

DIVERSE ISSUES

Diversity in People: What Are You? No simple answer for bi-racial people.

A growing segment of our youth population does not fit easily into the neat categories that we, as society, like to place people. These are the children of parents from differing racial groups. Children of differing racial heritage are often referred to as bi-racial, mixed, interracial, multi-racial, or legally as "other." Between 1970 and 1990, the number of children living in families where one parent is white and the other of a different race tripled from fewer than 400,000 to more than 1.5 million.



While all children have special needs and all must go through the process of identity development, bi-racial children have unique stress. Not only must they integrate personal identity and racial and ethnic identities, but they must also learn to bridge majority and minority cultures. This is further complicated by the fact that one of their identities may be more valued by society than the other. Since high levels of self-esteem are related to consistent comfort with one's racial identity (Okun, 1996), it is important that bi-racial children are able to accept and function in both cultures.

Yet, the question "What are you?" commonly asked of bi-racial children, presupposes an answer of either one race or another. In fact during adolescence, many bi-racial teens feel pressured to choose one racial group over another (Tatum, 1997). As social groupings become increasingly divided along racial lines during adolescence, where does the bi-racial adolescent fit? A number of factors may influence the decision. One's physical characteristics may identify the person more with the majority or minority group; the type of community/neighborhood environment (primarily white, primarily minority, or mixed) in which one was raised; and the identification the parents have encouraged a child to assume are just some of these factors.

Some bi-racial children may at times, feel like they do not belong to either racial group. They may feel as Rosato (1997-98) suggests, like a chameleon, with no color of their own. Some, at times, may feel rejected by both the majority and the minority populations. And neither parent can serve as a role model for a healthy bi-racial identity, because neither parent is bi-racial.

Until recently, many bi-racial people were likely to identify as belonging to the minority race since they were more likely to be identified by others as minority. To do so, however, almost forces the person to deny apart of him or herself, to deny one of their parents. Increasingly, parents are teaching their children to label themselves as bi-racial, thus owning and affirming both racial identities. As one young woman in a study of bi-racial students explained, "You have to accept everything about yourself, otherwise you're not going to like yourself." (Tatum, 1997, p 184).

Acknowledging the need to negotiate additional challenges that others do not, bi-racial children can and do develop healthy identities. Cauce and her colleagues at the University of Washington compared bi-racial adolescents with a matched group of adolescents that had two minority parents. They concluded that, "For both groups, all measures of psychological adjustment were in the normal range, suggesting that bi-racial adolescents can be as reasonably healthy and happy as other young people are." (Tatum, 1997, p 174.)

Educators and youth professionals are in a position to positively impact bi-racial youth with positive climates and accepting environments, thus creating a sense of belonging. The following are some considerations for creating such as environment:

1. Foster an atmosphere of trust and openness where bi-racial children can feel comfortable discussing racial identification issues. Sometimes children may fear discussing concerns at home due to the possibility of offending one parent.
2. Provide positive examples of diversity in the day-to-day activities of the group. Books and pictures that include many cultures and races are one example.
3. Examine your own personal attitudes about multiple racial heritages.
4. Allow and encourage children to self-identify their racial background, without forcing the child to identify more with one or the other part of their heritage.

References

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"The greatest compliment that was ever paid to me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer." Henry David Thoreau

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