

Boston Post Adoption Resources

VOICES IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION



INSIGHTS FROM ADOPTees, PARENTS & PROFESSIONALS

Conversations and Resources to Help
Adoptive Families
Promote a Healthy Racial Identity

BOSTON POST ADOPTION
RESOURCES

Voices in Transracial Adoption

Insights from Adoptees, Parents, and Professionals

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Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	iv
<i>About Boston Post Adoption Resources</i>	v
<i>In Gratitude</i>	vii
A Note to Parents on the Purpose of This Resource	1
A Parent's Introduction to Transracial Adoption	3
History of Transracial Adoption in the United States	5
Connecting Children with Their Racial Identity	9
How to Talk About Racial Identity and Give Adoptees a Voice	18
How We Can Help Children Process Current Events Around Race	24
Why Parents Should Study and Directly Address Race, Racism,...	30
How Parents Can Help with Micro- and Macroaggressions	35
Understanding an Adoptee's Thoughts About Birth Family	39
How Support Through Adoption-Competent Ther- apy Can Help	45
Conclusion: Conversations and Stories Can Educate and Heal	51
<i>Adoption-Related Glossary Terms</i>	53
<i>Sources</i>	56

Dedication

This book is dedicated to adult adoptee Jennifer Eckert,
founder of Boston Post Adoption Resources,
who envisioned a source of support that
she wished had been available during her earlier years,
and through boundless energy and generosity
created something truly unique
to ensure that adoptees, adoptive families, and birth families
feel valued, supported, and heard.



*Two-sided mask created by BPAR clinician Maya Rogers-Bursen,
reflecting on her transracial adoptee identity*

About Boston Post Adoption Resources

As a nonprofit, BPAR's mission is to provide specialized therapeutic support, connect individuals and families to resources, and educate the public about post adoption services to ensure that all those touched by adoption lead healthy, productive lives. Our team of licensed mental health professionals is specifically trained to deal with post adoption challenges with adoptees of all ages, parents, and birth parents in individual, family and group settings.

With respect to transracial adoption, we believe in honoring a child's beginnings, encouraging open family conversations, supporting children when they encounter bias and insensitive questions at school, and providing parents with resources to educate themselves in the hope that they will enlighten other adults in their children's lives, including teachers, coaches, and other parents.

For the adult adoptees we serve, we provide support around racial identity, racism, birth parent search, and other critical topics in our clinical practice. We encourage storytelling by providing creative forums such as the BPAR.org blog and Voices Unheard events which promote empathy and understanding in the community. Please visit our website at BPAR.org to learn more and explore our extensive offerings of online resources.

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Please note: The information provided in this book is not intended as a substitute for medical care or medical advice. Please consult with a medical care provider regarding any medical questions you may have. Boston Post Adoption Resources (BPAR) and its members, managers, officers, employees, agents, and the assigns of the same, disclaim any liability arising directly or indirectly from the use of this book.

In Gratitude

In *Voices in Transracial Adoption: Insights from Adoptees, Parents, and Professionals*, more than twenty-six adoptees or adoptive parents opened their hearts and shared their deepest thoughts about the joys and challenges of transracial adoption. We are extremely grateful for their honesty and courage.

This book is a product of the dedicated efforts of the [Boston Post Adoption Resources team](#), a group of mental health professionals and staff who are passionate about their mission as a nonprofit to provide resources to all touched by adoption.

In particular, Intake Coordinator/Director of Operations Erica Kramer, MSW, devoted many hours to interviewing adoptees and adoptive parents and researching transracial adoption. Much of the writing in *Voices in Transracial Adoption* is excerpted from blogs that Erica created for the BPAR.org website.

Additionally, Clinician/Development Coordinator Maya Rogers-Bursen, LMHC, a transracial adoptee, gathered numerous quotes used in this book in her 2020 campaign to create awareness about [“Why I Care About Adoption.”](#)

All BPAR clinicians contribute to the wealth of free resources on the BPAR website, and their blogs played a key role in *Voices in Transracial*

Adoption as well.

This book would not have been possible without Lucy Davis. Lucy shared her vision for this resource and contributed hours of her time and expertise both writing and editing to bring this work together. It is Lucy's hard work that brought this book to life.

Finally, we are indebted to the donors and grant foundations that give so generously to BPAR.

A Note to Parents on the Purpose of This Resource

Identity as it relates to race, especially in transracial and international adoption, has been a central theme in our post adoption clinical practice since Boston Post Adoption Resources (BPAR) was founded in 2012. As a nonprofit serving all touched by adoption and foster care, we have created this resource to widen the community of support for transracial adoptees and their families; to educate all on the impact of racism on adoptee mental health and well-being; and to connect families to resources to facilitate empathy, conversations, and healing, with a goal of promoting a healthy racial identity for all.

Voices in Transracial Adoption: Insights from Adoptees and Parents integrates our clinical knowledge as adoption-competent therapists, secondary sources, and our own primary research with individuals who reflect on their transracial adoption experiences. Our focus is on educating parents who are considering transracial adoption or have already built a family where the child adoptee's race or ethnic group differs from that of the adoptive parents. We reference important books, articles, and studies, but what makes this guide unique is that we frame these resources with first-person stories and reflections from adult transracial adoptees themselves, adoptive parents, and professionals. These are stories we have collected through interviews, blog collaborations, and community outreach.

It's important to note that *this book provides an introduction to the topic of transracial adoption*. The concepts of race, racism, racial identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion are incredibly complex and require and *deserve* a comprehensive process of education, exploration, and action. The recommendations that are provided here are general and are intended as starting points for exploration. It is imperative that parents of transracial adoptees create a culture of openness around race (through dialogue, self-exploration, and action) in order to adequately support their child through racial identity development. The exploration of racism is an ongoing process in which all members of the family need to be actively engaged. Please review the additional resources references throughout the chapters for further information.

Adoption is a lifelong journey. It doesn't need to be a lonely journey. While every situation is unique, if transracial adoption impacts your current or future family, you are part of a community with common experiences. We hope that by hearing the voices of people who have lived through these experiences, you will feel empowered to make informed decisions in the best interest of your child and will be encouraged to advocate for your child in every stage of development.

A Parent's Introduction to Transracial Adoption

The decision to adopt transracially is nuanced and complex. Especially since mid-2020, news and images have underscored the underlying racism and white privilege still very much present in our country, and they have highlighted the importance of talking with *all* children about race and racism. Much of the research about transracial adoption suggests that adoptees face a range of challenges, and the way parents address these challenges will affect how their child copes with feelings of loss and isolation, discrimination, and their racial and ethnic identity.

At Boston Post Adoption Resources (BPAR), our goal is to help build healthy, strong family systems. Achieving that goal sometimes requires parents to learn about topics that might be uncomfortable and to hold conversations that can be difficult to hear. But research shows that transracially adopted families can expect the best outcomes when parents proactively seek education on racist discrimination and stereotypes, understand their impact on identity, learn how to respond to hard questions, and embrace the practice of acknowledging and celebrating cultural and racial differences.

Learning how to parent a child of a different race is a process, not a one-time project, and ideally the process should begin even before adoption takes place. Prospective parents should closely examine the realities of adopting transracially and explore their own motivations

for doing so using a self-evaluation such as “Below the Surface: A Self-Assessment Guide for Anyone Considering Adoption Across Racial or Cultural Lines,” a tool available from Pact, An Adoption Alliance.[i] Before the child transitions into the home, parents should make informed decisions about where to raise the family and plan how to connect their child to people and opportunities related to the child’s cultural and racial heritage. And parents need to prepare themselves to provide the appropriate level of support their child will need throughout all the developmental phases, even in infancy when they can practice telling their child their adoption story. These steps require education, empathy, and commitment.

In *Voices in Transracial Adoption: Insights from Adoptees and Parents*, we share many useful resources. We provide an historical perspective, parenting tools, and information on adoption-competent individual, family, and group therapy. But most importantly, *we give voice to the people who have actually lived this experience*. Throughout this guide readers will benefit from the words of transracial adoptees who are now adults, reflecting on what helped them—and what didn’t help. Parents reveal the most important lessons they learned, and what they are still working on. Professionals weigh in as well. The world of post adoption is a community. We share special bonds. And we are here for one another.

[i] Beth Hall and Gail Steinberg, “Below the Surface: A Self-Assessment Guide for Anyone Considering Adoption Across Racial or Cultural Lines” (2009). Retrieved from Pact, An Adoption Alliance, at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/library/>.

History of Transracial Adoption in the United States

PREVIEW

- In the United States today, over 40% of adoptions are transracial
- The number of transracial adoptees in kindergarten rose 50% between 1999 and 2011
- Adoptive parent demographics barely changed, the majority continuing to be “white, older, well-educated, and relatively affluent”
- Since the 1994 passage of the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA), some children have been placed in permanent homes more quickly, but once in those homes, parents were not prepared to support their ethnic education

DETAILS

In the past, transracial adoptions in the United States have been controversial. In the 1990s, black social workers expressed strong reservations against placing black children in white homes. However, there were also concerns at the time that children of color were spending

more time in foster care because social workers were trying to match the ethnic and racial makeup of the adoptive family. In 1994, Congress passed MEPA (The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act). The goal of this act was to increase placements for children of color. MEPA required that social workers make a strong effort to increase the number of racially and ethnically diverse foster and adoptive parents; however, it “prohibited the use of a child’s or a prospective parent’s race, color or national origin to delay or deny the child’s placement.”[i]

Since the passage of MEPA, studies have indicated that some children have been placed in permanent homes more quickly, but once in those homes, parents were not prepared to support their ethnic education. A study completed by the GAO (Government Accountability Office) in 2004, however, found that white children spent an average of two years in foster care while black children spent an average of three years in foster care.

In 1958, the Indian Adoption Act allowed American Indian children to be adopted by white families. There is a long history in the United States of removing Native American children from their families in an attempt to “assimilate” them through placements including boarding schools. Wade Goodwyn of NPR reports that The Indian Adoption Project during the 1950s paired Native American children with white families in what they termed “enlightened adoption.”[ii] At that time it was possible to buy a child for \$10. The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), enacted in 1978, was established to ensure that steps would be taken for Native American children placed in care to remain with their tribe or extended family. This would allow the child to develop a healthy sense of cultural identity.[iii] Recent court cases have challenged this law.

Intercountry, or international, adoption in the United States has its own unique history. In 1933, The Hague Convention on Protection of Children was introduced on behalf of children adopted across

national borders. This international treaty was established to protect children and families who are adopted internationally, including protection against human trafficking.[iv] Intercountry adoption gained popularity in the United States after Henry and Bertha Holt founded Holt International Children's Services, the first agency in the US to focus on international adoption. Initially, the Holts petitioned Congress to adopt several children themselves, and they ultimately established an agency to help families adopt babies who were born following the Korean War, most of whom were children of Korean women and American soldiers. International adoption rates grew throughout the next several decades; in 1992, when China adopted the one-child policy, thousands of Chinese families placed their daughters in orphanages, and the number of international adoptions rose sharply.[v] In 2004, 22,990 children were adopted internationally in the United States. Annual international adoption numbers have since slowly decreased for a variety of reasons, and several countries, such as Guatemala and Romania, have struggled with scandals and reports of unethical practices. The Gladney Center for Adoption notes that only about 4,059 intercountry adoptions were reported in the United States in 2018.[vi]

Measuring adoptions overall, a 2017 study by the Institute of Family Studies, "The Changing Face of Adoption in the United States," compared adoptees in kindergarten in 1999 with adoptees in 2011. During that time period, the number of transracial adoptions, many of which were international adoptions, rose 50%. The demographics of the adoptive parents, though, barely changed, the majority continuing to be "white, older, well-educated, and relatively affluent." [vii] In the United States today, estimates are that over 40% of adoptions are transracial.

[i] Reggie Snowden, "Briefing the Multiethnic Placement Act: Minority Children in State Foster Care and Adoption," Child Welfare League of America (September 21, 2007). Retrieved from <https://www.cwla.org/briefing-the-multiethnic-placement-act-minority-children-in-state-foster-care-and-adoption/>.

[ii] Wade Goodwyn, "Native American Adoption Law Challenged as Racially Biased," NPR (December 17, 2017). Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/17/677390031/native-american-adoption-law-challenged-as-racially-biased>.

[iii] Kathy D. LaPlante, "The Indian Child Welfare Act and Fostering Youth Cultural Identity," *CYF News* (December 2017). Retrieved from <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2017/12/indian-child-welfare>.

[iv] Sue Kuligowski, "What International Adoption Statistics Should I Know?" Gladney Center for Adoption (June 9, 2019). Retrieved from <https://adoption.org/international-adoption-statistics-know>.

[v] "Capsule History of International Adoption," The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, Brandeis University. Retrieved from <https://www.brandeis.edu/investigate/adoption/history.html>.

[vi] Kuligowski.

[vii] Nicholas Zill, "The Changing Face of Adoption in the United States," Institute for Family Studies (August 8, 2017). Retrieved from <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-changing-face-of-adoption-in-the-united-states>.

Connecting Children with Their Racial Identity

PREVIEW

- Embrace and celebrate the child's cultural heritage
- Connect the child to people of their race
- Continue to offer cultural opportunities and discussions throughout childhood

DETAILS

Racial identity is both complex and fluid over the course of any person of color's life. Life circumstances and events, friendships, the community they are surrounded by, and even romantic relationships can and will continue to shape how a transracial adoptee experiences themselves based on the world around them. It is important to understand that there is no right or wrong way to represent one's racial identity. We can't possibly cover all there is to know about the ways to cultivate a healthy racial identity, but we do hope this overview chapter can serve as an introduction to concepts and a roadmap for further exploration.

The concept of identity for an adoptee is complex. The beginning narrative of a transracial adoptee's life is often built upon loss, which can have a significant impact on their identity. Many transracial adoptees, particularly international adoptees, have very limited or no information at all about their beginnings. The experience of not knowing where they come from can profoundly shape their sense of agency, self-determinism, confidence, and self-esteem, while raising a host of unanswered questions that can be internalized in many ways.

The search for identity, already a normative crisis for teenagers, becomes even more complicated for adoptees in their teen years and can ebb and flow well into adulthood. This identity struggle for teens and young adults is commonly seen at our clinical practice at Boston Post Adoption Resources where we serve the adoption constellation throughout the lifespan.

Nate explains some of the complexity. "As a transracial Korean adoptee growing up in a town in Maine, I was surrounded by people who didn't look like me. The desire to fit in as an adolescent is powerful on its own. When combined with other identities, the intersectionality of being a person of color, Asian American male, and all the associated stereotypes from popular culture—the model minority, the martial arts expert, Asian men as being effeminate—all were internalized for me. I didn't want to look different; I didn't want to be seen as these stereotypical constructs. So, I would often reject my differences and do whatever I could to downplay them. It wasn't until college where I was surrounded by other people of color, Asian Americans who looked like me, who experienced the world in similar ways as me, that I was able to accept myself and find ways to understand my place in the world—as a Korean American, Korean adoptee, Asian American, person of color."

As we highlighted in BPAR's book, [*Adoption Is a Lifelong Journey*](#), parents can promote a healthy racial identity by teaching children about the culture they came from and celebrating it together early on. The

book provides narrative and resources on the importance of talking about race from day one of fostering or adoption.[i]

Research has highlighted the importance of cultural socialization for transracial adoptees. In their 2010 research study, “Cultural Socialization Practices in Domestic and International Transracial Adoption.”[ii], the authors note that research around transracial adoption suggests that integrating the child’s culture while supporting and encouraging relationships with others from their culture is the best way to help them develop a positive racial identity as well as give them the skills to handle discrimination.[iii] However, they found that the most frequently used methods to introduce culture and race to most children may not be the most effective, because they typically required little contact with people of the child’s race and ethnicity.

Parents have a number of options for connecting their child to people of their own race. Proactively choosing to live in a diverse community enables that kind of connection from the beginning. In addition, heritage camps and [adoption-related support groups](#) give children a forum for exploring their cultural identity outside of the home and normalizing their experiences as adoptees.

Marta, a 33-year-old BPAR clinician who was adopted from Colombia, talks about how hard it was to grow up in a white community. She states, “I believed I was the only person in the entire world adopted from Colombia.” She remembers watching the TV show “[This is Us](#)” as an adult and identifying with Randall, who was also adopted transracially. There is an episode where Randall makes a mark in his book whenever he encounters a black person like himself. Marta states, “I would have had no marks.”

Over the years, the thinking has begun to shift, and adoptive parents have become more thoughtful about introducing their children to their cultural and racial identity. There is a wide variation in the extent that parents include their children’s cultural heritage in their day-to-day life.

Cultural lessons can include reading books, celebrating holidays, eating foods, and attending culture camps. Some parents enroll their children in language classes, and some make heritage visits to their country of origin. *Jodi Waddell*, an adoptive parent who works at Bright Futures Adoption Center, stresses the importance of living in a community that is diverse and socializing with members of the child's ethnic community. She adds that it is essential for parents to "know the child's history and understand the rich, powerful legacy they come from. Share it with them, so they can be proud of their history."

Alex affirms that her parents were open about discussing transracial adoption from the very beginning, and they regularly embraced traditions from her cultural origins. However, their community where she grew up was homogeneous, and she struggled through her teen years. In her BPAR blog "[Learning to Be Different – My Transracial Adoption Story](#)," she writes, "The universal adolescent urge to fit in coupled with a racially homogeneous social environment caused me to refuse to acknowledge that I was different altogether. People would say to me, 'Oh, you're not a real Asian though,' because my parents were white or because they perceived my social performance to be 'not Asian enough' to fit their concept of what it meant to be Asian. Meanwhile, I had absolutely no concept of what it meant to be Asian because I had no model." [iv]

In her article, "The Realities of Raising a Kid of a Different Race," Karen Valby cites a 2008 report from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, an adoption research and policy organization, that reaffirmed that "black children had a greater sense of racial pride when their parents acknowledged racial identity, moved to integrated neighborhoods, and provided African American role models." [v] The report also found that black kids whose white parents minimized the importance of racial identity became reluctant to identify themselves racially.

"I do know we have to acknowledge race and I wish our kids only

needed love, but they also need to see themselves in others, to know that they look different in their transracial family but they are not different,” Megan notes in [**a BPAR blog about learning to raise a child of another race**](#). “Prior to meeting my sweet boy, I never counted how many people of color were surrounding me at any particular time. Now I am forever tallying in my mind, no matter where I am. I am always aware of whether he is having representation or not.” Megan shares ways she introduces diversity in the life of her young family, admitting, “All of it is a work in progress. I try to say yes more when friends ask us to do activities or go places where I know we are going to be surrounded by POC [People of Color]. Oh goodness, I feel like I am learning every day.”[vi]

In the case of an intercountry or international adoption, some families opt to visit the child’s country of origin together as a way to better understand the birth culture. This travel yields better outcomes when parents first encourage their child to be honest about their expectations. “I was sure the trip to India was because they were going to return me and I was sure my dad was going to get to play with all of my toys back home,” Maya, a BPAR clinician, writes in her [**BPAR blog about returning to her orphanage**](#) in India when she was seven. She cautions parents by asking, “Have you told your children that they will be coming home with you after the trip is over?”[vii]

Studies have shown that as a child gets older, their family’s involvement in cultural activities tend to wane. This is often because the child has expressed a decreasing interest in this exposure. Parents should continue to openly address the child’s native culture and to provide opportunities, even if the child seems reluctant. In addition to offering repeated opportunities for conversation, parents can provide physical reminders of their openness. For example, they might display art from the native country or pictures of birth family, learn and use some of their child’s birth language in the home, travel as a family to the birth

country frequently, or make a point of donating to charitable causes in the birth country.

“My parents have always tried their best to keep me connected to my East Asian heritage,” *Marisa*, who grew up in a predominantly white community, explains in her blog, [“The Many Identities of Me: Coming to Terms with My Identity as a Transracial Adoptee.”](#) “We tried to make dumplings for the Lunar New Year, we all tried to learn how to use chopsticks (I unfortunately am the only one who succeeded), and I have a small library of books exploring the Asian and Asian American experience curated over the years by my mom.” As a pre-teen and adolescent, “It was this age that I began to truly resist efforts from my parents to engage with my Chinese identity. Looking back, I think on some level I could sense that even my Asian American friends were going through a similar phase in their lives too. Like many 12- and 13-year-olds, I think we were all trying to carve out a unique identity for ourselves while simultaneously trying not to stand out. We wanted to be cool, but we did not want to be the ‘nerdy Asian’ or ‘weird’ kid. As a result, we all had a tendency to downplay the things that might have made us stand out, the things that made us Asian.”[viii]

When *Marisa* moved to a college dorm with a richly diverse student body, she recalls, “It was my first time experiencing what it was like to consistently not be the only person of color or the only Asian in the room. Seeing their varying levels of love and interest in their own unique and oftentimes multicultural backgrounds gave me the validation and confidence to explore my own Asian and Chineseness.”

Liam, a 24-year-old adopted from South Korea, spoke to BPAR about what it was like for him to grow up in a Boston Irish neighborhood. He remembers that his mother tried very hard to expose him to Korean culture. She sent him to Korean school, and they hosted a Korean exchange student in their home. He has baby pictures wearing traditional Korean gowns. He strongly feels that “parents should

absolutely try to do these things, but not to push it too hard. Know that kids change over time, and maybe bring it up off and on.”

Cathy, an adoptive mom of two children of color, tried to find “every resource we could” when her children were young. She states, “We owned every book that had brown kids, we went to conferences, we even owned *The Black Parenting Book*.” The family initially lived in a town which was “very white, it was not diverse at all.” They chose to move to a new community, and although it is “not perfect,” it is more diverse. When the children were little, they were involved in a play group with adoptees of color. Cathy notes, “It was nice to see our family reflected in other families.” The family joined a church that has several transracial families, and this connection has provided a supportive community.

Fortunately, the list of available resources grows constantly. One of the best broad resources we recommend first to parents who approach BPAR is the Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association’s publication titled “Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family.”[ix]

[i] Kelly DiBenedetto, Katie Gorczyca, and Jennifer Eckert, *Adoption Is a Lifelong Journey*, Boston Post Adoption Resources (2017). <https://bpar.org/adoption-is-a-lifelong-journey-book/>.

[ii] M. Elizabeth Vonk, Jaegoo Lee, Josie Crolley-Simic, “Cultural Socialization Practices in Domestic and International Transracial Adoption,” *Adoption Quarterly* 13, no. 3-4 (2010): 227–247. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10926755.2010.524875>.

[iii] McGinnis et al., “Beyond Culture camp: Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in adoption.” Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, (2009): 245.

[iv] Alex Romero, “Learning to Be Different – My Transracial Adoption Story,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (July 15, 2020). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/learning-to-be-different-my-transracial-adoption-story/>.

[v] Karen Valby, “The Realities of Raising a Kid of a Different Race,” *Time* (January 28, 2020).

Retrieved from <https://time.com/the-realities-of-raising-a-kid-of-a-different-race/>.

[vi] Megan Cahill, “Learning How to Raise a Child of Another Race – My Journey as an Adoptive Parent,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (July 28, 2020). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/learning-how-to-raise-a-child-of-another-race-my-journey-as-an-adoptive-parent/>.

[vii] Maya Rogers-Bursen, “Back to the Beginning,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (February 26, 2019). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/back-to-the-beginning-birth-country-visit/>.

[viii] Marisa Nardone Mahoney (□□□), “The Many Identities of Me: Coming to Terms with My Identity as a Transracial Adoptee,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (March 3, 2021). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/the-many-identities-of-me-coming-to-terms-with-my-identity-as-a-transracial-adoptee/>.

[ix] “Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family,” Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association.

Retrieved from http://www.ifapa.org/pdf_docs/TransracialParenting.pdf.

How to Talk About Racial Identity and Give Adoptees a Voice

PREVIEW

- Conversations should start at the very beginning
- The level of discussion varies depending on the developmental phase
- It might take years for an adoptee to embrace their own story
- True narratives of transracial adoption tend to be suppressed in favor of idealized versions

DETAILS

Talking about race is hard, but it is important to start the conversation at the very beginning. *Waddell* recommends that parents have conversations organically with their children, throughout everyday life, in order to help the child develop a sense of themselves that includes their racial and ethnic identity. *Marta* recalls how difficult this was for her growing up. She states, “I remember being insecure about anything about me that was not identifiably ‘white.’ When I was 11 years old and feeling

insecure about the hair in front of my ears, a normal genetic trait for a Latina woman, my adoptive caregiver's response was to send me to electrolysis. This reinforced there was something wrong with me, and the solution was painful and permanently erased a part of my body that was connected to my roots." It wasn't until she went to a magnet high school and met her first boyfriend, who was half black, half white, that her racial identity began to shift. Marta declares, "He modeled for me how to be half-and-half, how to be fierce about who you are. He was so comfortable with who he was, he modeled that for me. There was nothing he wanted to change about me."

Sharon, an adult adoptee, notes that transracial adoption is wonderful, but it also comes with challenges: "Adoption is great, so many great things come out of it, but we have to acknowledge some of the not-so-great things, too." She wishes that her parents "had been more open to Korean culture or asked me if I was interested in learning more about it." She felt worried that she would be seen as "disrespectful" or they would feel "hurt" if she asked more about her adoption. She feels it is important to "have a more open dialogue," to acknowledge that her story was unique. Sharon recommends that adoptive parents give more resources to their children and provide them with opportunities to explore their culture.

Cathy, the adoptive mother of two, has spoken to her children about race and racism throughout their lives. "We talk a lot about race and racism and who has the power. We want them to understand the history, but not have to carry it." Cathy adds, "They are raised culturally white, but when they walk out our door, they are seen as black." She worries about how they are treated and talks to the kids about how unfortunate it is to "be perceived in a dangerous way. This is not a conversation that white parents have to have with their kids."

Waddell encourages parents to talk with their children about discrimination. Parents need to be prepared themselves, so they can prepare

their child. Remember that the parent's experience and the child's experience will be different. It is important to make strong connections with others who have the same racial or ethnic makeup as your child. This provides rich experiences for learning more about your child's culture, as well as great role models and mentors for your child.

Nicole Chung, author of *All You Can Ever Know*, talks about how important it has been for her to speak honestly with her parents about her transracial adoption. She states, "It feels like my duty as my white family's de facto Asian ambassador to remind them that I am not white, that we do experience this country in different ways because of it, that many people still know oppression far more insidious and harmful than anything I've ever faced. Every time I do this, I am breaching the sacred pact of our family, our once-shared belief that my race is irrelevant in the presence of their love. But withholding hard truths and my honest opinions would also sell short the love I have for them, and they for me. The fierce wish I still harbor for them to understand me for who I am, stand with me in love and full acceptance, persists because they chose me and they raised me: we are one another's responsibility." [i]

Liam states, "I have this in-between feeling about everything. There's this idea of being a Twinkie—I feel white inside, but Asian outside." He adds, "There's this discord—I connect better to the Boston Irish side, I have a lot of grit and I will always stand up for family and friends. But Korean is still a large part of who I am." Liam remarks that his interest in his heritage and his adoption has ebbed and flowed over the years. As he has grown and changed, he has become more open to sharing his story, and he has noticed that people tend to be "very curious" about him once they learn he is adopted. In high school, he recalls, "I was a closed door. I did not engage in a lot of conversation about my adoption. I wasn't open to my story. I had to do a lot of tripping and falling until I felt more comfortable telling my story."

Lisa Wool-Rim Sjoblom, author of the graphic memoir, *Palimpsest*:

Documents from a Korean Adoption, was interviewed in *Electric Lit* on January 28, 2020. She speaks about her trip to Korea to search her birth family, and how, in spite of the pain and feelings stirred up, it also helped her to connect to her heritage and culture. She remembers growing up in Sweden and what this was like for her: “[What] I struggled with growing up was about trying not to be Asian, not to be an adoptee, trying to be white, trying desperately to fit into something that I could never fit into.” She adds, “It took me over 30 years to just accept the fact that I’m Asian. I finally feel comfortable with that. I don’t feel disappointed when I see myself in a mirror, or I feel disappointed, but on my own terms. But I don’t feel anymore that I wish I was blond, or that I wish I had blue eyes. I can acknowledge a lot of things that I had just been pushing down in my desperate need to fit into all these narratives about what I’m supposed to be as an adoptee.”[ii]

There is a narrative out there that adoption equals rescue. Over and over, the adoptees that we speak with talk about the danger of this narrative, and certainly it was a topic at BPAR’s Voices Unheard adult adoptee creative forum. It places a burden on adoptees to deny any struggles they have with their story and suggests that they should only focus on the positive aspects. Transracial adoptions encompass an added layer where adoptive parents are seen as “white saviors.” Nicole Beede writes, “Adoptee voices are often muted, and narratives of transracial adoption tend to be idealized. Take, for instance, the trend on social media to martyr adoptive parents—which consistently bothers me—when referencing adoption: the idea that adoption is only beautiful and joyous. The public denies the fact that adoption is also deeply personal (for the adoptee, the birth family, and the adoptive parents), sad, and confusing. The idea of adoptees being ‘lucky,’ ‘chosen,’ and ‘grateful’ should not be the focus of our culture’s conversations about adoption.”[iii]

“One thing I often hear adoptees and those who grew up in out-of-

biological home placement talk about is feeling shut down when they express anything other than simple gratitude for their experiences,” LC, a BPAR clinician explains. “The acknowledgement of someone’s truth is necessary for healing to happen.”

The best outcomes occur when parents open a door to dialogue early and continue to welcome discussions throughout various developmental phases. Parents who start telling their child about their adoption story and birth culture at the very beginning, even in infancy, can practice the narrative and get comfortable sharing it. Generally, at around age four, children start to recognize race and differences. Parents can invite discussion and help with language to use. In elementary school, when other children begin to ask questions like, “Why is your mom a different color?” and school projects require a baby picture or details about a family tree, a sense of loss and feeling different can result in strong emotions and behavioral responses. Parents can rehearse how to respond to difficult questions while also teaching that they have the right not to answer intrusive questions at all if they don’t want to.

Adolescence is already a time of separation from parents, and transracial adoption adds to the complexity since this is a phase when teens are extra sensitive about how other people view them. Teens might feel angry about being adopted and not having the same skin color as a parent. They can find it hard to express that anger, feeling like they must protect their parents and never say anything bad. It’s also common for adoptees this age to think a lot about birth parents, but not admit this out of loyalty to their adoptive parents. If parents have been open to dialogue all along, teens will feel safer about being honest with parents. Having this connection in place is also essential as they pick up signals when the media and peers talk about race and racism. They, themselves, could be experiencing microaggressions and the effects of racism at this point.

[i] Nicole Chung, *All You Can Ever Know: A Memoir*, Catapult (2018): 208.

[ii] Marci Calabretta Cancio-Bello, “This Graphic Memoir About Adoption Isn’t Interested in Comfortable Answers,” *Electric Lit* (January 28, 2020). Retrieved from <https://electricliterature.com/this-graphic-memoir-about-adoption-isnt-interested-in-comfortable-answers/>.

[iii] Nicole Beede, “The Trauma and Healing Involved in Being a Transracial Adoptee,” *Elephant Journal* (January 10, 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2020/02/trauma-healing-living-as-a-transracial-adoptees/>.

How We Can Help Children Process Current Events Around Race

PREVIEW

- News stories around race can exacerbate pre-existing trauma
- Parents should follow the child's lead and give developmentally appropriate information
- Behaviors may mask underlying emotions
- Expressive therapy can help children articulate their feelings

DETAILS

We know that all adoptees have already experienced different forms of trauma. When transracial adoptees are exposed to **vivid images and news stories about traumatic events** around race, it can disrupt their sense of safety both physiologically and emotionally.^[i]

Some children may be ready to verbalize their feelings. Parents should look for signs that their child wants to talk. Sometimes questions serve as clues, but often parents have to watch for more subtle signs like hovering while they are doing chores. BPAR clinician Kelly advises,

“Ask what they’ve heard, how they feel about it, and if they have any questions. Listen to their response with full attention, being sure not to minimize or downplay their feelings; they are real, and they can be intense.”

A child’s questions should guide the amount of information to provide. Parents who share information in an age-appropriate way can help them feel safe and gain a better understanding of what is happening. When it’s the parent’s turn to talk, it’s okay to admit feeling sad or angry. In fact, honesty plays a role in helping a child feel safe and to feel more connected to the family. Teens, in particular, need to know they can have open conversations with parents. We suggest modeling that you can speak genuinely about your own feelings, without telling your child what to think.

Other children may rely on behavior as a coping mechanism instead of verbalizing their thoughts. Often behaviors mask the child’s true feelings and can be easily misinterpreted, BPAR clinician Darci asks parents, “What could that behavior be communicating to you?” She writes in her blog [“Big Feelings – A Parenting Guide to Understanding the Emotions Behind Behavior”](#), “It’s important to remember that behaviors always occur in service of meeting a need for a child. When we understand behavior as an attempt at regulation and communication, we can start to think about how to respond to the underlying need.”[ii]

Some children may fear their emotions and attempt to guard themselves against all feelings, as they experience them as overwhelming or threatening. In order to overcome this persistent state of fear or avoidance, children need to consistently experience an environment where they feel safe.

Parents who see their child struggling to articulate their feelings verbally can consider drawing, writing, or imaginative play as ways to explore what they are thinking. Expressive therapy is especially beneficial when children are surrounded by news about racism and

traumatic events. Parents can encourage creative responses or reach out to a mental health professional for support.

In June 2020, an 11-year-old transracial adoptee, using a whiteboard in a telehealth session with BPAR, represented what it is like to be adopted and a person of color. “Some of it is fun, but most of it is hard,” she said.



The 11-year-old artist and her family take up three windows of the house. The TV in the top left window shows the news in relation to Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter protest. The big red dot outside the house represents the virus.

The process of drawing following George Floyd's death opened the door to understanding a 10-year-old transracial adoptee's interpretation. When asked what she would like to see in the world, she said, "I want to see black people being treated the same way as white people."



The 10-year-old artist shows George Floyd on the ground with Derek Chauvin's knee on his neck for "8 minutes and 46 seconds." To the left people hold cameras capturing what was happening with a Black Lives Matter sign in the air.

After seeing protester signs in her neighborhood, an 8-year-old transracial adoptee created this image.



The 8-year-old artist shares that this is a Black Lives Matter sign “with confetti all over to celebrate us.”

Many of us react to stress and anxiety with behavioral changes, loss of appetite, and altered sleep patterns. If you see these changes in your child, pay careful attention. Seek help from a mental health professional if you are concerned.

[i] Kelly DiBenedetto, “Images and Talk of Violence—How Parents Can Help Kids Cope,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (January 14, 2021). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/images-and-talk-of-violence-how-parents-can-help-kids-cope/>.

[ii] Darci Nelsen, “Big Feelings—A Parenting Guide to Understanding the Emotions Behind Behavior,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog

(February 19, 2021). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/big-feelings-a-parenting-guide-to-understanding-the-emotions-behind-behavior/>.

Why Parents Should Study and Directly Address Race, Racism, and White Privilege

PREVIEW

- Research suggests that transracial adoptees face a range of challenges; the way parents address these challenges will affect how their child copes
- Stigma and injustice for children of color persists even when their parents benefit from white privilege
- Children often worry that they should not bring up racial identity with their parents
- Children of parents who think they are doing right by being “color blind” may experience repressed anxiety and trauma

DETAILS

In a 1989 essay in *Peace and Freedom* magazine, Wellesley College professor Peggy McIntosh introduced the concept of “white privilege.” “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day.” She lists conditions

in her daily life that attach to her skin color privilege but are taken for granted, including: “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed;” “When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is;” and “If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure . . . that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.” Her essential construct of white privilege is that “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow “them” to be more like “us.”[i]

It is important for adoptive parents who choose to adopt transracially to explore and recognize their own white privilege and their feelings about race and racism prior to adopting. A BPAR blog on [understanding white privilege](#) addresses the uncomfortable feelings that can arise from this topic at the beginning. Identity development models anticipate five phases to the point of acceptance, from conformity to integrative awareness.[ii]

After adoption, parents need to feel comfortable talking about race with both their child and people in their community. In her life as an adoptive parent and work at an adoption center, *Waddell* notes a paradox: Transracial adoptees receive the benefits of white privilege and opportunities, but they also face stigma and injustice that people of color and other marginalized people face. She stresses the importance of parents “stepping out of [their] comfort zone and asking uncomfortable questions.” Waddell recommends Robin Diangelo’s book *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* to all prospective parents of transracial children.

Gemma, an adoptive parent to two daughters born in Liberia, West Africa, says, “I remember the beginning of our life together with amazing clarity. My family and community embraced them, and our days were happy and joyful. But in the early years of our life together, I made

some very ignorant statements in the context of my interracial family because I had no concept of my privilege. . . . I realize now, I was still centered on my own world view, my whiteness, and leaning on my privilege.” Shocked by white supremacist actions in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 and further bolstered by 2020 events, Gemma has made a lifestyle shift. “Like diet, exercise and other aspects of my physical, mental and emotional care, dedicated time to learning about systemic and individual racism is a daily activity.” She suggests that white parents should consider Loyal Saad’s guided journal to the book she co-authored with Robin Diangelo titled *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World and Become a Good Ancestor*.

Adoptee Nishta Mehra shares her story in her 2019 memoir, *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion*. She describes what it is like to grow up as a “brown girl,” the child of Indian immigrants, growing up in a “white world.” As an adult, she and her white partner adopted a black child. “Not seeing’ color is, of course, a form of privilege; it means that things are oriented around you and others like you... For the rest of us, even if we wanted to, not seeing is never an option.”[iii]

In her memoir [*All You Can Ever Know*](#), Nicole Chung describes the advice that her parents were given when they brought Nicole, who is of North Korean heritage, to their hometown: They were encouraged to take a “color blind” approach. “No one ever so much as hinted to my parents that adopting across racial and cultural lines might prove a unique challenge, one they needed to prepare for specifically” (Chung, p. 29). It was felt that it would be best to act as if Nicole looked exactly like her adoptive parents. As an adult, however, Nicole realized that this approach left her feeling that she was not allowed to talk about her racial identity, nor did she feel comfortable sharing with her family incidences of discrimination at school. She writes, “My parents, I assumed, would never accept this. To them, I was *not their Korean child*, I was their

child, their chosen gift from God. They had waited so long and then they had gotten me, and there was no room in this radiant narrative to explain why I did not quite fit in. It would have felt like the greatest of betrayals to tell them I didn't belong in this place, this town, this *life* – all they would hear, I felt sure, was that I didn't think I belonged in our family.”[iv]

Sharon, adopted from South Korea at five months old, talks about growing up in a predominantly white community. Her parents felt that it was most important to “treat me as part of our white family.” They introduced her to very little Korean culture. Sharon felt she was lucky to be adopted, and “I didn't want them to feel I was disrespectful. I wanted to show them that I was happy and grateful.” As a result, however, she realized when she was much older that this approach affected her sense of self and her racial identity. Although when she was younger, she typically spent time only with white people, she has come to understand in adulthood how important it is to spend time with “more people that look like me.”

Nicole Beede writes in her article, “The Trauma and Healing Involved in Being a Transracial Adoptee,” published in the *Elephant Journal* January 10, 2020, “Being ‘colorblind’ is not an acceptable way to view race; and claiming to be colorblind actually communicates to others that differences are negative. I ask people to recognize that being one of the few people of color in every space we enter is something that TRAs (Transracial Adoptees) are conditioned to expect. In my case, this expectation has led to repressed anxiety and trauma that manifest internally and externally as anxiety, depression, and manic energy, with a loss of identity.”[v]

To help all in the transracial adoption constellation, clinicians at BPAR have compiled a comprehensive set of resources on anti-racism, social justice, and related topics on our website's [Transracial Adoption Resources page](#).

[i] Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom* (July/August 1989). Retrieved from https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf.

[ii] Brittany Purrington, "Understanding White Privilege," Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (March 18, 2021). Retrieved from <https://bp-ar.org/understanding-white-privilege/>.

[iii] Nishta Mehra, *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* (2019): 30.

[iv] Chung, 35.

[v] Beede.

How Parents Can Help with Micro- and Macroaggressions

PREVIEW

- A positive sense of identity depends on parents listening and validating when children report microaggressions
- It is important for parents to recognize and address overt and more nuanced racism and microaggressions
- Parents can model verbal and non-verbal responses to microaggressions when they occur

DETAILS

In our clinical work at BPAR, one of the most common statements we hear from transracial adoptees is that they were raised in a very “white” community, where they were one of the only persons of color. Many experienced racial taunting or microaggressions, and most did not tell their parents about these incidents.

Adult transracial adoptees have described experiences with microaggressions that have been difficult as they grew up, especially if they

were raised in a largely white community. Research suggests that when parents make fewer attempts at addressing racial bias or recognizing racism, it has a direct negative impact on their child's racial identity.[i]

Marta, age 33, a BPAR clinician who was adopted from Colombia, had many experiences with microaggressions growing up. She did not see her parents as supportive or recognizing these experiences for what they were. "My parents invalidated these—they would say, oh, they didn't mean it that way, or, 'You're being sensitive.' I started questioning myself, especially since I had no support from other people of color."

Sharon states that she experienced microaggressions when she was younger, and they have continued today. She wishes that she had been empowered to address these directly when they occurred. "In the past, I laughed things off, but that doesn't help change things for the better."

Parents who have adopted transracially have spoken about being approached by strangers and asked intrusive questions about their children. The underlying message? You look different from your parents and the community, so you must not belong. A second message is often that of the "white savior"—the implication that the transracial adoptee must feel "grateful" that they have been "saved."

Cathy, an adoptive mom of two children of color, states that her family has not experienced a lot of overt racism, and in general, she feels that many people have been "welcoming of the children, and the kids have been acknowledged in a positive way." However, they have experienced microaggressions, often toward her and her spouse. Cathy states, "People have said things to me. They can be so nosy, but they generally mean well." Once, at the grocery store with her youngest child sitting in the grocery cart, "a woman asked me if the food was for my family or the child's family." Cathy explained that those were one and the same, and when the woman kept asking questions, Cathy turned away and did not answer.

So, the underlying question is, how can white parents raise transracial

children in a way that honors the child's culture and diversity and prepares them to handle racism and microaggressions? It is important for parents to recognize more nuanced racism and microaggressions. They need to be open to exploring their own feelings about these issues. *Waddell* comments that microaggressions can at times be "unintentional, they are not always to inflict harm. But every transracial family will face this." The Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association helps parents learn and prepare in their resource "Transracial Parenting in Foster Care and Adoption: Strengthening Your Bicultural Family." [ii]

Preparation Points for Micro- and Macroaggressions

§ It is important to be prepared and model responses for your kids. Parents instinctively want to protect their children, but *Mehra* stresses, "So often it seems that what parents object to is messiness, to exposing their children to a narrative that will blow up any notion that life is orderly and predictable, that the world operates fairly, that parents can keep their kids from being exposed to unpleasant things." [iii]

§ Allow your child some control over responses. You can discuss beforehand how your child might want to respond to intrusive questions and remind them that they do not have to answer if they do not want to. Model responses when they occur while you are with your child. Review other options, such as walking away and not answering.

§ Prepare your child: You *will* experience inappropriate comments and questions, so we can prepare together ways to respond that feel comfortable. *Mehra* adds, "Powerful though the urge is, I know that to shelter my child would only render him dependent on me; my task is to prepare him, not protect him." [iv]

[i] Sydney K. Morgan and Kimberly L. Langrehr, "Transracially Adopted Parents' Colorblindness and Discrimination Recognition: Adoption Stigma as Moderator," retrieved from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30113175/>.

[ii] Iowa Foster & Adoptive Parents Association

[iii] Nishta Mehra, *Brown White Black: An American Family at the Intersection of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion* (2019), p. 110.

[iv] Mehra, 113.

Understanding an Adoptee's Thoughts About Birth Family

PREVIEW

- Adoptees may perceive a missing Chapter One in their stories
- Country of origin visits and birth family searches elicit strong emotions
- Explore expectations and motivations first
- Seek professional guidance for teens who want to engage in the search process
- Understand the pros and cons of DNA testing in advance
- Make a structured reunion plan to help navigate the complex web of relationships

DETAILS

Filling in that missing Chapter One often leads to the urge to learn more about a birth family, and for a transracial adoptee struggling to form their identity, the questions may be intense. *Laura*, adopted from Colombia, describes her longing for information as a child. “I

felt broken like a puzzle, with lost pieces.” Admitting that desire, however, was emotionally difficult. As she explains in her blog, [Puzzle Pieces: Identity and My Birth Mother Search](#), “Thought-provoking questions would linger in the depths of my mind for the majority of my lifetime: Who am I? Who brought me into this world? Where do I fit in? These questions, however, carried a weight that riddled me with guilt. Did it matter? I have loving parents and a family that cares for me deeply. . . . So why wouldn’t my mind let these questions go? Did my drive to learn more make me ungrateful? Selfish?”[i]

Desi, like many adoptees, felt more than just a simple curiosity in high school during psychology class as she learned about the concept of nature versus nurture. “When that topic popped up, it brought up a lot for me around identity and upbringing. It got me thinking about my adoption story more.” Throughout high school and college, *Desi* started to realize “how anxious I would get around my relationships, whether with family members, friends or significant others.”[ii]

The decision on how to address that hunger for information about an adoptee’s beginnings—or whether to take action at all—is highly personal, and the journey is emotional. *Laura* shares her experience when, at age 18, with her parents’ support, she did choose to reach out to her birth mother, who had moved from Colombia to Mexico. “I was filled with fear and anxiety. What if the pieces that I find don’t fit? What if my puzzle is incapable of being completed, for reasons that are out of my own control?” Once she decided to proceed, new questions surfaced: “What if she blocks me? What if she doesn’t want anything to do with me? What if she hasn’t told her husband about me? What if she doesn’t want me to confuse the seemingly perfect life she has made for herself?”[iii]

Desi chose to, literally, take an academic approach. As a psychology major in college, she pursued a thesis project on caregiving and attachment, entailing her return to the orphanage in the Philippines

where she had spent time as a child in order to pursue her study. Questions around early attachment intrigued Desi on a personal, professional, and educational level: “What were my early years like? What was the orphanage like? How can I use this thesis to explore caregiving and attachment in orphanages in early life?” In the BPAR blog [**Researching Attachment: A Student’s Journey to Her Orphanage in the Philippines**](#), Desi reveals she found herself in some emotional pain, so she intentionally spent a lot of time just playing with the children and also journaling every night, processing the ups and downs of the experience. She prefers to keep the specifics on whether she did or did not try to see her birth family private, noting that in our culture the “meeting of birth family” can be sensationalized and made into a magical experience when “the thoughts, feelings, process, and actions around an adoptee and their relationship with their birth family is a real, complicated life journey.”[iv]

Regardless of the purpose, before visiting their country of origin, adult adoptees who were adopted internationally should consider their motivations in advance. In our work with clients, BPAR talks about [**birth country trips and how to prepare**](#) for them. Based on her experience both as a clinician and an adoptee, *Maya* suggests considering, “Do you expect to meet birth family, or is the trip mainly intended to explore the country where you were born? What do you want from the trip? How much time do you want to spend? What can you do when you need space to process emotions that may come up? Who will you travel with? Do your travel companions understand the complexity of the trip? These are just a few of the questions that are helpful to think about when planning.”[v]

The search and reunion process can be complicated for both the parent and the child. In the BPAR blog titled [**Search and Reunion — Voices in the Lifelong Journey of Adoption**](#), *Ilana* stresses, “Adoptive parents need to feel secure enough to grapple with their child being

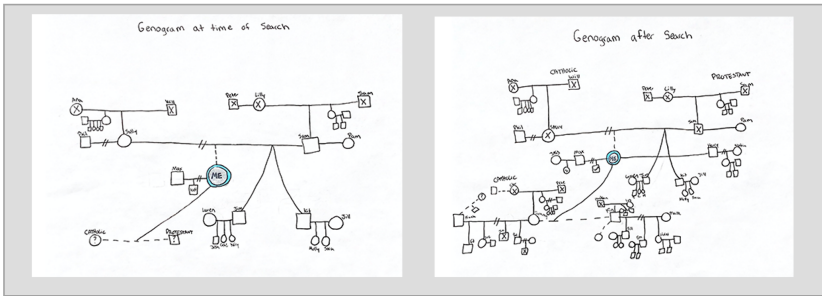
theirs but also not *theirs*. A child is not a blank slate even if they are adopted at birth. The child needs to know that their parents can handle the complexity of adoption and identity.”[vi]

For parents with teens who ask to connect with birth family, we recommend seeking professional assistance to help your family explore the fears, hopes, and expectations around searching. The search process can be disruptive and all-consuming, and the process for international adoptions or people of color is fraught with roadblocks due to a disparity of information. BPAR offers [search support](#) to help families navigate the process in a safe and healthy way. Parents of adult adoptees who plan to engage in the search process can seek support for themselves and encourage their child to consider individual therapy or find a sense of community in their experiences in a setting like one of our [therapeutic groups](#).

Search methods that include DNA testing carry their own complications and risks. On BPAR’s [DNA testing information page](#), we note that “for a significant portion of the world population, DNA testing can lead to a dead end and dashed hopes.” As we discuss in our blog [DNA Testing – What to Think About Before You Do a Test](#), individuals may be disappointed if they discover no new information or they learn upsetting or [overwhelming information they were not expecting](#). We recommend learning as much as possible in advance about the test and preparing a game plan of who to talk to afterward.

Reunions and their inherent expectations, fears and feelings require thoughtful preparation for all involved: adoptees, parents, and birth parents. “First, get a good sense of yourself,” *Rachel*, a 47-year-old biracial adoptee, suggests. Get to know yourself well. Make sure you have a good therapist. There will be a lot of stuff to work out in your mind. I have learned to honor myself and my self-worth. My story is my story: This is me; I’m not broken. Hard things have happened to me that I had no control over.”[vii]

UNDERSTANDING AN ADOPTEE'S THOUGHTS ABOUT BIRTH FAMILY



Professional support like **BPAR's reunion assistance** can help families make a structured plan, develop a support system before, during and after a reunion, process feelings that come up, and navigate the new, complex web of relationships.

[i] Laura Palladino, "Puzzle Pieces: Identity and My Birth Mother Search," Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (October 8, 2019). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/puzzle-pieces-identity-and-my-birth-mother-search/>.

[ii] LC Coppola, "Researching Attachment: A Student's Journey to Her Orphanage in the Philippines," Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (November 28, 2018). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/researching-attachment-a-students-journey-to-her-orphanage-in-the-philippines/>.

[iii] Palladino.

[iv] Coppola.

[v]Rogers-Bursen, 2019.

[vi] Erica Kramer, “Search and Reunion — Voices in the Lifelong Journey of Adoption,” Boston Post Adoption Resources blog (April 19, 2021). Retrieved from <https://bpar.org/search-and-reunion-voices-in-the-lifelong-journey-of-adoption/>.

[vii] Kramer.

How Support Through Adoption-Competent Therapy Can Help

PREVIEW

- Adoption-competent therapy provides insight into root causes of feelings like anxiety and depression
- Clinicians trained in adoption competency recognize frequently overlooked adoption-related challenges
- Adoptees of all ages and parents can benefit from individual or group therapy

DETAILS

Adoptees, parents, siblings, and significant others all agree in the value of adoption support. “As a transracial adoptee from India, I believe adoption support is essential,” *Malana* tells us. Everyone deserves support to heal from the trauma they have endured, and transracial adoptees are no exception. Support for adoptees has not always been prioritized, in favor of a rhetoric that adoptees are lucky and that their trauma is erased once they have a family. But still the effects of trauma

related to adoption and racism are ever present.”

All of the people that BPAR interviewed for this resource stressed the importance of connecting with others and accessing services from mental health professionals trained in adoption competency. In her article titled “Promoting Adoptees’ Well-Being in Transracial Adoptive Families,” Ellen Pinderhughes confirms, “Outside resources are critical. . . . Adoption competent therapists can understand the nuances of adoption, cultural difference, and interpersonal dynamics, thus providing more effective support.”[i]

[Boston Post Adoption Resources](#) encourages a clinical model like ours that focuses exclusively on post adoption therapeutic services. Adoption competency training enables therapists to look through an adoption lens and recognize challenges that may have a connection to the adoption experience. This specialized view allows adoptees and their families to open up a path to healing that is often otherwise overlooked or misunderstood. *Megan* explains that adoption competent therapy “is like having a supportive family member who happens to be versed in the life you are leading.” “BPAR’s staff are all experienced in helping adoptees and their families meet challenges in thoughtful and creative ways,” *Sally* tells other adoptive parents.

Evaluations with an intake coordinator can help parents determine the best course of action for their family’s need. Adoptees under the age of 18 might benefit from individual sessions with a therapist, the opportunity to connect with other children their age in group therapy organized by age cohort, or both.

Lori describes the value of individual therapy for her child. “Often my children are asked by friends, classmates, and even strangers to explain their presence in their own family and community. BPAR provides them with a refuge to be themselves, no explanation required.” She notes that in their sessions, “my children do not need to justify their life. The therapists and staff welcome the complexity of adoption, identity,

and loss and walk with my children on their journey to learn, explore, and heal.”

“Our two East Indian daughters have been with us since infancy and grew up brown-skinned in a very white community,” *Sally* told us. “Having someone for them to talk to when things got tough, especially someone who understood their plight, was key in helping them to develop their personal strength, each in their own way.”

When a parent’s mental health is addressed as well, studies predict better post adoption outcomes for the child. Concurrent child-parent individual therapy or family therapy can yield insights that increase understanding, improve communication, and build bonds. “I am an adoptive parent and I have come to know through experience that both parents and adoptees need support,” *Christina* tells us. Sometimes parents need help understanding the child’s perspective on their experience, especially in the years before the child has the ability to explain it themselves.”

Cathy stresses the importance of adoptive parents accessing resources and support. Cathy has found therapy has been invaluable for her whole family. Both [individual therapy](#) and [group therapy](#) have helped her children address a variety of concerns. Meeting other adoptees and their families through groups “has been great. Being with other kids who understand is so helpful. The parent group is awesome too. You don’t have to explain, they get it.”

Megan reflects, “My family is a one-parent, transracial-adopted family. SO much beauty and SO much complexity. [Therapy] helps me navigate and unearth all of it . . . a safe space to talk about our adoption journey, a spot where I can share all of my thoughts, wonderings, worries, anxieties, highs/lows and wins. Being able to sit and talk for a full hour a week about my son is a gift. I always leave a session with a new thought or perspective. [Therapy] nudges me to better myself and to be a better parent.”

Sally shares similar feelings. “Parenting always demands all of our wits and abilities to do it well. But transracial/transcultural adoption comes with many additional challenges. Knowing there is a place to go and people to confide in when the going gets rough is such a gift!”

Transracial adoptees over the age of 18 can make their own decision about whether to seek therapy for themselves. In her interview, *Palimpsest: Documents from a Korean Adoption*, Lisa Wool-Rim Sjoblom stresses how critical it is for the adoptee to have control over their journey. She recommends that an adult adoptee should “listen to yourself” and do what feels comfortable.[ii]

Sharon’s search for resources ultimately led her to include therapy in her life. She shares that, over the last year or so, she began to research [resources to help her process her adoption](#). She has found books (including Nicole Chung’s memoir cited here) and podcasts to be very helpful. Organizations such as BKA (Boston Korean Adoptees) and [therapy at BPAR](#) have been an important part of her journey: “They have been eye-opening and reassuring. I’m not the first person to go through this. It’s OK, it’s part of who I am.”

Liam shares how therapy addresses his yearning to belong. “I grew up in a very white community. I now realize I stuck out like a sore thumb. I felt I didn’t belong.” As he has grown, therapy has helped him “put less pressure on myself. It’s important to remember you are not alone. . . . A longing for belonging is also big, but that is not always talked about.” He feels more comfortable now sharing his history of “anxiety and mild depression, and how the roots for these are in my adoption story.”

Matthew attests to the impact of therapeutic support on his relationship. “My girlfriend, who is adopted from China, explains to me often the struggles she faces due to being adopted. Over the past year, she has been diving deep into adoption studies through her college and undergoing adoption therapy via BPAR. This past year, she has shown tremendous growth by taking on her vulnerabilities and dissecting her

adoption identity. She has demonstrated her ability to know herself and her needs and also now has a deeper understanding of adoption and its effects.”

Group therapy provides an alternative way to explore transracial adoption among a community of peers. “I started working with BPAR last May and while waiting for a spot to open up for individual therapy, I joined a group, *Ling-li* explains. “This group was eye-opening to say the least. Over the course of six months, I learned so much about myself. I was able to unpack the many closed boxes in my mind and release a lot of suppressed emotions. The small group size was great and helped us find the trust in one another to talk about some of our most intimate parts. A few months in, when I was finally assigned to an individual therapist, I continued working on things I had discovered in group with the goal of finding balance within myself. Looking back, I have made so much progress in the last couple of months and feel lighter both mentally and physically. The stuckness I felt is vanishing and has been replaced by a desire to take action on the things that are important to me. I am grateful for everything BPAR has given me and I hope many other adoptees will eventually find their way here.”

Feedback about group therapy has been striking: Children, teens, parents and adults have stressed that connecting with other adoptees and adoptive parents has been powerful and supportive. Nicole Beede writes, “The most helpful thing for me has been connecting with other TRAs [transracial adoptees], as we understand and validate each other’s experiences.”[iii]

Describing her group therapy experience, *Michelle* admits, “This fills the void more than me meeting my birth family.”

Marcos comments, “You feel less alone when you know there are other international adoptees. In a weird way, meeting with them every month is part of my search and reunion process.” He adds, “The way people I have been working with approached me, I feel accepted. I

am working on feeling worthy and accepting compliments and not being so hard on myself. When I started [group therapy], it opened the floodgates—things I had not talked about in detail to anyone. I feel like a much better person now. I feel so much lighter.”

All of the interviewed adoptees who attend group therapy are in adult groups, but BPAR also runs groups for children by age cohort and concurrent groups for their parents.

Ilana has noticed these groups in passing. “I wish I had BPAR earlier. I needed that. Seeing the kids in the waiting room, I get a little jealous. I imagine if I was in a group with other adoptees when I was 10 or having an adoption-competent therapist.”

As for the value of her own group during her search and reunion with her birth mother, *Ilana* shares, “There’s been so much grief throughout this process. I still feel it sometimes when I talk about it. I’ve learned not to fear the grief. It felt like I was going to jump off a cliff and I had no control. Once I realized I could survive this, I could move forward.”

[i]Ellen Pinderhughes, “Promoting Adoptees’ Well-Being in Transracial Adoptive Families,” *The Future of Adoption*, Rudd Adoption Research Program at UMASS Amherst (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.umass.edu/ruddchair/sites/default/files/rudd.pinderhughes.pdf>.

[ii]Wool-Rim Sjoblom.

[iii]Beede.

Conclusion: Conversations and Stories Can Educate and Heal

By sharing the actual words from more than twenty-six adoptees or adoptive parents who have lived through the transracial adoption experience, the clinical team at BPAR hopes that *Voices in Transracial Adoption: Insights from Adoptees and Parents* builds a bridge to better understanding, preparation, and support.

For parents, education provides a foundation for building a strong family system. Informed, honest conversations both in the home and outside the home matter. Based on her firm belief that “collective voices matter,” *Gemma* says as an adoptive parent, “I invest time regularly on educating myself, engaging with others, and writing about racism and diversity. . . . I share what I learn and am working to build community [and] to increase dialogue. She urges “other adoptive parents to build a new understanding among all who touch their children’s lives.”

Cathy also spoke about engaging in the community. She suggests, “It is so important to be an advocate, be out there banging the drum.” She has been pushing the school to hire more teachers of color, and she has joined the PTO to continue to advocate. “We are far from perfect, but parents should not be afraid to try.”

For transracial adoptees, the discussions in this resource can validate that their feelings are normal and make sense. We believe in the power of storytelling, considered one of the most effective techniques for

creating empathy in the community. Not only is storytelling a platform for truth, the acknowledgement of someone's truth is necessary for healing to happen. For all in the adoption constellation, the process has the potential to heal regardless of age. The American Academy of Pediatrics advocates the therapeutic benefits for the storyteller: "When the child is able to tell or read [their] story to their caregiver it indicates the trauma no longer defines the child, but instead is a story of what happened to them, having lost its power to continue to harm." [i]

BPAR aims to be a leader in empowering all touched by adoption to share their authentic stories as a way to normalize the post adoption experience. It's important for each individual to connect with their stories at their own pace, in a way that feels safe. Adoption is a lifelong journey, and every journey is unique.

[i] American Academy of Pediatrics, "The Medical Home Approach to Identifying and Responding to Exposure to Trauma" (2014). Retrieved from https://www.aap.org/en-us/documents/ttb_medicalhomeapproach.pdf.

Adoption-Related Glossary Terms

The following definitions apply specifically to the context of this book and transracial adoption in the United States.

Adoption-competent therapy: Therapy that is conducted by a psychotherapist who is well-versed on and practices attachment and trauma-informed interventions in order to address core adoption issues

Bicultural family: A family with more than one culture

Birth country: The country where an adoptee is born

Birth family search: The process of an adoptee searching for birth family members or information

Birth parent: The biological parent of an adoptee, also referred to as a first parent

Color-blind: The inability to see color or race in people

Cultural socialization: A process of integrating the child's birth culture into their daily life

Domestic adoption: Adoption that occurs within the United States

DNA testing: Genetic testing that indicates medical and family history

Family therapy: A type of therapy that includes multiple members of the family system

Group therapy: A type of therapy that brings together a group of individuals with common life experiences to build community and gain support

Individual therapy: A type of therapy that provides one-on-one support

Integrative awareness: Appreciation of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity

International adoption: Adoption from a country that is outside of the United States; also known as intercountry adoption

Macro-aggression: Overt aggression toward those of another race, gender, etc.

Micro-aggression: Subtle, consistent acts of harm toward those of another race, gender, etc.

POC: People of color

Racial identity: One's understanding of themselves and/or the meaning one makes of their racial group membership

Racism: Discrimination and prejudice directed against minority groups

Reunion: The process of birth family and an adoptee reconnecting

Transracial adoption: When a child who is of one race or ethnic group is placed with adoptive parents of another race or ethnic group

TRA: Transracial adoptee

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