



A Guidepost in Transracial Adoption

In 1968, just months following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Jaiya John became the first African American baby in New Mexico to be adopted by a White family. He describes growing up in a family who were blind to the racial tensions he encountered in a landmark book, *Black Baby White Hands: A View from the Crib*. The following is an excerpt of an interview with Jaiya John in which he offers advice to families of transracial adoption.

How important is it for adoptive parents and professionals to evoke and consider the child's voice in transracial adoption?

The more the child is distinct or unique from the family she is being adopted into, the more that child's voice becomes a critical source of authority on what her own needs are. This implicates not only racial differences, but those involving class, geographic region, community background, trauma experiences, special needs and general life experiences of the child relative to the parents/professionals.

The more adults' life experiences deviate from what the child has, is, or will experience, the more those adult insights need to be supplemented by honoring the child's voice; the child's voice being not only what she speaks orally but what she expresses nonverbally in her demeanor, actions, attitudes and reactions to life. Even the Black child adopted at birth will experience a life shaped by the world's reaction to her Blackness and so she will come to develop her own personal culture for existing in life. Attitudes such as, "The younger they are when we adopt them, the less we have to worry about things like race and culture," are misguided and can be counterproductive to the child's growth and the family's well being.

What is the impact of separating siblings in transracial adoptions?

Separating children from their siblings is just one aspect of separating them from their biological families as a whole. There are consequences. We cannot pretend that there are not. You are disrupting nature-borne ties. Biological connections inherently breed a sense of self; a sense of connectedness. No matter how damaging those biological family relationships may be or might have been, there is something of the human essence within them that we are severing. Whether that has to do with similarities in physical appearance, personality, health, learning styles, interests or values, these biological connections serve as a compass orienting children and adults within a vast and alienating world. That deeply rooted sense of, "I belong to this," that exists in ways that are unquestionable even if undesirable, serves to create a child's feeling of security, validity and value. Of course this impacts self-esteem and therefore every aspect of a child's movement through her stages of life. This is not an issue of affinity or affection. It is about undeniable evidence that you have come from something beyond yourself, that you are not simply an untethered life drifting without origin or purpose. Of course our child placement policies and practices must honor this truth, even within the limitations of the difficult circumstances involved.

What should White parents do and know about the hair of African American children?

White parents of African American children need only the humility and lack of ethnocentrism to realize that everything they've known and been taught about their own hair might not apply to the hair of their adoptive children.

Hair care is much more than cosmetic. Hygiene impacts self-image and self-esteem, plays a role in social acceptance and rejection; in relationships and therefore ultimately, in success in life. In adoption, realizing as parents or workers that we might possibly not know everything there is to know about people/children who are distinct from us is the critical starting point in a healthy relationship and in delivering effective child welfare. The truth is that, culturally, this can be difficult for well-intending parents who are part of this society's racial mainstream. This country teaches that what is normal is White and what deviates from that is inherently inferior or at least not valid enough to warrant being valued or considered equally. This is a truth that all U.S. Americans are socialized into and grapple with, regardless of our heritage.

**What must prospective parents understand
before adopting a child of color?**

Relax. Do not expect perfection on your part. Do not assume the mantle of cultural expert or demand of your child the role of cultural ambassador. Allow the child to tell her story in any way she is compelled. Listen. Realize that a condescending attitude of charity toward your child is the most destructive energy you can carry. You haven't done anything wonderful by adopting a child, but you can do something wonderful by effectively raising that child. This is not a case of the "good" people lifting the poor, pitiable child out of a horrible fate. It is not our place to judge what might have been for the child. It is our place to receive the child as a blessing in our lives; a messenger come to us to teach us about life in ways we would not otherwise have been taught. It is a mutual relationship. The child is our equal in terms of life purpose. This is a dance not best performed by asserting and imposing our values but by bringing them respectfully to the table and clearing an equal space for the child to present hers.

**Do you think that parents who have both biological children and transracially adopted children
pay special attention to the children who are struggling with ethnic, racial issues?**

Why wouldn't a parent pay special attention to any child struggling with her own special issues? We can't pretend children's issues away. We can't pretend Johnny isn't really Black, or that Ashia isn't really in a wheelchair, or that Tony doesn't really have a challenge with bonding and attachment. Pretending children into an illusory space of sameness may be tempting, but again, we confuse the parental objective of loving our children the same amount with loving them in the same way. Each child learns in a unique way; each child requires a unique manifestation of parental love.

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Dr. Jaiya John is founder and executive director of SOUL WATER RISING, an educational organization devoted to improving human relations, combating prejudice, and fostering spiritual growth. *The Writer's Digest* award-winning author of *Black Baby White Hands: A View from the Crib* is a former professor of social psychology at Howard University in Washington DC and a former associate director of the National Center on Permanency for African American Children. **(301) 933-4967 or jaiya@soulwaterrising.com www.jaiyajohn.com or www.soulwaterrising.com** *Black Baby White Hands* is available through Amazon.com and local bookstores.

Salons that Specialize in African American Hair

*For a list of salons that specialize in African American hair, see the Spring 2004 issue of MN ASAP Family Voices.