

Module #11 Race and Ethnicity in Adoption

Handout #11.6

Parenting Tasks that Facilitate Positive Racial Identity

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Because children from minority groups (Asian, Latino, African American, or Native American) who experience prejudice or discrimination are subject to developing negative racial identity, they require monitoring, with attention paid to their perception of racial identity. They should not be expected to develop positive racial identity without support and reinforcement from their families, role models, and the community. Parents can provide support and reinforcement through the following 7 tasks.

TASK 1: Acknowledge the existence of prejudice, racism, and discrimination.

Adoptive parents must recognize not only that racism, prejudice, and discrimination exist, but that they, too, have been victims and survivors of it. By admitting the existence of inequities, parents can avoid racist, prejudicial, or discriminatory behavior. By admitting being a victim and survivor, parents are able to: 1) recognize inequities and how they affect others; and 2) elicit strategies for intervening on behalf of their child, based on personal experiences and knowledge.

While the victimization of minority groups is fairly obvious, that of members from the dominant culture and race may not be. Children in the dominant group are victims of racism by inadvertently developing superiority complexes.

Superiority complexes occur when a child:

1. observes that those in power are racially the same as he or she is,
2. observes those not in power are of a different race or color,
3. observes or is exposed to prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs and practices against a minority race,
4. assumes, therefore, that he or she and his or her race are better off without having any contact with a minority group.

Once parents understand how racism victimizes members from both the dominant and minority communities, they are prepared for the second task.

TASK 2: Explain why the child's minority group is mistreated.

Parents must explain and define racism, prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry, and why such behavior exists. Understanding the behavior exists. Understanding the behaviors beyond their simply being "good or bad" will enhance the child's coping skills. Understanding the functions and reasons for the behaviors increases the child's range of responses beyond anger or retaliation.

TASK 3: Provide the child with a repertoire of responses to racial discrimination.

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Parents must work to minimize their children's feelings of helplessness. A child's identity can be more positive if he or she perceives him or herself and members of racial groups to be empowered with choices, resources, and the ability to acquire and protect their rights. This repertoire of responses may include:

1. selective confrontation or avoidance,
2. styles of confrontations (passive, aggressive),
3. individual, legal, institutional, or community resources and responses (i.e. grievances, suits, NAACP, protests)
4. priorities and timing (when to avoid and when not to avoid issues),
5. goal-oriented responses rather than unplanned reactions,
6. institutional/organizational strategies (positioning, coalitions, compromising).

TASK 4: Provide the child with role models and positive contact with his or her minority community.

Parents of a different race from their child are quite capable of modeling and helping the child develop various identities (i.e. gender, class). However, counteracting the racial identity projected by a racially conscious or discriminating society requires positive exposure to same-race models or experiences. These contacts and experiences require: 1) interacting with the child's minority community, 2) providing the child information about his or her history and culture, and 3) providing an environment that includes the child's culture on a regular basis (i.e. art, music, food, religion, school, integrated or same race community).

This task requires that the parents be comfortable with 1) being a minority when interacting in the child's community, and 2) sharing the role of modeling with members from the child's race. Same race contacts and experiences function to: 1) counteract negative stereotypes, 2) teach the child how to implement the repertoire of responses, and 3) provide a respite from being a minority (i.e. the only child of color, the object of stares, or needing to prove one's equality).

TASK 5: Prepare the child for discrimination.

Providing the child with information on how his or her racial identity might be degraded helps him or her develop better coping skills and methods of maintaining a positive identity. Feeling self-confident about his or her ability to cope with and appropriately respond to discrimination reinforces a child's positive self-image and identity.

Same race role models may be a helpful resource for information and preparation if an adoptive parent has not experienced discrimination similar to the child's minority group (i.e. double standards, slander, interracial dating, and gender issues).

TASK 6: Teach the child the difference between responsibility to and for his or her minority group.

This task relieves the child of: 1) feeling embarrassed or needing to apologize for his or her racial identity or group, 2) not having to overcompensate or prove his or her worth because of his or her racial identity or negative stereotypes. However, the child is able to develop a commitment to both his or her individual and minority group's accomplishments, resources, and empowerment.

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The Clark Doll Test suggests that children are aware of differences in race as early as four years old. This study also found that African American children became aware of stigma associated with race as early as seven years old. Although parents cannot stop the minority child's exposure to racial prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes, parents (adoptive, birth, same or different race) of any minority child must help develop the positive racial identity necessary to counteract the effects of racial inferiority.

TASK 7: Advocate on behalf of your child's positive identity.

The purpose of this task is to provide the child an environment that is conducive to the formation of a positive identity. The parent should advocate for family, social, and educational experiences that are respectful, reflective, and sensitive to cultural diversity. Therefore, the parent may need to be prepared to correct or confront individual or institutional racism, prejudice, or discrimination that the child may encounter.

As an advocate the parent models for the child how to advocate for themselves. The child also sees and feels their parent's protection, loyalty, and commitment, which are essential in attachment and bonding. Confronting prejudice and discrimination on the child's behalf is no longer optional once a parent adopts transracially.