

# Supporting Healthy Identity Development

## Excerpt from A Place to Begin with Parents on Issues of Diversity

By Dora Pulido-Tobiassen and Janet Gonzalez-Mena  
California Tomorrow (1999)

### ***How do children of color develop a sense of racial identity?***

*"The environments of Black children in America are infused with negative images of their ethnic group. Color concepts appear to undergird cultural beliefs and are in place prior to age 3 (Spencer, 1977, 1982 and 1987). The princesses of fairy tales do not cavort in black gowns or ride on 'dark' stallions. They are 'saved' by princes in white shining armor who ride white horses. 'Good guys', generally, have always worn white hats. They are threatened by individuals of 'dark character, dressed in black and riding 'dark' horses. The fear of darkness becomes analogous with a fear of all things dark and unknown, including people. Such early environmental experiences become integrated into the psych prior to learning the facts."*

---Margaret Beale Spencer

In society afflicted by racism, children of color have a profoundly difficult task when it comes to developing a positive racial identity. They must somehow reconcile conflicting messages about who they are and their value in a society that grants privilege to white skin and devalues people with darker skin. They must be helped to resist the message that the only way to feel like a complete human being is by being white, by trying to "act white" or talk like white children.

*"Attitudes about race, culture and language impact a child's development and identity formation. Children absorb the negative messages about who they are. If a young child is always hearing negative messages about having dark skin, his or her identity will be shaped around those attitudes. Identity is intimately tied to how an individual is responded to by socializing agents." (uga, 1984).*

As we talked about in Chapter Two, children of color are a target group for bias, receiving a double message from society: All people are equal; but some are more equal than others are.

If children of color are not supported in positive identity formation, they can easily incorporate racist messages unconsciously into their view of self and others. As they experience others thinking less of them, they can begin to think less of themselves and their families. This “internalized oppression” becomes a part of identity, which limits potential and puts the brakes on the future, cutting down on options and possibilities. Self-identity takes a negative twist as children accept the view that they may get from society that their people are “less than.”

As children come to understand that they, the people they love and their ways of doing things are feared, hated or devalued, they can become frightened. Here is a story told by the mother of a three-year-old Mexican girl whose family worked in Northern California. They were living in the United States without papers to reside here legally. The girl often heard adults in her family worry that immigration agents would raid their workplaces or homes. Often, she saw television images of people who looked like her parents being chased and arrested. Her mother reported sadly, “Whenever my daughter sees a white van anywhere, even though it is just someone’s van, she says, ‘*Mami, La Migra* (Immigration), get down!’--- and she goes to her little chair and gets underneath because she is afraid. She is so little, three-and-a-half. I try to tell her not to be afraid. But from the tension that she feels in us, she feels afraid.” This little girl is living in fear. She is learning about her world, taking in the ugly reality that it isn’t a welcoming place for people like her.

It takes extra work for families to help a child feel safe, to learn to avoid oppressive situations, to know when it is and isn’t safe to be visible for who they are. Parents face a delicate balance between trying to protect their children enough about the dangers to learn survival skills. As difficult as this is, it is also an opportunity for children to take in the resiliency and courage of their family. People who work with parents can greatly help by understanding that families are up against these kinds of challenges---and by offering support as they work through them.

Children of color take different paths in identity formation (Derman-Sparks, Daniel Tatum):

1. Whether trying to be like those who are accepted, or making a strategic choice for safety, children of color who take on the speech, dress, and behaviors of whites---and distance themselves from the speech, dress, and behaviors of their own families and community---painfully deny part of their own identity. In the early years the child may not be doing this deliberately---as can happen later. But rejecting one’s home language and refusing to speak anything but English is a start in this direction of

taking on a new identity that is more in line with the dominant culture. Choosing white dolls over dark-skinned dolls may be an early sign of the child rejecting her own identity in favor of a whiter one. Children who take this approach to identity formation may end up feeling like outsiders in their own group---even within their own family. Being an outsider is a lonely position, especially if the group they're trying to imitate won't allow them in. Even if it does, being cut off from one's people can cause pain.

2. Some children of color don't absorb negative messages to the same degree, but instead learn strategies to fight both internal and external oppression. It might not happen at first, but eventually some children resist negative judgments about themselves and their people. They oppose the dominant culture's negative view of them. They come to see and understand the oppression of their people and fight against it. These children are often in environments in which adults work actively to build self-esteem in their children, who stand up against the behaviors of others that undermine their culture, language and ways of being.
3. A third way children handle the discrepant value messages that they receive is to dismiss all thoughts of race and racism and avoid all discussions about these subjects. These children are often in environments in which adults do the same thing. They observe inequitable treatment and racial slurs being ignored because adults don't want to believe that the children notice color, let alone use it against anyone. The adults seem to believe that if they don't mention it, children won't notice. But children DO notice, and what they learn is that adults are afraid to acknowledge or react actively to those messages and experiences. Adults with this attitude don't seem to realize that denial isn't good for healthy emotional development or identity development.

### ***How do biracial children develop a sense of identity?***

Trying to understand race and racial categories takes on another layer of complexity when the child and each parent all look different from one another. Children from parents of different racial backgrounds---biracial or multiracial children---develop their racial self-identity in a unique context. Biracial children have a better chance of growing up in an environment where a range of skin colors and physical characteristics are "normal" at home, where they accept the love between people who look different as a fact of life. They have access, within the safety of their own family, to different racial experiences. But despite this home advantage (which of course cannot by any means be guaranteed; they may be adopted into a family of one race, their parents may be separated, etc.) it is often not so easy for the biracial child out in the world. First, a biracial child is affected

by racism in the same manner as all children of color. Yet the child's development of group identification presents an additional challenge, as our common application of racial categories does not easily allow for a child who is not "one" or "the other" but "both" or "many." Often, the biracial child will look different from all the other children in the child care program.

The mother of a biracial daughter (African American and European American) said, "I want my daughter to be proud of her uniqueness. I want her to understand as much as she can about the different cultures that are brought together in her family and then take that out into the world and value the differences of the kids around her. I want her to know that we are lucky to live in a world where there are different people of different colors and family traditions that we can learn from."

The growing population of biracial and multiracial families can be perhaps the most evidenced in today's child care settings. But in a society that categorizes people by race, some biracial families express fears that their children will be misunderstood or discriminated against because they do not easily fit into one racial group or another. They fear that their child will be alone in a culture that has distinct places for people of different races. These parents hope that their child care program will play a strong role in helping their children to develop a positive biracial identity---to feel their feet planted in both racial realities.

***How can children who are adopted into a different racial group than their own---"transracially adopted"---be helped to develop a positive sense of identity?***

It is important to try to connect the child with his or her group---whether it be a racial, ethnic, cultural or community group---in ways that promote a positive feeling about the aspects of the identity that are different from the parents. Books help, too, as children are exposed to their own racial group and picture of children who look like them. Some adoptive parents are able to find other parents who have adopted across racial lines. Creating a social network of other families in the same situation lets children know that their family isn't the only one in which the children don't look like the parents.

One of the advantages of cross-racial adoption is that, tempted as some parents are to keep adoption a secret, this is not an option when the child does not resemble them. That puts adoption out in the open and makes it a matter of fact, instead of something shameful to hide. It's important for all children to know that not only do families come in many forms, but that children arrive in families other ways besides being born into them. Discussions of adoption and fostering have to be handled delicately and with

respect, but they cannot be avoided if children are to accept and feel comfortable with diversity.

### ***What can adults do to foster a positive sense of identity in children?***

The adults who touch a child's life---including their parents and people who work with them---can help children to develop a positive sense of identity. To do so, they first need to examine their own identity---how they feel about themselves as well as their ability to accept and celebrate differences. The more they do so, the more they can help parents navigate these difficult parenting issues. Uncovering one's own beliefs may be difficult and painful. Nobody likes to face prejudices held deep inside, but nobody can avoid stereotypes and prejudices, either. And, it is only by pausing and examining our own attitudes and experiences that we can see where our automatic actions may or may not fit our deepest values and hopes for the kind of society we want for children.

Adults model through what they say and do setting an example. A child notices that her mother holds her hand tighter when they pass an African American man. Children watch and sense the adults in their lives all the time. Adults can also create learning opportunities for children and take advantage of "teachable moments" that arise spontaneously. This is a strong way to encourage and support children.

The issues discussed in terms of racial identity above apply also to other realms of identity where there is bias in our society: language, gender, immigration, religion, family structure. Our experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about all of these shape the verbal and non-verbal messages we sent to our children about their own worth and place in the world. For example, a caseworker in an organization responded in English to a mother who spoke to her in Spanish---even though the caseworker knew Spanish. The woman had her children with her. By responding in English, the caseworker conveyed to the children that her mother may have been doing something wrong and that people in authority only speak English.

### ***Looking forward***

We can all challenge ourselves to look inside and uncover our own beliefs, but it's also valuable to explore these areas with other trusted people. Some of the greatest insights are gained when people compare their interpretations of life's situations with others...

*\*Reprinted by the Early Childhood Equity Alliance with permission from the authors and California Tomorrow\**