Breaking the Racial Sound Barrier

In our society that considers “color-blindness” a noble attitude, parents may worry about talking about racism, or even mentioning it. But we must talk, and talk in a way that encourages our child to open up, too. BY BETH HALL and GAIL STEINBERG

A central task of childhood is to define and come to value one’s “self.” As they are loved and cared for by their parents, children need to hear again and again how much we value their warm brown skin, their tight, curly hair, their shining, almond-shaped eyes—particularly when these physical characteristics mark their differences from us.

Although children’s self-esteem is initially shaped by others’ perceptions of them (and will always be influenced by those external perceptions), at the age of four or five, as their cognitive capacities develop, children begin to think for themselves about what it is that makes them OK. Eventually, their internalized picture of self becomes more important than the views of others. If the inner picture of self is not clear and strong, children will develop the skill of “impression management,” presenting what they believe others want to see. This preoccupation with external expectations and the values of others tends to diminish their comfort with themselves, as they attempt to avoid racism, rather than developing skills for coping with it.

No one can live in an environment “diverse enough” or “friendly enough” or “good enough” to protect children of color from the hurt of racism. Discrimination hurts everyone, but white parents are especially susceptible to being taken aback by racist experiences, because they don’t anticipate them. To successfully support their children of color, white parents must take an honest look at their own blind spots and biases, in order to become effective anti-racist allies.

It is critical that parents do not hesitate to talk to their children about racial experiences. We don’t wait for children to ask us how to cross the street, or fear that talking about the dangers of cars will scare children too much. We discuss the dangers of traffic because we understand that navigating traffic is a matter of life and death. Issues of racialization are no different. Children must be taught how to anticipate and cope with social bias. They need to be able to identify and give language to prejudice in order to understand the differences between the principles we are teaching them and those they may encounter in the world outside our homes.

Breaking the racial “sound barrier” is critical to providing important survival tools. Overcome your fears. Talking about and understanding racism gives a child a way to see that the racism he experiences is not about him; it’s about something bigger that operates on a societal level.

Every parent learns to distinguish the meaning of their baby’s cries, based on their tone. We seem to put this talent away when our chil-
Children never deserve to be yelled at, even when they make a mistake. Who was talking in a yelling voice to her child in the store. Remember, once we are back in the car, we can say, “I noticed a mom yelling at her child in the grocery store. When children grow, their understanding of adoption and sensitivity to the role played by race in our society changes. TV, stories in books, news events, and so on offer openings for conversation.

**EXPLORE THE CONNATIONS OF COLOR**

Sometimes words don’t mean what they say. Why are people with brown skin called “black” and people with pale skin called “white”? Why do we use color designations to describe people and what do they mean? Explaining that black is a word used to describe African Americans, brown to describe Latinos, as well as other people of color, and white to describe people whose ancestors came from Europe is confusing for children because the colors do not match the skin tone of the people. The specific color of one’s skin is caused by how much of the pigment melanin you have. People who have the most are often called black, but they can be lighter-skinned than someone who is white. White people are usually one of many shades of beige ranging from pale peach to deep tan. People who are called Latinos may be of European, African, and/or Asian descent and embody every skin color imaginable.

It is no accident that the word “white” is also used as an adjective to connote cleanliness, goodness, purity, as those qualities are often associated with the racial designation. We must teach children that, when used to describe people, “white” is not better or worse, it is just a way of describing the people who have less melanin in their skin—people whose ancestors lived in places with less sun. And that we don’t believe that white people are better or prettier than people of color.

By comparison, the word “black” is often associated with things that are dark and fearsome. This is a powerful example of attitude manipulation reflected through the language of culture. The word “yellow” is associated with gold, butter, lemons, jaundice, old age, something cheaply sensational as in “yellow journalism.” The word “brown” is associated with mud, sand, chocolate, coffee, tanned by the sun, excitement, and paper bags. The word “red” is associated with having red hair, American Indians, communists, excitement, anger, and more. When children are old enough, it is important to talk to them about the connotations color designation imply for all.

Be careful about teaching children to use color terms to describe themselves and other people without also understanding the meaning of culturally accepted language, like African American or Latino. Children need to understand the language of the world in order to navigate the oppression that exists within it rather than become a victim to it.

**TEACH VALUES, NURTURE STRENGTH**

Passing on our values is a critical aspect of a parent’s role, but it involves much more than just telling children what we believe; it means helping them move through challenging situations and navigate value clashes. Even when children are very young, we can begin to introduce our values by pointing out situations in books or in real life that give us the opportunity to explain our stance on certain issues. For instance, we might talk with a child about a parent who is yelling at a child in a grocery store. Once we are back in the car, we can say, “I noticed a mom who was talking in a yelling voice to her child in the store. Remember, children never deserve to be yelled at, even when they make a mistake. That is not behavior we agree with in our family.” These discussions must address race, as well.

“Remember, at Thanksgiving, when Grandma said that she doesn’t think that Chinese people should be allowed to drive? We love Grandma, but we don’t agree with her about this. She probably doesn’t know very many Chinese people, so she has ideas that aren’t accurate. It’s kind of sad for Grandma, because she won’t be able to make friends with people if she thinks things about them just because they are a certain race or look a certain way. That is what people mean when they say ‘racism’ or ‘prejudice,’ when people judge others because of their race. That’s why we don’t agree with her.”

Or:

“When Grandma talked about Chinese drivers, I was really uncomfortable with the way she was judging a whole group of people based on a stereotype about how Chinese people drive. I talked with Grandma about it yesterday and told her that I disagree with her. What did you think about what she said? What do you think I should say to her? How does it make you feel when she says stuff like that?”

Eventually discussions with our children will go even further, talking about actual strategies for interacting with adults with whom we disagree, including grandmas, teachers, and other folks in authority, while maintaining a respectful tone. This is an essential navigational skill.

**PREPARE TO FACE RACIAL BIAS**

In order to become an ally and advocate for their child, parents must sort out their feelings about their own racism in a safe context, without asking their children to participate. We must take inventory of the racial stimulus around us and understand its impact. Children deserve parents who can admit that race will be a factor in the way that they are seen by others in their community. White parents are often afraid that naming racism will somehow make their child a victim of it, when the exact opposite is true.

When we teach our children to identify bias when it comes up in books or on TV, we make it easier for them to recognize and respond to it when it comes up in their day-to-day lives. Preparing our children for the hate-words that might be used against them is hard. But won’t it be easier for them to hear them at home first, where the sting of surprise will be minimized? A parent could say: “Some people use mean words to hurt people because they don’t like them. Some people don’t like people who are girls or people who are boys, so they call them mean names… Or sometimes people don’t like people who are one race or another, so they call them mean names...” Eventually, when your child asks you what some of those names are, you can begin by asking if he has heard any. After he shares some, you can begin to share some too. Tell your child explicitly that these are names that you don’t want him to use because they are meant to hurt people, and they are targeting people because of who they are, not how they act, and that is wrong.

White parents need to understand that it is not only appropriate and safe to talk to their children about racist experiences, it is, in fact, essential to their child’s well-being. What color are the people seen as “experts” by the media? Who are our national heroes and political leaders? Yes, Barack Obama was elected President of the United States—but one of the reasons his election generated so much excitement was the huge change in the status quo that it represented. Despite their growing numbers, African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and Latinos who are in positions of power and influence still stand out as...
exceptions to the European-American norms of our culture. This kind of racism acts as a barrier to self-respect for children of color.

To prepare your child to deal with the reality of negative attitudes about race, you must point them out and have conversations about them. “Did you hear what that little girl said? She doesn’t think it’s possible for Asian people to be American...” or “Why do you think she assumes that you don’t have a father who lives with you?” Parents who take a proactive approach to teaching their children to recognize racial bias will give their children the tools to identify whom they can trust and rely on to be their ally.

A corollary to this principle is the often unrecognized commitment to believing a child when she says something might have racial connotations, even if the parent is not sure it does. Children must develop good antennae to recognize racism in its overt and more subtle forms for their health and safety. If we undermine their confidence in their own ability to do so, we may place them in grave danger. Be very careful and aware of using phrases like, “Oh, I’m sure she didn’t mean it like that!” Focus on impact rather than intent. When we are teaching young children how to stay safe on the street, we don’t chastise them if they are over-careful on an empty roadway; rather, we understand that they are honing their skills and learning to practice caution, which we want to encourage. By the same token, white parents must encourage their children of color to explore the possibility of racialized responses and understand that this will sometimes mean that they see danger when it isn’t there. But that is so much better than not having the tools to see danger where it is.

On the other hand, be careful about attempting to extract feelings as if they were bad teeth. We sometimes assume that superficial answers to our anxious questions means the child is concealing painful emotions, but we may be looking for something that isn’t there. Most children are not subtle. If a child is not labeling something as a racial incident, perhaps it isn’t one. Trust your intuition and everything you know about your child, but don’t over-react or invade your child’s right to be the star of her own personal drama by taking it over for yourself.

**FIRST, LAST, AND IN-BETWEEN: TALK ABOUT IT!**

It’s easy for parents to imagine that, since racial differences have become a comfortable part of their own reality, their children must be feeling the same. This is yet another reminder of how different a parent’s experience often is from that of their child.

Remember that you won’t be there most of the time your children are racially profiled or targeted. Parents need to teach their children how to recognize racialized assumptions, so that when they are alone they can be assertive and protect themselves. Every child deserves to have a parent who has communicated certain basic truths about the racial landscape of American culture:

- Race comes with birth; no one can choose or earn it.
- You are always available to talk about things that concern her about race. Practice talking about race in many contexts, so that you won’t be nervous when you talk with your child.
- It’s OK to be different. The goal is to recognize, accept, include, honor, and celebrate the diversity of human beings. As people, we are more similar than different. Our differences benefit us all.
- He is loved and he is not alone.
- She need not let anybody, of any color, limit or define her solely by race or undermine her acceptance of and belief in herself.
- He doesn’t deserve bad treatment, and is a good person just as he is.
- There is always something she can do. She has all the tools within her that she needs to be successful. She will get up every morning and get up every time she falls down.
- The answer lies inside him, and you believe that he will triumph in the end.
- People who act rudely and don’t know him have no right to comment.
- Some people are toxic, always negative. She has every right to be angry when that toxicity is directed at her. It has nothing to do with who she is.
- He is encouraged to talk about oppression and racism, and he will be taken seriously when he explores the possibility that something might have been directed at him, even if a white person who loves him didn’t see or experience it the way he did.
- One person can make a difference.
- He is part of a group from which he can gain strength and comfort.

When something bad happens, bring out the toolkit. Validate your child’s hurt, offer comfort, and share feelings. Don’t imagine your child doesn’t notice or hear something that was said in their presence. Not talking about it means you condone it.

Demonstrate appropriate reactions to racism by validating anger, and commiserating with them about injustices they observe and experience. This will go a long way toward strengthening the bond between you. Revisit issues from previous days that you have had time to think about; this demonstrates how important these experiences are to you.

Sometimes parents tell children of color that they have to try twice as hard and be twice as good to convince biased people that they are not bad. Remember, a racist will not be changed by a child’s “good” behavior. Negative attitudes are unfair; strong feelings, including sadness and frustration, are appropriate. Often the hardest emotion for parents to encourage in children is anger, but righteous anger needs to be validated in order to help children (or adults) deal with the unchangeable reality of racism.
Help your child to externalize racist remarks rather than internalize them. This is a critical coping skill for children of color, if they are to handle the onslaught of negative messages they will likely encounter in their lives.

No one can know the perfect way to respond to insensitive remarks all the time. In fact, people commonly respond to racist insensitivity with disbelief and stunned silence. It is only later that we gnash our teeth and think up clever ways to handle the situation. Giving yourself permission to handle racial insults imperfectly is to acknowledge your humanness. Don’t be ashamed. Use your regret as a teaching tool for your children. “Wow. Can you believe he said that? My jaw just dropped open; I didn’t know what to say! Here’s what I wish I had said.”

You might prepare and practice a standard response that you start to use whenever a racial slur comes up, such as: “I am not comfortable with what you just said, and I’d appreciate it if you would never repeat it. Your remark is offensive, because it says some people are worth less than others, which is neither true nor funny. The world has more than enough anger and pain, so how about putting a lid on contributions like that?” or “Talk like that hurts people’s feelings. I won’t let you talk that way here.” Giving responses like these with, and in front of, your children makes it clear that you are on their side, and gives them ways to respond when things happen to them and you are not with them.

Parents can also brainstorm strategies with their children, so that they know they have allies on their side. You may even do so in a silly or outrageous way. Children’s knowledge and memory of these “good” times will become part of their protective armor next time someone approaches them. Examples could be: “Not another one of these comments. Sometimes I get tired of it. How about you?” or “Let’s play ‘Remember the dumb thing someone said to us recently about race and think of the most outrageous things we could have said (even though we probably didn’t).’” These exercises and discussions are respite in the storm, and white parents have to learn how to have them without being defensive or defending other white people. When a child says she has been teased or excluded because of race, parents need to help her to hone and use her problem-solving skills.

In any conversations with your child, try to ask questions that don’t elicit one-word answers. What does your new teacher do best? How is he different from your last teacher? What did the kids say when he read that story about slavery to the class? As she answers, try to talk less and listen more. Don’t assume that your feelings are the same as your child’s. You need to understand your child’s experience, not direct the action.

Too often adults assume that we know what our kids mean without really listening to them. Topics like adoption or racism may first give us pause and then, once we’ve started talking, we may keep our mouths so busy that we fail to hear what’s coming from theirs. But in the end, the child’s perception is all that really matters. Our goal as transracial adoptive parents must be to have our child be able to say, “I’m glad that you are my parent because you care about how I feel.”

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### 10 Ways to Help School-Agers Handle Racism

1. **Admit that race will be a factor in the way a child of color is treated**, and point out examples in history and daily life. Racism exists and it cannot be denied.

2. **Agree that racism is unfair, and promise that you will not tolerate such behavior within your sphere of influence.** Practice different responses and let him practice his responses too, so that he is prepared to handle racism when it comes up. This is a safety issue; without practice your child becomes more vulnerable.

3. **Kids develop new problem-solving skills in middle childhood.** When your child says she has been teased or excluded because of race, encourage her to use these skills. Help her to express her feelings and explore the short-term and long-term consequences of her possible response. Calmly ask her to say what happened, how she feels, what she did, what else she might have done, and if she has any plans for continued responses. Ask what she would do if it happened again.

4. **Ask whether you should do anything.** It’s important for kids to feel capable of handling their own problems—especially as they are learning about being treated unfairly because of race. If possible, help her feel able to handle it without adult protection (particularly from a white adult). That said, it is also critical that children know that their parents are absolutely prepared to take their side and be their ally—if they have something in mind for you to do, be responsive and helpful.

5. **Elementary school kids are information gatherers.** This is an ideal time to provide her with opportunities to gather realistic images and history of her racial heritage. Otherwise, she might be defenseless against stereotyped images of her race and feel bad about herself.

6. **Your child’s growing ability to categorize and understand increasingly abstract concepts can help her to integrate seemingly contradictory ideas.** Help her to learn that all racial groups have both good and bad historical figures, and have made both positive and negative contributions to the world. She will arrive at a deeper understanding of how she can be both Mexican and American or both black and white.

7. **Make sure that she is able to talk with other people of color who have had similar experiences and can provide new ideas on how to react.** Without this exposure the only role models for children adopted transracially will be the narrow, generally negative stereotypical characters in television and the movies.

8. **Notice the messages you send in real-life situations:** when you walk past a homeless person, when a fundraiser rings your doorbell, or when a person with physical differences serves you. Since none of us is bias-free, it’s useful to discuss with our kids the responses that may have been inappropriate or confusing. Soon your child will let you know when your bias is showing.

9. **If your child resists getting to know other people of color because she has not had enough experience outside of an all-white group to feel comfortable, insist that she participate anyway.** She needs to break her isolation to develop skills to cope with racism as much as she needs food and water.

10. **Demonstrate your acceptance of diversity of all kinds—religious, economic, political, and social—and make fighting racism and other injustice a personal matter for you, not just for your child.**