

# Raising a Child of Color in America—While White

Our country is far from a “post-racial” society, as this last year has demonstrated. How can you ensure that your child will grow up feeling safe, secure in his identity, and close to your family? Commit to calling out racism and fighting injustice wherever you see it. **BY BETH HALL**



**A**sk yourself and answer honestly, “How comfortable am I in talking about race?” If the answer is “not very,” you’re certainly not alone. But as a parent, sometimes you have to do things that move you outside your comfort zone for the sake of your child.

Race matters. That is an absolute truth that has been well documented in research. In the last year, we’ve seen all too vividly the way in which race remains polarizing on a national

scale. And yet, many of us come to transracial adoption hoping that it doesn’t need to matter in *our* families, thinking we’re “post-racial,” or that our children won’t feel close to us if race is emphasized. Pretty much the exact opposite is true. For children of color who are being raised by white parents to grow up healthy and strong, for transracial adoptive families to remain close and connected for years and decades, we need to acknowledge this truth and commit to having whatever

hard discussions are necessary.

Some parents avoid the topic because they are more comfortable talking about culture than race. Some are fearful that *they* might be perceived as racists if they talk about race. Some parents have confided to me that they're nervous that bringing up racism or white privilege might instill in their child a reluctance to love white people in particular, or anyone across racial lines in general.

Regardless of the age at which your child comes home, you will be the most trusted person in his world, so by default he is going to learn to trust a person of your race. But because people of your race are not always trustworthy, it is imperative that you teach him how to distinguish those who are allies from those who are not.

Because race is such a sensitive topic, it can be helpful to take a step back and compare it to street safety. We don't say to ourselves, "I think I'll wait until my child is crossing the street before I teach her what to watch out for." We understand that it is our job as parents to teach children how to cross the street, and that includes giving them a healthy dose of fear about the dangers of fast-moving traffic. In exactly the same way, it is our job to talk with them about the dangers and realities of racism before they ever encounter it, so they will know how to take care of themselves.

How do you do that? Over time, we've learned that there's a three-step learning process in transracial adoption. The steps are:

## STEP 1

### Understand the Effects of Racism and What It Looks Like

➔ **The U.S. racial gap is a reality.** Research clearly demonstrates that there are still huge inequities across racial lines. Consider some of the statistics: We are rapidly approaching a "majority minority" population (in which one or more racial and/or ethnic minorities relative to the country's population make up a majority of the population). Yet only 71 per-

cent of all Bachelor's degrees awarded in the U.S. go to white students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In contrast, the prison population is 88 percent people of color (Bureau of Justice, 2010; U.S. Census, 2010). Job applicants with "black-sounding" names are 33 percent less likely to get called for an interview than other applicants with identical resumes (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015). These gaps apply across class lines. They are realities.

➔ **Children pick up implicit bias about race at a very young age.** We know that children not only recognize racial differences very early (before they turn one), but they are expressing racial preferences by three years old. So if we don't speak about race with our kids, they are going to absorb through osmosis what the world is teaching them, which is: White people equal good/nice/pretty people. Black and brown people, in contrast, equal bad/mean/ugly people. Children will internalize these pervasive messages as a negative self-image and/or a negative view of other people like them unless we counter with explicitly contrasting messages and direct experiences.

➔ **Recognize that racism comes in many forms.** When people hear the word "racism," many think only of blatant interpersonal racism, like the use of racial epithets. If your only image of racism is a Ku Klux Klan member, it is easy to dismiss racist incidents with a reaction of, "Oh, I know so-and-so is not a racist—she didn't mean it that way." We must educate ourselves to recognize the microaggressions that people of color experience every day, as well as the ways racism can operate on a larger scale [see sidebar, "The Four Levels of Racism"]. Racism can be expressed via car doors suddenly locked, by purses clutched, by students not called on in class, by children not invited to a birthday party, by selective surveillance by security guards, by requests to touch a person's hair, or by phrases like "You speak English really well" or "He's so articulate!"

➔ **Race is a matter of life-and-death impor-**

**tance.** If you don't think it is, do some more reading about Ferguson; about Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and the all-too-long list of people of color who are dead because they were shot first and questions were asked later. Our children's very lives are dependent on their understanding of how to navigate race in our society. Keeping our kids ignorant of these issues is not protecting them—it is endangering them.

## STEP 2

### Talk with Your Children About Race and Racism

Once we understand the landscape of race, we have to get comfortable noticing race, acknowledging that racism exists, and bring up examples when talking with our children.

➔ **Your tone matters, so practice is imperative.** Those of us who are white have probably not grown up talking about race. If that's the case, you need to practice. If we're uncomfortable when we talk about something, our children sense it, and that discomfort on our part sends the message that it's better not to bring up that topic.

➔ **We *must* talk about race because silence speaks volumes.** Children think adults have a great deal of power. When we do not say

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**If our kids see people of color in our city, but see mostly white people at their school or church, they think we are keeping people who look like them out of the rest of our lives on purpose.**

that something is wrong, they assume that we agree with it. When we are silent on a topic like race, we are effectively saying to our children that the system as it exists today is OK with us. Unless all of the inequities that exist—the income gap, the educational achievement gap, the legal disparities (what Michelle Alexander

has called “the New Jim Crow”)—are OK with you, it's critically important that you speak up and explicitly teach your children that they are wrong.

➔ **Begin this conversation when your kids are young.** This may seem daunting, but there are a couple of ways to start such discussions. Two kid-friendly books I particularly like are *All the Colors We Are*, by Katie Kissinger, and, *Let's Talk About Race*, by Julius Lester. Begin by noticing and talking about race in a very factual way—talk about skin color and why people who have ancestors from different parts of the world (where the sun shines more or less brightly) have different amounts of melanin in their skin. When my kids were little, they spent lots of time comparing their skin colors—in the bath, in their bedroom. Noticing and comparing are very important to young children: They learn how to recognize triangles versus circles, orange versus blue, all of these things, at ages two, three, and four. So that's when we want to be having those kinds of discussions about skin color and other features, and thus laying the groundwork for later discussions about the values placed on these features.

➔ **Use the words they'll hear in the larger world.** I know that some parents like to describe skin color with terms like “brown sugar” or “chocolate,” but, as with any other important topic, I think it's imperative to give children the words of the world. You might say, “We sometimes say that your skin is the color of ‘brown sugar,’ which it is, but the world uses the term Black or African-American to describe people whose ancestors came from Africa and live in America now.” You can add that race is a social construct later, but when children are younger, it is more appropriate to focus on noticing that there are some light-skinned people who are African-American and some darker-skinned people who are white. Help them learn that the terms Black and brown don't come from the color of people's skin, but rather the racial group with which they identify. It is important for children to learn not only their own

# The Four Levels of Racism

## INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RACISM

**1 Internalized racism** is the implicit bias we all hold within our minds—for example, white is equated with good, black with bad or dangerous. These are assumptions that are in the media, and all but in the drinking water in American culture, and the beliefs a child will pick up unless she’s explicitly told otherwise. I encourage you to take an implicit bias test (like Project Implicit’s Racial Bias test at [implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html)). Acknowledging that I hold racist attitudes internally about black and brown people in the world, when those people include my own chil-

dren, whom I love more than anything, is profoundly painful. But if I can’t say that out loud, I can’t fight against it and make sure that my actions are not racist.

**2 Interpersonal racism:** Interpersonal racism occurs between people. “I don’t like you because you are a \_\_\_\_\_.” Some of us may know people who are blatantly racist, who exhibit interpersonal racism, but many of us don’t. It’s important to understand that interpersonal racism also includes microaggressions, which, like 1,000 paper cuts, cumulatively add up to do real harm.

## SYSTEMIC-LEVEL RACISM

**3 Institutional racism** involves the reality that, within institutions, there is discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and practices, inequitable opportunities, and impacts that are based solely on race. An example might be a school system that concentrates students of color in the more overcrowded and underfunded schools with the least experienced teachers while concentrating white students in the better-funded, less

crowded schools with better teachers.

**4 Structural racism** is the cumulative and compounded effect of institutional and societal bias that privileges white people and disadvantages people of color. An example of this is the racial wealth divide. This has been going on for generations, and undoing it will take sustained, hard work on a societal level.

Adapted with permission from “Moving the Race Conversation Forward: How the Media Covers Racism and Other Barriers to Productive Racial Discourse, Part 1,” by Race Forward, The Center for Racial Justice Innovation ([raceforward.org](http://raceforward.org)).

descriptions, but also the language of the world in a factual, uncharged way.

➔ **Start calling out examples of racism.** Point out something that happened to a character in a book, something you heard on the radio, or an interaction on the playground or at your work. You might wade in with, “Today I heard someone say that she thinks that Black people are naturally better at sports and Asians are naturally better at math. I disagree with this and I am going to say something

about it to her. What do you think I should say?” Or “I notice that there are hardly any people of color nominated for an Oscar and that makes me mad. Why do you think that is?” Or “A Black boy was shot by the police, and I am really upset and want to talk with other people who don’t think that police should ever shoot a boy who isn’t trying to hurt them.”

➔ **Be explicit in saying that racism is wrong.** The really important part in these

conversations is for parents to add a value statement at the end. One of my favorites is, “...and in our family, we really disagree with that.” Our job as parents is to teach our children values. By explicitly stating what we believe as a family when it comes to racial inequities and justice, our children will understand us to be their allies.

➔ **Don’t worry about talking too much.** Some parents tell me they worry about bringing up race *too much*. If you asked my children, “Did she talk about it too much?” they would both roll their eyes and laugh and say, “Absolutely.” But if you asked them whether I had their backs, the answer would be, “Absolutely. She didn’t always get it right, but she always tried to be there for us.” And that, for us as parents, is the most important thing. I don’t mind annoying my kids or sometimes “going overboard” if it means I am supporting them.

### STEP 3

## Find Friends and Role Models of Your Child’s Race

In order for our children to have a healthy self-identity, they need to not only be loved unconditionally and have their basic needs met, but they need to have role models who can help them imagine possibilities and move toward positive futures for themselves. No matter how well-intended, any plan to address a child’s racial identity that doesn’t include immersion with others who share that child’s racial experience is not going to be very successful, and will create problems for that child down the road.

In my experience, this third step is often the hardest. There are a lot of parents who say, “I can acknowledge that race is important and racism exists, I can get to the place where I can talk about it within my own family and social circle, but...” The truth is that making connections, authentic and intimate connections, across racial lines is something that much of America struggles with.

➔ **Take a hard look at the diversity in your daily life.** Ask yourself: “With whom do I eat dinner? Who comes into my home, and whose home do I go into? With whom do I worship?” If the answers are, “Only people who look like me, and not like my children,” it is important to recognize the underlying message to your child about who is important and who is worth loving. Again, that which is unsaid also conveys a message.

➔ **Peers are important; adult role models are essential.** Some parents ask if being around other transracial adoptive families or their child’s having friends of the same race is enough. As you likely have already inferred, the answer is no. Our children do benefit from knowing other families that look like theirs, and they need same-race peers. But it’s critical they have adult role models who reflect them. None of us would rely solely on other children to teach our kids about our religious values, our ethical values, or how to be successful in life, would we? So why would we think our nine-year-old son should look only to another nine-year-old to understand how to become a strong, proud, culturally-connected Asian, Latino, or Black man?

➔ **Find friends and role models for yourself, too.** Remember, this is not about sending your child off to have those interactions; it’s important for you to have them too, and for your child to see you in relationships with people who look like her. As parents, we also need other adults we can talk to, peers for whom these conversations are just as important as they are for us.

➔ **Understand racial isolation.** So how do we make friendships with adults of our children’s race? The same way we make any friendships. First, there has to be access to the adults you are trying to connect with, and the more the better. Racial isolation is very important for transracial families to think about. There are two kinds of racial isolation—geographic and demographic.

**Geographic isolation** describes a family that lives in a highly heterogeneous, white-majority area where there are very, very few people

of color. Transracially adopted adults who grow up in that kind of environment often feel very disconnected from their own racial group, which leads to a kind of self-hate, which obviously is damaging. Many of them choose or feel forced to leave when they grow up and then remain far less connected to their adoptive families—hardly the result most of us parents would desire.

On the other hand, you can live in a very “diverse” area and still lead a **demographically isolated** life. If our kids see lots of people of color when we’re driving down the street or at the grocery store, but then look around their block—or their school, their church, their after-school activities, and so on—and see mostly white people, they may think we have chosen this segregation intentionally. To the child, who sees adults as all-powerful, it appears we are keeping people who look like them out of the rest of our lives on purpose. A child can get the message that people who look like them are undesirable to their parents, leading her to reject her parents and struggle with a sense of belonging as she grows older.

➔ **Counter racial isolation.** Whether your family is geographically or demographically isolated, you’ve got to find a way to create access, and that often means making some significant and difficult changes. If your child went to a school or you lived in a neighborhood where she was being continuously bullied, you wouldn’t shrug it off; you would find a way to make a change. This is just the same. If your child is suffering from racial isolation, you need to do something about it.

Find opportunities to visit and spend time in communities of color that reflect your child’s racial heritage. Maybe you need to change your child’s school, or soccer team,

or your family’s place of worship—conscious efforts which may require driving longer distances and going out of your way to make this a priority. Consider taking vacations in places where people who look like your children are going to be in the majority. You may need to move. Whatever it takes, understand that your job as a parent is always to put your child’s needs first, even when that requires some sacrifice on your part. Alleviating the ache of isolation, the sense of not belonging, that our



transracially adopted children too often live with is worth whatever effort is required from us. Our kids often appear fine to us and to the world, but this is often the case only because they are working so hard to maintain that appearance, because “fine” is what they think they *should* be. Doing everything we can do to spare them that experience is the essence of our job of becoming *their* family rather than asking them to change or sacrifice in order to become ours.

➔ **In-person interactions are vital.** I know that many parents mention online groups or sites as an alternative to living in areas with direct access to people of color. These are

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great resources for parents to learn from, but your children—particularly young children—aren't online with you. They need to have this happening in their lives. They need to see you making the effort because it tells them how much these issues matter not only to them but to you.

### ➔ **Introduce yourself to potential allies.**

After you've set up this access, you need to make connections. When I walk into a room without my children, people of color don't know they have a lot in common with me. Why would they? But I know that we share concerns regarding parenting, and safety for our children, so I have to be opportunistic and be the one to approach them, to be friendly and find commonality. Take baby steps. Is your son one of only two African-Americans in his classroom? Chances are, you and the other child's parents have some common concerns. Introduce yourself. Sit next to them at the open house. Volunteer to work together on a project or a committee. You can form this connection whether or not your kids decide to be friends. In truth, you have far more in common with them from a parenting perspective than you are likely to have with white parents of white children who far too often do not share our concerns about racial equity and pride.

### STEPS 4 AND BEYOND

## Don't Stop with Diversity; Be an Anti-Racist Activist

Your work as a parent doesn't end with diversifying your children's world. It starts with that, but diversity is not the end goal. Equity is. Justice is. And we all have a lot of work to do to get there.

Until we do, it is our job to be thinking hard about this, to be thinking about the environments into which we bring our children and how they make our children feel. It's not just about finding a diverse school or a diverse church, but asking the questions: "Who succeeds at this school? Who is given voice and authority in this community? If the needs of my child's racial group are not being met in this school or community, if they don't have access to everything they deserve and don't have true equity, how will I stand up and be an ally and an advocate for all of them?"

Standing up for what is right for your child is challenging, but take heart: Know that families don't become close by skating through the park on a sunny day. We become close when we jump into the hard stuff, because that's how we know who's really there for us. Facing these challenges together gives you the opportunity to become closer to your children than ever before. Adoption and race create complexity, but when we go there, we can have the most amazing relationships with our kids.

I've been a transracial adoptive parent for 25 years now. And all of the anxious parenting I did, all of my brilliant ideas about how my children should behave and what they should do, mattered far less than the work I did in standing up when I saw inequities and saying, "It's wrong when I see bias. It's wrong when I see racism, sexism, adoptism, homophobia." Being an activist let my children know that I have their backs and made them want to stay connected and close.

All of our children deserve to grow up knowing that they don't have to accept unfairness, that their parents who love them would never tell them to just smile and shrug it off, that they can and should stand up for themselves and for what's right. When you let your child know that you will always be his or her ally in the struggle for justice, you are building the foundation for a very close and loving relationship that will last a lifetime. **BT**

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