

# POV

## Adoption Stories

### BACKGROUND

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## Transracial Adoption

Transracial adoption — most often white families adopting children of color — has a charged history in the United States.

The practice flourished in the aftermath of major conflicts such as World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, when widespread death and destruction left thousands of children without parents or adequate resources. It was in the 1940s when American families first became aware of the plights of such children and began adopting from abroad. Specific programs developed that sought to facilitate international adoption. One such program, Operation Babylift, brought more than 2,000 children from Vietnam to the United States. Such adoptions marked a shift in U.S. practices, which historically had aimed to place children with parents of similar races.

Gradually, children of color began to be placed in white homes, with mixed results: While some families suffered harassment and even violence, others had few issues. Between 1968 and 1972, approximately 50,000 black and biracial children were adopted by white parents. At the time, the adoption of black children by white families was motivated largely by the increasing number of black children in foster care and the seeming lack of black adoptive families. In the early 1970s, the number of transracial adoptions rose as white infants became less available and the number of prospective adoptive parents continued to grow.

The adoption of black children by white families has long generated controversy in the United States, sparking criticism from both blacks and whites, as well as from some adoption professionals. In 1972, the practice of transracial adoption was publicly challenged. At the national conference of the North American Council on Adoptable Children, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) issued a formal statement opposing transracial adoption, citing concerns that such placements compromised children's racial and cultural identities and



amounted to a form of cultural genocide. The NABSW worried that black children raised in white homes would fail to develop effective coping strategies to deal with racism and discrimination and would experience identity conflicts as they grew older. The NABSW also challenged traditional adoption practices, raising questions about institutionalized racism within the adoption profession. The organization pointed to existing evaluation criteria for prospective adoptive couples that routinely prevented black families from qualifying and claimed that agencies were failing to recruit prospective black adoptive families and were, in fact, even passing them over in favor of white couples. By 1994, however, the NABSW released a new statement supporting transracial adoption in the case of a documented failure to find a home with black parents.

In the same year, Senator Howard Metzenbaum authored The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994 (MEPA), which mandated that adoption agencies receiving federal funds could not deny or delay adoptions based solely on racial difference. This was written partly in response to the growing number of children in foster care. Because the



language of that first act was open to interpretation, in 1996 Congress enacted the Inter-Ethnic Adoption Provisions (IEP), which specifically prohibited federally funded agencies from denying or delaying adoptions solely on the basis of race or national origin. These laws are designed both to decrease the length of time a child has to wait before being adopted and to eliminate racial discrimination. These laws have been controversial, however, and the debate surrounding transracial adoption has not diminished. Many people feel that transracial adoptees are emotionally scarred by their experience; others strongly disagree and suggest that the long-term outcome for transracial adoptees is very positive. Some suggest that the number of children in a particular racial group in need of foster care or adoption will always exceed the number of available families in that racial group. Others believe that current adoption practices are rife with racial discrimination and other barriers, and that greater efforts should be made to remove them. Still others advocate for more systemic support of economically and socially disadvantaged families in order to keep these families together and decrease the need for foster and adoptive placements. And finally, there are those who think that for

children of color adoption into a white family is preferable to the impermanence and instability of foster care.

A report issued in 2008 by the nonprofit Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute and endorsed by the Child Welfare League of America, the Adoption Exchange Association, the NABSW, Voice for Adoption and the Foster Care Alumni of America (among others) stated, however, that the act downplays race and culture too much.

The report stated that although transracial adoption itself does not produce psychological or other social problems in children, multicultural adoptive families do face some special challenges. Some public agencies have become hesitant to discuss race at all with adopting couples, however, for fear of being sued for discrimination. As a result, many new families go without the counseling and preparation they need to help them navigate the realities of living in a race-conscious society.

In its position statement on transracial adoptions, the North American Council on Adoptable Children, a group representing more than 400 American and Canadian child advocacy organizations, contends that adoptive parents of the same race as the child are best equipped



to provide him or her with the skills and strength to combat racism. The council also states, though, that if an appropriate family of the same race cannot be found, transracial adoption is a better alternative for a child than long-term foster care.

One provision of MEPA calls for the diligent recruitment of adoptive parents of color. However, the 2008 report found that the provision has not been well implemented and is not being enforced adequately. The report called for better enforcement of the provision through greater resources and funding for recruitment.

Many studies show that about three quarters of transracially adopted children adjust well to their new homes, but experts agree that there are steps multicultural families can and should take to promote children's well-being, self-esteem and sense of cultural identity, including celebrating cultures of all kinds, forming friendships with other interracial families, talking about cultural issues and adopting a no-tolerance policy on bias.

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## Development of Racial Identity

Racial identity might be defined as one's self-perception and sense of belonging to a particular group including not only how one describes oneself, but also how one distinguishes one's self from other ethnic groups. Racial identity in children develops in two stages: First, a child distinguishes race at a conceptual level, and second, he or she begins to assess his or her own membership in a racial group. This second stage usually occurs between the ages of 3 and 7. Children's attitudes toward their own races are greatly influenced by their interactions with and observations of the attitudes of those around them.

As adolescents, all children begin to establish separate identities from those of their parents. When children are of a different race than their parents, they may magnify the physical differences between them, and feel especially isolated as a result.

Beverly Daniel Tatum, psychology professor and president of Spelman College in Atlanta, found that one reason young people of color tend to build their identities around their racial backgrounds is that they see themselves as differing from the dominant images in American society. And the white majority, which tends to see itself as colorless, encourages this further with questions and observations about those perceived differences. White adolescents, in contrast, are more likely to see themselves as "normal" in terms of ethnic background.

There are conflicting thoughts about how explicit race conversations should be between parents and young children. On the one hand, in families where the issue of race is not addressed, children get the message that it is inappropriate to express their feelings and that the topic is taboo and perhaps even shameful or embarrassing. On the other hand, in homes where parents dwell on the issue extensively, children may attach too much significance to it, causing self-consciousness and anxiety.



## Adjustment Outcomes of Transracial Adoption

Considerable research has been conducted around the outcomes of transracial adoptions. A 12-year longitudinal study of 204 families and 366 children whose families included transracially adopted children, adopted white children and white birth children found that the transracial adoptees were as integrated into their families as the biological children. No significant difference in self-esteem was evident. After 12 years, with approximately half of the families still in the study, 18 adoptees had serious problems. However, in only one case was race a significant fac-

tor. All of the other problems could be traced to the children having been adopted at an older age (4 or older), learning disabilities, developmental delays or abuse before the adoption. Another review study found that the majority of transracially adopted children (75 to 80 percent) functioned well and demonstrated no more behavioral or educational problems at home or school than non-adopted children.

A Canadian study tracking families from Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec who had adopted internationally found that the self-esteem of inter-country adoptees when they reached adolescence was higher than that of the general population but lower than that of their sib-





lings. A large majority of the adoptees reported being comfortable with their ethnic backgrounds, although 10 percent identified themselves as white, despite coming from Korea, Bangladesh and Haiti.

In 2009, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute published an extensive examination of adult adoptive identity based on input from 468 adults who were adopted as children. Specifically, the study compared the experiences of white adoptees to those of adoptees from South Korea. The resulting 112-page report is entitled “Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption.” Central findings in that report include the following:

While the majority of Korean-born survey respondents reported experiencing race-based discrimination from strangers and classmates (and 39 percent from teachers), white respondents were more likely to feel discriminated against simply for being adopted, particularly within their extended families.

A significant majority of transracially adopted adults reported considering themselves to be, or wanting to be,

white as children. By adulthood, however, the majority had reconciled their racial identities, whether through increased interaction with a “like” community, reconsidering their roots after experiences with discrimination or simply maturing.

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