

Helping Your Adopted Child Maintain a Cultural Connection

If you're going through a transracial adoption, it's important to help your child develop a connection to her heritage. Here's how.

By **Kate Bayless**



Transracial adoption, the process of adopting a child of a race or ethnic

group other than your own, has grown dramatically in the last two decades. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' most recent National Survey of Adoptive Parents found that nearly half of adopted children have a parent who is of a different race, ethnicity, or culture than the child. Although 84 percent of transracial adoptions are international, it's still common for kids adopted from foster care and private adoptions.

The key to helping your child stay connected to his heritage, says Casey Call, Ph.D., developmental psychologist and associate research scientist at Texas Christian University, is starting early and finding a variety of ways to introduce the child's birth culture. "To help a child stay connected to [his] roots, bathe the child in a variety of cultural experiences that affect all of [his] senses -- seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting," Dr. Call says. These activities are important for both the child and the parent. When a child whose background differs from the parents is adopted, a multicultural family has been created," says Fern Johnson, a professor at Clark University, co-author of *The Interracial Adoption Option: Creating a Family Across Race*, and mother of two transracially adopted sons. Your child is not only joining the culture of your family; you are joining his, too.

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Talk about your child's history often and openly. The experts agree: Don't hide your child's adoption. Talk about it frequently, even before your new little bundle can coo a reply. "At an appropriate developmental level, talk about the story of your child joining the family by making a photo album, creating a collage, or recording the story of the child's arrival so he can listen to it," Dr. Call recommends. This is as much for the child's benefit as it is for yours. You need to be comfortable discussing the adoption and that only comes with practice.

Celebrate differences. Your daughter's ebony skin or crescent eyes. Your son's love of chicken feet or fermented lentils. Celebrate the unique qualities of all family members as strengths and help your family develop an attitude of openness to things that are different, whether it is traveling to new places, trying new foods and traditions, or learning a new language.

Cultivate an interest in the world. Introduce your children to the world beyond her town early. Dr. Call suggests getting a map -- a big one. "Post it in a family room and mark special places with pushpins or sticky notes of the place where each family member was born or has ancestors from, places the family has lived or visited, the cities where relatives or close friends live, or places you'd like to visit as a family."

Be attentive and authentic with your home decor. "The home environment should reflect the heritage and cultural background of the child, and the parents," Johnson says. "What is part of the home -- from the artwork on the walls to magazines, books, and food -- helps create the family." But this is more than just throwing a sitar on the wall or a nesting matryoshka doll on the coffee table. "We stress that what parents do to accomplish this must feel authentic to everyday family life rather than what some have termed "cultural tourism,"" Johnson says. This means that parents should avoid randomly displaying cultural items without understanding their role in the culture.

Choose toys that respect your child's birth culture. Each one of these small decisions sends subtle messages to your child about what is "normal." "Look for baby dolls whose skin color matches theirs," Dr. Call suggests, "or musical instruments that are native to where they were born." Most important of all? Play with them.

Seek out events that celebrate an aspect of your child's ancestry. "Many cities have cultural festivals that offer a wide range of events and entertainment," Johnson says. From cultural holiday celebrations to storytelling festivals, musical performances to dance productions, search out ways for the whole family to celebrate your child's heritage.

Read books together that reflect your child's culture. Reading books that celebrate many cultures is great, but Dr. Call suggests going a step further. "Be deliberate about searching out age-appropriate books that include characters who look like your adopted child and stories about the people, land, customs, and animals of your child's homeland," Dr. Call recommends. Check with your local librarian for recommendations or visit GoodRead's collection of children's diversity books, the Database of Award-Winning Children's Literature, and the Anti-Defamation League's list of multicultural and anti-bias books for children, which are searchable by ethnicity.

Make race and ethnicity part of the daily conversation at home. "For a child to feel her place in the world, there needs to be normalized daily recognition of that child's heritage," Johnson says. Conversations around the family dinner table can provide a good opportunity to talk about current political, social, or pop culture events related to race. This can be an excellent way to create a dialog on race and ethnicity with older adoptees, but don't avoid it if your children are younger. "These conversations need to be age-appropriate, but it's also important for the child to hear her parents discussing these things -- even if she does not completely understand what is being said."

Foster and develop relationships with people of the same ethnic or cultural heritage. One of the most important steps you can take is to help your adopted child develop relationships with peers, family friends,

community members, and other role models with the same heritage. Depending on your neighborhood, this may be a simple or difficult task. "This takes work and getting out of our comfort zone," Johnson admits, "but the lives of both your child and you as a parent will be enriched, and your child will understand that he is not isolated." Think broadly. "Check out churches, schools, day cares, or recreation programs for sports, dance or music," suggests Ellen Singer, a licensed clinical social worker and senior adoption therapist at The Center for Adoption Support and Education. "Look for pediatricians, hairdressers, or teachers who can be role models who are of your child's ethnic or cultural heritage." Connect with local adoption agencies for parenting support groups or multicultural playgroups.

Consider a culture camp. Organizations such as the Latin America Parents Association (LAPA), Korean Parents Association (KPA), and Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption (FRUA) offer camps or weekend getaways that allow adoptive children to participate in cultural activities and events with others from their home culture, Singer suggests. This can also be a great way to meet other families. Search online to see if there is a local chapter in your area.

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