Helping Your Child Develop a Healthy & Positive Ethnic Identity

“Ethnic identity” and “racial identity” are terms that have often been used interchangeably. While they certainly are related, when broken down, they are somewhat different.

**Racial identity** is the racial background with which you identify and feel you can relate to best, whereas **ethnic identity** is, essentially, the culture, beliefs, and values of the heritage in which you identify. A person, for example, may identify as Latino (his or her race), but also feel a sense of belonging as being Spanish and Columbian (ethnic identities).

Both racial and ethnic identity are important facets in how we view ourselves and how others view us. It may sound simple, and yet it can actually be rather complex—especially for children and youth who were adopted into transracial adoptive families. There are often layers of identity issues that will unfold as your child grows that can sometimes create challenges in the process of developing healthy racial and ethnic identities.

For instance in the first few years of their lives, generally between the ages of birth to age five, children are unaware of differences as it relates to ethnic identity development. Children are essentially in the initial stage of ethnic identity development, during which they haven’t yet begun to explore their ethnicity. This may be due, in part, to unawareness and perhaps a lack of desire to know more at this time. However, between the ages of six and 11, as children mature and start to notice visible differences, their reactions to these differences may fluctuate between positive and negative, based on their own individual experiences.

When children are exposed to strong positive images related to adoption, they are able to link their differences to adoption, despite lacking a firm understanding of what it means to be adopted. Likewise, when children are exposed to strong positive images associated with their ethnic background, they may be more inclined to identify positively with a particular ethnic group, possibly without having a full understanding of what it means to be African American, Korean, etc.

On the flipside, when young children are exposed to negative images and messaging, such as stereotypes from peers at school, individuals in their community, or perhaps even what they are seeing on television, they may internalize some of what they have heard or seen and, in turn, harbor mixed feelings about their ethnicity. Some children might feel

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embarrassed and not want to identify with their ethnic group of origin. “I'm not African American, Native American, or Mexican. I'm just American.” “I was born in China, but I don’t really care about that. I don’t even remember what it was like because I was just a baby.”

Identity development really begins to pick up during the tween and teen years. Add in raging hormones, mood swings, and puberty and most parents might agree this often equates to total chaos! Most youth in this age group are trying their best to fit in, not wanting anything that makes them different; children are in search of trying to make sense of who they are and where they belong. Some tweens and teens might even want to hide the fact of their adoptions as a result.

Usually in the tween and teen years, and sometimes earlier, adolescents naturally begin to grow more curious about their adoption stories and ethnic heritage. As older children find themselves exposed to more people from diverse backgrounds, and as they begin to understand what it means to experience discrimination and prejudice, they may begin to become engrossed in wanting to know more about their roots. They may find themselves quickly moving from the one extreme of not wanting to identify with their ethnic group to the very opposite of embracing their roots and strongly identifying with their ethnic group. Some may also even go as far as beginning to have anger or negative feelings towards the dominant group and empathizing with other minority groups different from their own.

They generally have a better understanding of adoption, race, and ethnicity at this age, yet older children might still ask questions as they enter the second stage of ethnic identity development, often referenced as the period of search. Their feelings may change and their questions may begin to be more reflective of how they are feeling inside. Some youth may begin to question how they fit in with their adoptive families. They might experience sadness, joy, or perhaps feelings of guilt as they imagine what it would be like to be a part of a family in which most everyone looked like them. “Did I get my red hair and freckles from my birth mom or birth dad?” “Do I have other brothers and sisters who might look like me who were also adopted?” “Why wasn’t I able to stay with my birth family?” “Were my birth parents nice people?” “How is it possible that I am part African American, Vietnamese, and French?”

Perhaps they might also be thinking how cool it could be to speak another language or grow up in another country. They begin to learn more about their ethnic origin, as well as gather additional details about their adoption stories from various sources. Older children in this age group may feel the need to begin the grieving process as they try to make sense of why they were adopted. They may struggle to understand the ways in which their lives could have been different had they not been adopted.

The final stage of ethnic identity development is when an individual is confident and secure in having accepted or embraced his or her
own ethnic identity. Individuals who have reached this stage will often have a positive but realistic view of themselves and their ethnic group in which they identify. They have grown to accept what is and what may be. They have learned to break down what barriers they may have put up in their adolescent years, and have been able to truly make sense of who they are and where they belong – two key components in the search for one’s identity. Many of our children may not reach this stage until they have entered several years into adulthood. In the meantime, we, as parents, may be able to provide guidance for our children in their journey to finding themselves.

In order for children and youth adopted into transracial families to develop healthy ethnic identities, they need to feel safe and supported by their adoptive parents and their network of extended family and friends, as well as their school and community. However, the support and guidance they need stems beyond simple love. They need for you, their adoptive parent, or another adult who cares about them, to harbor a desire to learn and understand how racial and ethnic identity develop at various ages and stages, so that you can be more fully prepared and able to provide support as they grow. They also need you, as caregivers, to be willing to make changes and sacrifices that will help give them their best chance at having the most positive life experiences.

We know that ethnic identity is sometimes influenced by not only our values and beliefs, but also further shaped by our individual life experiences and the environment in which we grow up. We have identified some unique ways you can positively influence and support your child’s ethnic identity development below:

- Consider making some changes to enhance your family life as a transracial family. Examples:
  - Choose to live in a community that embraces cultural diversity,
  - Make and maintain connections with friends and neighbors who may be of the same racial or ethnic background as your child.

- Show interest in learning more about your child’s racial or ethnic background, and provide him or her with opportunities to explore those roots through different education and activities, such as:
  - Visit your local library to check out books you can read together.
  - Set aside time to attend a local event, when possible, that may provide an opportunity to learn more about the history of a particular racial/ethnic group your child is part of.
  - Choose to engage and participate in related support groups, culture camps, travel to your child’s country of origin, etc.

- Schedule time with your child to check in, or make it a point to have candid conversations with your child, about his or her challenges. Help to validate his or her feelings and help him or her to process and respond to uncomfortable situations. When necessary, help your child strategize and come up with appropriate ways to respond, perhaps through role play or just thinking about different

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scenarios.
- Don’t be afraid to seek additional positive formal or informal support and guidance for yourself and/or for your child. The larger your network and your child’s network, the more options you will both have to seek out help when you need it most.

Overall, identity development can be a very confusing time for your child, filled with questions, mixed emotions, and maybe even challenging behaviors at times. But it can also be an opportunity for you to use your own personal experiences or your transracial family adoption experience as a way to bridge those gaps with your child.

Many societal views related to race and culture in the world that we live in have evolved. However, we cannot discount that there still exist many people who have yet to embrace and accept those changes. That being said, even with the most culturally aware and supportive parents, family members, and friends, your child could still find himself or herself face to face with challenges that might include encounters with racism, discrimination, and other societal prejudices. Those experiences may leave your child feeling rejected, alienated, confused, and/or misunderstood. Furthermore, your child may begin to internalize some of those negative experiences, which can be harmful and directly result in a low sense of self-worth and, sometimes, even acting-out behaviors.

If your child comes from a multi-racial or multi-ethnic background, sometimes it can be challenging to identify with one specific group. He or she may feel like a player in a game of Twister, with part of one foot on a red dot, another on a yellow dot, and a partial hand on a blue dot. Each of those dots represents a different racial/ethnic identity group: African American, German, Polish. Your child may find himself or herself gravitating towards one of those groups more than another; or he or she may have the feeling of not quite belonging completely to any of those groups. When things become too overwhelming, and he or she can’t hold the position on that game board any longer, he or she collapses. Were it truly a game of Twister, your child would laugh, pick himself or herself up, and begin again. But in the “game of life,” he or she may need a little help getting back to his or her feet. As your child begins to explore his or her sense of self and belonging within any group, he or she may be experiencing the need to have you by their side so they won’t fall or so that, when they do fall, you’ll be there to help them up.

For more information about racial/ethnic identity development, feel free to contact the Coalition for Children, Youth, and Families or consider the resources included in this tip sheet.

Resources
- IFAPA: Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption, Strengthening Your Bicultural Family
- Pact’s Point of View: Helping Your Child Develop A Positive Racial/Ethnic Identity, by Jeannie Lin
- Child Welfare Information Gateway: Adoption and the Stages of Development