking kindly to each other. However, racism may occur within the school environment. Most schools have policies around racism and bullying and it may be worth being familiar with these and keeping in touch with your child's teacher so that you can address difficulties for your child early on if necessary.

Parents from the dominant culture (white families) in Australia do not usually experience racism so may not be fully aware of how it feels to always stand out and have negative assumptions made about you because of your skin colour. For example, some teenagers have felt they are assumed to be trouble

makers by police merely because of their skin colour. When adopting a racially different child you need to consider yourself as having become an interracial family, not just that your child is racially different. Confront racism together as a family, so that your child is not forced to find ways of dealing with this alone. As parents you can help them by responding to any racism in front of them appropriately, thereby giving them responses to imitate when they do not have you there to support them. Embrace friendships with persons of different ethnic background, whether or not they are of the same racial group as your child. They will help you be aware of the challenges around racism that your child may face, and it shows clearly to your child that, in your family, all people and all cultures are equally valued. Additionally, having contact with other children and adults who are from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds provides your child with peers and/or mentors who can help them deal with issues of discrimination that they may not feel comfortable discussing with you.

## Bookshop and library

The Relationships Australia bookshop and library are open Monday to Friday, 10 am to 6.30 pm, and Saturday 10 am to 2 pm.

Some books to read with your young child:

- 'Whoever you are' by Mem Fox
- 'William is my brother', by Jane Schnitter.
- 'I don't have your eyes' by Carrie Kitz.

Books for you to read:

- 'Beyond good intentions' by Cheri Register
- 'I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla' by Marguerite Wright
- 'The colour of difference: Journeys in transracial adoption' edited by Sarah Armstrong & Petrina Slaytor
- 'Welcome home!: An international and non-traditional adoption reader' edited by Lita Schwartz & Florence Kaslow.

Web sites to visit

- Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) <http://www.bensoc.org.au/parc/>

Articles for further reading:

- Building Bridges to Your Child's Ethnic Community by Chris Winston, President Friends of Korea <http://www.adopting.org/rwbridge.html>
- Issues to Consider Before Pursuing Intercountry Adoption ADOPT: Assistance, Information Support <http://www.adopting.org/race.html>
- Transracial & Transcultural Adoption [http://www.hopeforchildren.org/heritage\\_transracial\\_transculture.htm](http://www.hopeforchildren.org/heritage_transracial_transculture.htm).