

UTAH'S ADOPTION CONNECTION

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

AUGUST 2020



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QUARTERLY DCFS NEWSLETTER



MARIAH
Photo by: Amy Jensen Photography

In This Issue

- | | | | |
|----------|--|-----------|---|
| 3 | THE ADOPTION EXCHANGE IS NOW:
RAISE THE FUTURE
By: Kathy Searle, Vice President of Utah Programs,
An introduction to the new name of The Adoption Exchange. | 8 | WHY NONVERBAL LEARNING DISORDER IS
SO OFTEN MISTAKEN FOR ADHD
By: Lucy LaMare
An introduction to NonVerbal Learning disorders. |
| 4 | THE TEEN YEARS: BRAIN DEVELOPMENT
AND TRAUMA RECOVERY
By: Kim Stevens
An article about teens and how trauma effects their brains. | 10 | WHAT TO DO IF YOUR CHILD SAYS “NO
ONE WILL PLAY WITH ME”
By: Andrew M.I Lee, JD
An article from Understood.org on how to help your child
navigate the playground. |
| 7 | PARENTS NIGHT OUT-VIRTUALLY
Virtual information nights for adoptive/foster parents. | 12 | RAISING A CHILD OF COLOR IN
AMERICA-WHILE WHITE
By: Beth Hall
An article for transracial adoptive parents. |

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Connect Youth. Support Families. Create Hope.

By Kathy Searle, LCSW

As a Foster Parent, Adoptive Parent, and Vice President of Utah Programs here at The Adoption Exchange for several decades now, I'm pleased to share exciting news with all of you! We are changing our name, logo, and image. Effective next month we will be known as Raise the Future. Our mission, our work, and our partnership have not and will not change. Indeed, as we celebrate 35 years of serving Utahns we are simply doubling down in our future, long-term commitment to ALL of our partners: Foster Parents, Adoptive Parents, Youth, Caseworkers, Agency Partners, and all of Utah's communities at large. We intend to grow our organization and foster deeper connections with everyone we serve.

Why the name change? While "The Adoption Exchange" was at one time descriptive, this name is now limiting to the vision of our organization and sent negative signals, causing confusion among the population we serve. So we listened to what our partners were saying. And, after months of research, deliberation, and planning, we will now transition into our new image as Raise the Future. Our new name speaks to the positive shift that can be made when youth find loving connections. It also invites discussion and rapport with those who may not yet know about the impact of our work. While our day-to-day activities and services will not change, this new image will allow us to change the way we engage others in conversation about our work.

Raise the Future believes every young person deserves to go through life knowing they have a caring adult by their side. So, every day, we show up for kids in foster care by listening to their needs and introducing them to adults they can rely on. We then surround those connections with support, so that they grow into meaningful, lasting relationships that help our youth heal from the past. Because to truly Raise the Future, we must raise the bar for what it means to support youth from foster care as they navigate life.

Our new tagline (it's the title of this article) is an opportunity to further explain what we do, how we're different, and why it matters. For example, I'm guessing that some folks do not know that we are certified TBRI Practitioners and the only partner of Texas Christian University in the West. This partnership is a badge of honor for us that we strive to re-earn every day.

We hope you will watch for more news about what this change means, including some fun activities and opportunities for conversation. Most importantly, we hope you will see how we show our deep commitment to all of you. We hope you will embrace our growth and mission, and also keep us honest about what is working and what we can do better. You are who we serve. We want to be exceptional listeners and partners for the next 35 years and beyond!

Thank you for being a part of raising the future for youth in foster care. We look forward to your continued partnership as we work towards creating a world where no child waits for the love and support of a permanent family, where families get the ongoing support they need, and where all agency partners have a strong and knowledgeable helping hand to always rely on

Fondly,

Kathy Searle



On the Cover

Damion & Noah

Damion and Noah are a great pair of brothers!

Get to know more about Damion! This kiddo is a fan of Batman and Spiderman. When he isn't thinking about masked crusaders, Damion can be found curled up reading his favorite tales of fiction. He does well with adults and likes coloring in his free time. Described as a happy child, Damion thrives on positive affirmations and likes to be helpful to others. He is in the seventh grade.

Noah is a playful and energetic boy! Playing is always a top priority for him; he enjoys being around peers and relishes being at the center of attention for play. If Noah needs a break from the spotlight, coloring and watching TV are his go-to choices. Superheroes are beyond cool in his book, and he absolutely adores cats. Noah is described as charming and helpful and is in his fifth-grade year.

Damion and Noah would do best in a home with pets. They would like to remain in contact with their foster parents following placement. We will only accept inquiries on the sibling pair, as they will be placed together. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related services.

Photo by: Dawn McBride, Fuzz Love Photography

To view other children that participated in Heart Gallery 2020 visit the gallery online at www.utahadopt.org.

If you are interested in any of the children featured in this publication, please contact The Adoption Exchange at 801-265-0444 or visit www.utahadopt.org.



The Teen Years: Brain Development and Trauma Recovery

From Adoptalk 2019, Issue 1; Adoptalk is a benefit of NACAC membership.

Adapted by Anna Libertin, NACAC's communications specialist, from a webinar by Kim Stevens.

Teens who have experienced adoption or foster care have faced a lot of change: healing from trauma, coping with major life transitions, developing new routines, and experiencing puberty—just to name a few. As parents and caregivers, our role is to provide young adults with a safe space to explore, stumble, and succeed in this time of self-discovery by developing parenting strategies that prioritize family connection and establish trust.

Adolescence, Trauma, and the Brain

The brain dictates all of human behavior, from automatic responses like breathing to making small talk or laughing at jokes. So understanding how to build connections with teens requires understanding how age and past experiences can alter a brain over a lifetime—and how those brain changes affect behavior.

In adolescence, for example, the brain undergoes significant changes that affect a teen's understanding of self and the world around them. As teens move into adulthood, they face increased independence, more intimate relationships, challenging and significant decisions, and other major life transitions. The brain is trying to prepare for this through:

“Use it or lose it” cells. In preparation for adulthood, the adolescent brain experiences a massive increase in cell production—giving the brain an opportunity to develop new skills. However, without proper stimulation and/or the forgiving, caring guidance of an adult, these additional brain cells go unused and eventually decay. While

this doesn't prevent skills from being developed in the future, it can greatly delay the process.

Neural highway repairs. In order to think, do, or feel more than one thing at once, different parts of the brain need to be in communication with one another. In adolescence, myelin—a coating that speeds up communication on the neural highway between parts of the brain—grows. Production of serotonin, a hormone that enhances mood, is slowed to allow for this change, meaning teenagers experience irritability and low moods more often.

Development of the prefrontal cortex. Adolescence is also a great period of growth for the prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain in charge of impulse control, organization, decision-making, prioritizing, inhibiting inappropriate behavior, initiating appropriate behavior, empathy, and more. But while the prefrontal cortex is developing, the amygdala—the more emotional part of the brain—takes over, meaning that most situations and conversations are interpreted primarily through an emotional mind rather than a rational one.

These changes, and many more, are biological and occur regardless of a child's background. However, trauma, abuse, neglect, major life transitions, and other past experiences or environments contribute to how the brain develops during the crucial period, as the brain calls upon familiar behaviors or frequently used parts of the brain to determine what areas of the brain to strengthen and what areas to weaken in this mental “growth spurt.”

In other words, children learn to seek and develop their own strategies to satisfy the needs that are not being met, and over time, those strategies change the brain. For example, when a child is malnourished, their brain focuses on where and how to get the next meal. Over time, the child develops whatever behaviors are necessary to secure that meal, and the parts of the brain in charge of those behaviors grow stronger—an evolutionary means of ensuring that no matter what, the child will survive and be fed.

Similarly, when a child faces repetitive trauma, their brain develops behaviors to survive the high stress and remain alert, and eventually those behaviors alter the brain: the parts controlling fear and anxiety grow to protect the child, while the parts controlling logical or more critical thinking shrink. These two parts of the brain might be in conflict, too, resulting in flashbacks and difficulty interpreting or identifying emotional responses. Eventually, the neural pathways associated with fear are so chronically activated that the brain develops indelible memories, attitudinal changes, and shifts in perception. This means that long after a child establishes safety, the coping mechanisms used to survive traumatic experiences remain—resulting in unexpected or uncontrollable reactions to certain triggers, issues processing or understanding consequences, and other potentially challenging behaviors like hoarding, yelling, or aggressive outbursts. “Problematic behaviors” are the products of a child’s brain’s best attempts at satisfying their needs in the absence of dependable help.

A child’s brain development is often changed by the loss of birth family members, communities, homes, pets, and friends; early abuse or neglect; failed reunification or frequent moves in foster care; trauma; or the lack of a secure attachment figure. As a result, the way a child acts socially, emotionally, and cognitively might be out of sync with the child’s physical and chronological age. They might develop patterns of intense or unstable relationships, while resisting interdependence or connections with the community. They may also struggle with memory and cognition, affecting how they perform at school, at home, and at work. For this reason, teens may be mature in some domains and behind their age in others.

In short, adolescence alters, and in some ways slows down, a child’s ability to work through their thoughts, emotions, and reactions. Changes in brain chemistry and structure create behaviors that might feel unfamiliar or challenging—independent of whether a child has experienced trauma or not. But children who have experienced trauma must adjust to those typical changes in addition to coping with the developmental effects of past experiences.

Trauma and adolescence work together to interfere with a child’s sense of self and relationship, and the key to effective treatment and intervention is building and rebuilding connection.

How We Can Respond

Connection is key to helping teens heal from trauma and cope with the changes adolescence brings—but building a relationship isn’t always easy. A traumatized brain sees anything new or unusual as a threat, so rules or protective interventions feel like punishments and those who try to establish safety or trust are seen as perpetrators.

This natural lack of trust—coupled with a struggle to connect cause and effect and the mood changes typical in adolescence—can quickly create a negative family cycle. Imagine this scenario: A

teen stays out past curfew, having not fully realized that by doing so, they will be grounded (despite you repeating this rule over and over again). So, when you ground them, the teen feels scared, angry, and confused—they process your punishment as a threat to the safety they’ve established. Unable to articulate these intense emotions, they react by being verbally aggressive and you, feeling tired, frustrated, and overwhelmed, react with anger as well.

You can see how quickly this situation can escalate, and how it becomes a cycle that can pit the parent and teen against one another.

Fortunately, with a deeper understanding of the impact that trauma and adolescence have on a teen’s brain, you can develop a more effective and understanding parenting mindset that disrupts the cycle before it begins. Specifically:

Only intervene when necessary. Not all battles are worth fighting. Teenagers, in their effort to establish independence and explore themselves, can be challenging to parents regardless of past trauma, disabilities, or other adverse experiences. As parents, it can be easy to fall into the mindset of needing to fix every potentially challenging behavior.

Unless the behavior is dangerous, before you try to “fix” something, pause and consider whether this intervention is completely necessary: is this actually an opportunity to learn something or grow together? Will intervening now prevent a bigger problem later? Do you have the patience and ability to effectively navigate this situation?

Remember, you provide your child with the tools they need to be polite, gentle, creative, and respectful. Sometimes, you need to believe that those tools are enough!

Conversely, don’t assume that a quiet well-behaved teen doesn’t need intervention or support—compliance does not necessarily indicate improvement or healing, and your child might be struggling more than you realize.

Prioritize connections. When you decide it is time to intervene, you need to be creative. Failing to connect cause with effect and having already experienced significant loss in their life, teens who have experienced trauma are not always afraid of or able to process punitive consequences. In other words, the “threat” of losing electronics, time with friends, and more will not effectively address a teen’s behavior, and can sometimes re-traumatize a child. In fact, teens may be afraid only of losing pride, which means punishments, fights, and ultimatums will often only serve to escalate the situation.

Understand that effective intervention for teenagers is not intervention that forcibly stops behaviors—it’s intervention that builds deeper connections and allows teens to understand the depth of your love for them, while providing them with the opportunities they need to learn from mistakes and missteps.

So, develop your consequences around relationship-building. Instead of a “time out” or a grounding, which take kids away from relationships, turn punishments into time spent with family. Going on walks or bike rides, dinner dates, or other “adventures” with parents, grandparents, or siblings isn’t the ideal way for many teens to spend their Saturday, but it provides an effective consequence to negative behaviors while still creating connections and communicating that no matter what they do, you are in their life forever.

Many parents believe that activities like joining a sports team or having friends over are rewards for good behavior. Rather, they are valuable ways to build connection, support healing, and model good behavior! Let your children engage in extracurricular activities. Make your home the home that friends want to visit. Seek opportunities for teens to care for others through volunteer work or watching over a pet. Find ways for your teen to laugh, play, dance, sing, and move—all of these activities work to heal trauma at its most fundamental level and help youth develop a sense of belonging, self-worth, and confidence. The true work of being a parent and being a kid is having fun together.

As a child gets older, they are seen by society as more responsible for their behaviors—meaning parents and caregivers lose more control over the consequences a teen might face from the outside world. If a young adult steals, they might be arrested. If they fail a class, they might get kicked out. In these situations, remember that your job is to communicate to your teen that no matter what they do, you are unconditionally committed to them.

Work as a team. Your relationship is a partnership, and your child needs to be treated like an active member of their own healing journey—because they are! When considering consequences, activities, treatment options, and more, include your child in the decision-making process by offering them a choice (consider offering a choice between two or more options you've pre-approved). Give them the language and space to participate in this relationship. Because trauma and adolescence can isolate the “thinking” part of the brain from the “feeling” part, it can be hard for teens to find language that describes their moods or experiences. As a result, behaviors become the primary way to communicate emotions, and what might look like defiant behavior is just a means of processing a situation. Instead of asking why something happens, step back and ask the child to share what they think occurred in their own words. Ask them what they need, how they feel in this moment, and what other options are available to them the next time something like this happens. Move at their pace—pausing

and stepping back if you recognize that they seem overwhelmed or uncomfortable. Avoid having these conversations in the moment or in invasive environments, where a teen might feel overwhelmed by the pressure to fill silences or make eye contact. Aim instead for stress-free opportunities later, when you both have had the time to process immediate emotions, and consider opening up dialogue during a physical activity like a walk around the block, a game of basketball, or a drive to dinner.

Finally, remember that any partnership requires equal give and take. Allow your teen to practice caring and listening by sharing your emotions with them too. While it may feel unnatural to let yourself cry around your child or share how you are feeling, establishing this honesty allows them to see how much you care for them. This is an important way to model trust, but it's also an essential step for building connections.

Conclusion

In the midst of major physical and developmental changes, teens are working hard to understand themselves, their feelings, their bodies, their behaviors, and their narrative. By taking a family-centered approach to parenting, you ensure that they can trust you with their story, experiences, and healing journey, in addition to breaking the negative and ineffective family cycle of action, reaction, and punishment.

This is tough: prioritizing your relationship means repeatedly reaching out, staying steady, and being there for your child when it feels most challenging. This is concrete, hands-on, long-term work, but it's part of a lifelong commitment to helping this child learn how to attach and trust, enabling them to offer the same care to the world in the future. When it gets hard, remember: love is an action—a verb, not a noun.

Annual November Adoption Celebration at Boondocks Fun Center

Tentative Date: November 7th, 2020
Depending on State Covid 19 Recommendations

Watch for More Information to Follow

parent's night out

FOR ADOPTIVE AND
PROSPECTIVE PARENTS

2020 DATES

July 17

Parenting with ACE's & Trauma

August 21

Teens and Therapy

September 18

Compassion Fatigue

October 10

Adopting From Foster Care

November (TBD)

November Adoption Celebration

December

No training

FOSTER PARENT TRAINING
HOURS AVAILABLE.



7:00 PM - 8:30 PM

ALL TRAINING'S WILL BE HELD VIRTUALLY
ZOOM INVITE WILL BE SENT IN
RESPONSE TO YOUR RSVP

RSVP AND QUESTIONS:

BRANDIE NAYLOR

BNAYLOR@ADOPTEX.ORG



Why Nonverbal Learning Disorder is So Often Mistaken for ADHD

By: Priscilla Scherer, R.N., Reprinted with Permission

Marci G. started talking when she was 15 months old. By age three, she was reading *The Cat in the Hat*. Her parents started calling her their “little professor” because of her incessant questions and articulate chatter.

“She soaked up words like a sponge,” her mother, Irene, recalls. But unlike other children her age, Marci, who lives in New York City, never liked the sandbox or the playground. More interested in talking to her parents than playing with her peers, she preferred asking questions to physically exploring the world around her.

Marci did well academically in grades one and two, although she didn’t have many friends. Her third-grade teachers said she seemed inattentive in class, blurted out inappropriate comments, and bumped into classmates clumsily when they lined up for recess. Later that year, Marci was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). But Ritalin didn’t help. Neither did Adderall.

By sixth grade, Marci was all but friendless. She had stopped finishing classroom assignments and often left her homework incomplete. Given her obvious intelligence, her teachers considered her C average evidence of laziness or defiance. At this point, Marci was

diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). But behavioral therapy — the standard treatment for ODD — was no more helpful to her than Ritalin or Adderall had been.

Not until seventh grade did Marci and her parents learn the true problem: Marci has a nonverbal learning disorder, or NLD — a condition that doesn’t respond to the treatment regimen commonly used to treat ADHD.

What is a Nonverbal Learning Disorder?

Nonverbal learning disorder (NLD) is a constellation of brain-based difficulties. Once considered rare, NLD is now thought to be as prevalent as dyslexia. Strongly genetic in origin, NLD affects girls as frequently as boys and is characterized by poor visual, spatial, and organizational skills, poor motor performance, and difficulty recognizing and processing nonverbal cues — body language, facial expression, and the nuances of conversation.

Like Marci, most children with NLD have large vocabularies, outstanding memory and auditory retention, and average to superior intelligence. Also like Marci, kids with NLD are often misdiagnosed with ADHD.

“Virtually every child I’ve seen with NLD was first diagnosed with ADHD,” says the late Marcia Rubinstien, who was the founder of the Nonverbal Learning Disability Association. “Pediatricians ought to be able to recognize NLD and refer children for an evaluation, but teachers and medical professionals are more aware of language-based learning disabilities. That’s why every parent of a child with NLD has to become a full time advocate for their child.”

Despite their facility with language, kids with NLD often have poor reading comprehension. A child with NLD may miss the forest and the trees because of his intense focus on the leaves. After reading a book about the Civil War, for instance, the child might be able to name and describe each battlefield — yet fail to recognize that the conflict was about slavery and federalism.

Young children with NLD are often good at compensating for their limitations. But once those kids hit puberty, they often experience severe anxiety. In adulthood, mood disorders — combined with trouble picking up social cues and setting priorities — make it hard for people with NLD to hold on to jobs and relationships. The earlier the correct diagnosis is made and appropriate interventions begin, the better the outlook for a person with NLD.

No Conception of Deception

Far more than other children, kids with NLD rely mostly on language to learn about their world. Yet because they have trouble with abstract concepts, their language comprehension and speech lack nuance.

When an exasperated mom says, “Don’t let me see you playing with that toy any more,” her child with NLD might continue to play with it, but turn away — so his mom cannot see him. No wonder kids with NLD are often considered smart alecks.

Because they’re literal-minded, children with NLD tend to be naïve and virtually incapable of deception. These traits are often endearing, but they can cause heartbreak when a child reaches adolescence. For example, a teenage girl who cannot comprehend lying may not hesitate to befriend a stranger who offers her a ride home.

Easily Mistaken

At first glance, children with NLD seem to behave like those with ADHD, but the appropriate interventions are not the same. A child with NLD may have trouble sitting still and may bump into people. But this isn’t due to hyperactivity — it’s due to his poor balance and coordination, and trouble with visuospatial relationships.

Some children have both ADHD and NLD. “You can miss NLD in children with ADHD if you don’t have a thorough neuropsych evaluation,” cautions Ruth Nass, M.D., professor of pediatric neurology at the New York University School of Medicine.

Making the Diagnosis

NLD varies from child to child, and is not defined as a separate entity in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. For diagnosis, a child must undergo neuropsychological testing, speech and language assessment, and educational and occupational therapy evaluations.

As measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, kids with NLD usually demonstrate a verbal I.Q. that’s 20 or more points higher than their performance I.Q. (Verbal I.Q. is a measure of a child’s language ability. Performance I.Q. measures how well he makes use of what he knows.) Another test, the Brown ADHD Scales, can help differentiate NLD from ADHD.

ADHD and NLD: Overlapping Signs

One reason doctors have trouble diagnosing NLD is because it shares similar symptoms with ADHD such as...

- Poor social skills
- Academic difficulties
- Inattentiveness
- Overfocusing on certain tasks
- Excessive talking
- Speaking without thinking about it first
- Given the complexities of NLD, children do best when they get help from a team of professionals, including a neuropsychologist, occupational therapist, education specialist, and a speech and language therapist.

“As a parent of a child with NLD, you are your child’s primary therapist,” said Sue Thompson, the late author of *The Source for Nonverbal Learning Disorders*.

Unlike ADHD, NLD usually does not respond to medication. But children with NLD often do well with various other kinds of intervention:

- Social skills groups can help teach kids how to greet a friend, how to greet a stranger, and how to recognize and respond to teasing
- Occupational therapy builds a child’s tolerance for tactile experiences, improves balance, and enhances fine motor skills.
- Typing instruction software, like Jump Start Typing, can help kids compensate for poor handwriting.
- Recorded books are key for kids who learn by listening. Recording classroom lectures may also be helpful.
- Using a daily planner can help students improve organizational skills.
- Sound daunting? According to Rubinstien, “Helping a child with NLD is like learning a new language. Once you learn it, you can give your child the tools he needs to win.”

How’s Marci Now?

Marci, now 15, is in tenth grade. Her academic performance has improved, and she finished her freshman year of high school with a B average. But Marci still needs help with organization and, especially, with social skills.

As recommended in her Individualized Education Program, Marci is now “shadowed” by an education specialist for several school periods. Because auditory memory is one of her strengths, Marci tapes classroom lectures to listen to later and subscribes to a “books on tape” service. Several afternoons a week, Marci participates in a social skills group.

Now that her parents, classmates, and teachers recognize the biological basis of her behavioral problems, she’s treated with understanding. “She even has a best friend now,” says her mom, smiling. “It’s wonderful to hear the two of them complaining to each other, just like typical teenagers.”



What to Do if Your Child Says “No One Will Play With Me”

By Andrew M.I. Lee, [JD Understood.org](http://JDUnderstood.org)

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“No one will play with me.” Has your child ever said this to you? If so, you may not have known what to do or what to say. Here are some suggestions.

When your child shares feelings with you, start by just listening. Play is as important to young kids as things like money and love are to adults. So when kids say “no one will play with me,” it probably feels like a really big deal to them. Try not to downplay it by saying something like that “everything will be fine tomorrow.”

Try to understand more by asking your child open-ended questions:

What made you feel like this today?

Who didn’t want to play with you?

Were there some kids you wanted to play with, but you didn’t get a chance?

How you ask questions is just as important as the questions you ask. You want to show you care about your child’s thoughts and feelings. Saying something like **“Wow, sounds like you had a rough day”** can make your child feel heard.

At the same time, try not to jump to conclusions. It’s not unusual for young kids to say “no one will play with me.” Sometimes, it’s a real problem. Other times, it’s because of how young kids interpret things. It might not be what’s really happening.

Say your child was working on a class project and got out to recess 10 minutes late. When your child got to the field, soccer teams were already picked and your child had to sit out. Your child told you that no one wanted to play. But in that case, it’s because of timing, not friends.

How often your child says it is also important. If it’s isolated—like once a month—listening is usually enough. If your child complains more often, look deeper.

It’s also important not to try to rush in and “fix” things for your child—for example, by inviting another child over. Instead, work with your child to find solutions.

If your child has no one to play with at recess, encourage your child to try a game like four square. With four square, your child just has to get in line. Eventually your child will get to the front of the line and have a chance to play.

You can also reach out to your child’s teacher. Lots of schools have strategies to help kids socialize.

One is a “lunch bunch,” where a teacher has lunch with a group of kids, some who struggle with making friends and others who are more popular. The group gives your child a chance to have a guided conversation, helped along by a trusted teacher. There are also student clubs around interests like video games, graphic novels, or Legos.

If your child seems upset for several days, you may need to do more. Playing with others doesn’t come naturally to all kids. Your child may need to learn skills to make friends, like knowing how to ask others to play or how to start conversations. Or taking your turn and letting others talk. Your child can learn these skills through role-play or a social skills class.

Sometimes, saying “no one will play with me” can be a sign of something more serious. If other kids are saying mean things or bullying your child, contact the school. Don’t hesitate to reach out to the school counselor if you need help.



Raising a Child of Color in America- While White

By: Beth Hall

Ask yourself and answer honestly, “How comfortable am I in talking about race?” If the answer is “not very,” you’re certainly not alone. But as a parent, sometimes you have to do things that move you outside your comfort zone for the sake of your child.

Race matters. That is an absolute truth that has been well documented in research. In the last year, we’ve seen all too vividly the way in which race remains polarizing on a national scale. And yet, many of us come to transracial adoption hoping that it doesn’t need to matter in our families, thinking we’re “post-racial,” or that our children won’t feel close to us if race is emphasized. Pretty much the exact opposite is true. For children of color who are being raised by white parents to grow up healthy and strong, for transracial adoptive families to remain close and connected for years and decades, we need to acknowledge this truth and commit to having whatever hard discussions are necessary.

Some parents avoid the topic because they are more comfortable talking about culture than race. Some are fearful that they might be perceived as racists if they talk about race. Some parents have confided to me that they’re nervous that bringing up racism or white privilege might instill in their child a reluctance to love white people in particular, or anyone across racial lines in general.

Regardless of the age at which your child comes home, you will be the most trusted person in his world, so by default

he is going to learn to trust a person of your race. But because people of your race are not always trustworthy, it is imperative that you teach him how to distinguish those who are allies from those who are not.

Because race is such a sensitive topic, it can be helpful to take a step back and compare it to street safety. We don’t say to ourselves, “I think I’ll wait until my child is crossing the street before I teach her what to watch out for.” We understand that it is our job as parents to teach children how to cross the street, and that includes giving them a healthy dose of fear about the dangers of fast-moving traffic. In exactly the same way, it is our job to talk with them about the dangers and realities of racism before they ever encounter it, so they will know how to take care of themselves.

How do you do that? Over time, we’ve learned that there’s a three-step learning process in transracial adoption. The steps are:

STEP 1: Understand the Effects of Racism and What It Looks Like

The U.S. racial gap is a reality. Research clearly demonstrates that there are still huge inequities across racial lines. Consider some of the statistics: We are rapidly approaching a “majority minority” population (in which one or more racial and/or ethnic minorities relative to the country’s population make up a major-

ity of the population). Yet over 71 percent of all Bachelor's degrees awarded in the U.S. go to white students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In contrast, the prison population is 88 percent people of color (Bureau of Justice, 2010; U.S. Census, 2010). Job applicants with "black-sounding" names are 33 percent less likely to get called for an interview than other applicants with identical resumes (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015). These gaps apply across class lines. They are realities.

Children pick up implicit bias about race at a very young age. We know that children not only recognize racial differences very early (before they turn one), but they are expressing racial preferences by three years old. So if we don't speak about race with our kids, they are going to absorb through osmosis what the world is teaching them, which is: White people equal good/nice/pretty people. Black and brown people, in contrast, equal bad/mean/ugly people. Children will internalize these pervasive messages as a negative self-image and/or a negative view of other people like them unless we counter with explicitly contrasting messages and direct experiences.

Recognize that racism comes in many forms. When people hear the word "racism," many think only of blatant interpersonal racism, like the use of racial epithets. If your only image of racism is a Ku Klux Klan member, it is easy to dismiss racist incidents with a reaction of, "Oh, I know so-and-so is not a racist — she didn't mean it that way." We must educate ourselves to recognize the microaggressions that people of color experience every day, as well as the ways racism can operate on a larger scale. Racism can be expressed via car doors suddenly locked, by purses clutched, by students not called on in class, by children not invited to a birthday party, by selective surveillance by security guards, by requests to touch a person's hair, or by phrases like "You speak English really well" or "He's so articulate!"

Race is a matter of life-and-death importance. If you don't think it is, do some more reading about Ferguson; about Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, and the all-too-long list of people of color who are dead because they were shot first and questions were asked later. Our children's very lives are dependent on their understanding of how to navigate race in our society. Keeping our kids ignorant of these issues is not protecting them — it is endangering them.

STEP 2: Talk with Your Children About Race and Racism

Once we understand the landscape of race, we have to get comfortable noticing race, acknowledging that racism exists, and bring up examples when talking with our children.

Your tone matters, so practice is imperative. Those of us who are white have probably not grown up talking about race. If that's the case, you need to practice. If we're uncomfortable when we talk about something, our children sense it, and that discomfort on our part sends the message that it's better not to bring up that topic.

We must talk about race because silence speaks volumes. Children think adults have a great deal of power. When we do not say that something is wrong, they assume that we agree with it. When we are silent on a topic like race, we are effectively saying to our children that the system

as it exists today is OK with us. Unless all of the inequities that exist — the income gap, the educational achievement gap, the legal disparities (what Michelle Alexander has called "the New Jim Crow") — are OK with you, it's critically important that you speak up and explicitly teach your children that they are wrong.

Begin this conversation when your kids are young. This may seem daunting, but there are a couple of ways to start such discussions. Two kid-friendly books I particularly like are *All the Colors We Are*, by Katie Kissinger, and *Let's Talk About Race*, by Julius Lester. Begin by noticing and talking about race in a very factual way — talk about skin color and why people who have ancestors from different parts of the world (where the sun shines more or less brightly) have different amounts of melanin in their skin. When my kids were little, they spent lots of time comparing their skin colors — in the bath, in their bedroom. Noticing and comparing are very important to young children: They learn how to recognize triangles versus circles, orange versus blue, all of these things, at ages two, three, and four. So that's when we want to be having those kinds of discussions about skin color and other features, and thus laying the groundwork for later discussions about the values placed on these features.

Use the words they'll hear in the larger world. I know that some parents like to describe skin color with terms like "brown sugar" or "chocolate," but, as with any other important topic, I think it's imperative to give children the words of the world. You might say, "We sometimes say that your skin is the color of 'brown sugar,' which it is, but the world uses the term Black or African-American to describe people whose ancestors came from Africa and live in America now." You can add that race is a social construct later, but when children are younger, it is more appropriate to focus on noticing that there are some light-skinned people who are African-American and some darker-skinned people who are white. Help them learn that the terms Black and brown don't come from the color of people's skin, but rather the racial group with which they identify. It is important for children to learn not only their own descriptions, but also the language of the world in a factual, uncharged way.

Start calling out examples of racism. Point out something that happened to a character in a book, something you heard on the radio, or an interaction on the playground or at your work. You might wade in with, "Today I heard someone say that she thinks that Black people are naturally better at sports and Asians are naturally better at math. I disagree with this and I am going to say something about it to her. What do you think I should say?" Or "I notice that there are hardly any people of color nominated for an Oscar and that makes me mad. Why do you think that is?" Or "A Black boy was shot by the police, and I am really upset and want to talk with other people who don't think that police should ever shoot a boy who isn't trying to hurt them."

Be explicit in saying that racism is wrong. The really important part in these conversations is for parents to add a value statement at the end. One of my favorites is, "... and in our family, we really disagree with that." Our job as parents is to teach our children values. By explicitly stating what we believe as a family when it comes to racial inequities and justice, our children will understand us to be their allies.

Don't worry about talking too much. Some parents tell me they worry about bringing up race too much. If you asked my children, "Did she talk about it too much?" they would both roll their eyes and laugh and say, "Absolutely." But if you asked them whether I had their backs, the answer would be, "Absolutely. She didn't always get it right, but she always tried to be there for us." And that, for us as parents, is the most important thing. I don't mind annoying my kids or sometimes "going overboard" if it means I am supporting them.

STEP 3: Find Friends and Role Models of Your Child's Race

In order for our children to have a healthy self-identity, they need to not only be loved unconditionally and have their basic needs met, but they need to have role models who can help them imagine possibilities and move toward positive futures for themselves. No matter how well-intended, any plan to address a child's racial identity that doesn't include immersion with others who share that child's racial experience is not going to be very successful, and will create problems for that child down the road.

In my experience, this third step is often the hardest. There are a lot of parents who say, "I can acknowledge that race is important and racism exists, I can get to the place where I can talk about it within my own family and social circle, but..." The truth is that making connections, authentic and intimate connections, across racial lines is something that much of America struggles with.

Take a hard look at the diversity in your daily life. Ask yourself: "With whom do I eat dinner? Who comes into my home, and whose home do I go into? With whom do I worship?" If the answers are, "Only people who look like me, and not like my children," it is important to recognize the underlying message to your child about who is important and who is worth loving. Again, that which is unsaid also conveys a message.

Peers are important; adult role models are essential. Some parents ask if being around other transracial adoptive families or their child's having friends of the same race is enough. As you likely have already inferred, the answer is no. Our children do benefit from knowing other families that look like theirs, and they need same-race peers. But it's critical they have adult role models who reflect them. None of us would rely solely on other children to teach our kids about our religious values, our ethical values, or how to be successful in life, would we? So why would we think our nine-year-old son should look only to another nine-year-old to understand how to become a strong, proud, culturally-connected Asian, Latino, or Black man?

Find friends and role models for yourself, too. Remember, this is not about sending your child off to have those interactions; it's important for you to have them too, and for your child to see you in relationships with people who look like her. As parents, we also need other adults we can talk to, peers for whom these conversations are just as important as they are for us.

Understand racial isolation. So how do we make friendships with adults of our children's race? The same way we

make any friendships. First, there has to be access to the adults you are trying to connect with, and the more the better. Racial isolation is very important for transracial families to think about. There are two kinds of racial isolation — geographic and demographic.

Geographic isolation describes a family that lives in a highly heterogeneous, white-majority area where there are very, very few people of color. Transracially adopted adults who grow up in that kind of environment often feel very disconnected from their own racial group, which leads to a kind of self-hate, which obviously is damaging. Many of them choose or feel forced to leave when they grow up and then remain far less connected to their adoptive families — hardly the result most of us parents would desire.

On the other hand, you can live in a very "diverse" area and still lead a demographically isolated life. If our kids see lots of people of color when we're driving down the street or at the grocery store, but then look around their block — or their school, their church, their after-school activities, and so on — and see mostly white people, they may think we have chosen this segregation intentionally. To the child, who sees adults as all-powerful, it appears we are keeping people who look like them out of the rest of our lives on purpose. A child can get the message that people who look like them are undesirable to their parents, leading her to reject her parents and struggle with a sense of belonging as she grows older.

Counter racial isolation. Whether your family is geographically or demographically isolated, you've got to find a way to create access, and that often means making some significant and difficult changes. If your child went to a school or you lived in a neighborhood where she was being continuously bullied, you wouldn't shrug it off; you would find a way to make a change. This is just the same. If your child is suffering from racial isolation, you need to do something about it.

Find opportunities to visit and spend time in communities of color that reflect your child's racial heritage. Maybe you need to change your child's school, or soccer team, or your family's place of worship — conscious efforts which may require driving longer distances and going out of your way to make this a priority. Consider taking vacations in places where people who look like your children are going to be in the majority. You may need to move. Whatever it takes, understand that your job as a parent is always to put your child's needs first, even when that requires some sacrifice on your part. Alleviating the ache of isolation, the sense of not belonging, that our transracially adopted children too often live with is worth whatever effort is required from us. Our kids often appear fine to us and to the world, but this is often the case only because they are working so hard to maintain that appearance, because "fine" is what they think they should be. Doing everything we can do to spare them that experience is the essence of our job of becoming their family rather than asking them to change or sacrifice in order to become ours.

In-person interactions are vital. I know that many parents mention online groups or sites as an alternative to living in areas with direct access to people of color. These are great resources for parents to learn from, but your children — particularly young children — aren't online with you. They

need to have this happening in their lives. They need to see you making the effort because it tells them how much these issues matter not only to them but to you.

Introduce yourself to potential allies. After you've set up this access, you need to make connections. When I walk into a room without my children, people of color don't know they have a lot in common with me. Why would they? But I know that we share concerns regarding parenting, and safety for our children, so I have to be opportunistic and be the one to approach them, to be friendly and find commonality. Take baby steps. Is your son one of only two African-Americans in his classroom? Chances are, you and the other child's parents have some common concerns. Introduce yourself. Sit next to them at the open house. Volunteer to work together on a project or a committee. You can form this connection whether or not your kids decide to be friends. In truth, you have far more in common with them from a parenting perspective than you are likely to have with white parents of white children who far too often do not share our concerns about racial equity and pride.

STEPS 4 and Beyond: Don't Stop with Diversity; Be an Anti-Racist Activist

Your work as a parent doesn't end with diversifying your children's world. It starts with that, but diversity is not the end goal. Equity is. Justice is. And we all have a lot of work to do to get there.

Until we do, it is our job to be thinking hard about this, to be thinking about the environments into which we bring our children and how they make our children feel. It's not just about finding a diverse school or a diverse church, but asking the questions: "Who succeeds at this school? Who is given voice and authority in this community? If the needs of my child's racial group are not being met in this school or community, if they don't have access to everything they deserve and don't have true equity, how will I stand up and be an ally and an advocate for all of them?"

Standing up for what is right for your child is challenging, but take heart: Know that families don't become close by skating through the park on a sunny day. We become close when we jump into the hard stuff, because that's how we know who's really there for us. Facing these challenges together gives you the opportunity to become closer to your children than ever before. Adoption and race create complexity, but when we go there, we can have the most amazing relationships with our kids.

I've been a transracial adoptive parent for 25 years now. And all of the anxious parenting I did, all of my brilliant ideas about how my children should behave and what they should do, mattered far less than the work I did in standing up when I saw inequities and saying, "It's wrong when I see bias. It's wrong when I see racism, sexism, adoptism, homophobia." Being an activist let my children know that I have their backs and made them want to stay connected and close.

All of our children deserve to grow up knowing that they don't have to accept unfairness, that their parents who

love them would never tell them to just smile and shrug it off, that they can and should stand up for themselves and for what's right. When you let your child know that you will always be his or her ally in the struggle for justice, you are building the foundation for a very close and loving relationship that will last a lifetime.

The Four Levels of Racism

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RACISM

1. Internalized racism is the implicit bias we all hold within our minds — for example, white is equated with good, black with bad or dangerous. These are assumptions that are in the media, and all but in the drinking water in American culture, and the beliefs a child will pick up unless she's explicitly told otherwise. I encourage you to take an implicit bias test (like Project Implicit's Racial Bias test at implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html). Acknowledging that I hold racist attitudes internally about black and brown people in the world, when those people include my own children, whom I love more than anything, is profoundly painful. But if I can't say that out loud, I can't fight against it and make sure that my actions are not racist.

2. Interpersonal racism: Interpersonal racism occurs between people. "I don't like you because you are a _____." Some of us may know people who are blatantly racist, who exhibit interpersonal racism, but many of us don't. It's important to understand that interpersonal racism also includes microaggressions, which, like 1,000 paper cuts, cumulatively add up to do real harm.

SYSTEMIC-LEVEL RACISM

3. Institutional racism involves the reality that, within institutions, there is discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and practices, inequitable opportunities, and impacts that are based solely on race. An example might be a school system that concentrates students of color in the more overcrowded and underfunded schools with the least experienced teachers while concentrating white students in the better-funded, less crowded schools with better teachers.

4. Structural racism is the cumulative and compounded effect of institutional and societal bias that privileges white people and disadvantages people of color. An example of this is the racial wealth divide. This has been going on for generations, and undoing it will take sustained, hard work on a societal level.

Adapted with permission from "Moving the Race Conversation Forward: How the Media Covers Racism and Other Barriers to Productive Racial Discourse, Part 1," by Race Forward, The Center for Racial Justice Innovation (raceforward.org).

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