



# PREPARING FOR A TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

THINGS TO CONSIDER  
WHEN ADOPTING A CHILD  
OF ANOTHER RACE

BY JASON AND TRISHA WEBER



Talking about race can be uncomfortable. We worry about saying the wrong things or being misunderstood. And **these worries can make it difficult for those considering a transracial adoption to seek answers to their questions.** Moreover, some might wonder if race really matters when it comes to giving a child a loving family. Others wonder how extended family might treat a child of another race. It's tempting to either dismiss these thoughts entirely or allow them to paralyze us. But it doesn't have to be this way...

IF YOU ARE IN THE PROCESS OF ADOPTING A CHILD OF ANOTHER RACE, OR EVEN JUST THINKING ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY, THERE ARE SOME **QUESTIONS YOU'LL WANT TO CONSIDER:**

- Q:** *How might growing up in my culture and in my community affect my child—both positively and negatively?*
- Q:** *Am I able to teach my child how to interact with a world that will treat him differently because of the color of his skin?*
- Q:** *Am I prepared to help my child respond to the extra attention and curiosity that comes from “standing out” as a transracial family?*

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**Transracial adoption is a complex issue.** In our family, we have adopted children of three different races, and our goal is not to provide all the answers as much as it is to help you ask the right questions. The three questions above are a good place to start.

So, what are the things adoptive parents should understand about raising a child of a different race, and what are the best ways to gain that understanding?

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

While there are a number of issues to consider in a transracial adoption, the best place to begin is the same place we start whenever we discuss our relationships with others. **We begin with love.**

But when the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:34-40 ESV).

## LOVING GOD AND LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR IS THE STARTING PLACE.

It is important to define what we mean when we use the word “love.” Plenty of watered-down or even counterfeit versions are prevalent in our culture today, but when we talk about love, we are talking about biblical love. It is action-oriented, sacrificial and unconditional. We are not simply talking about warm feelings and affection (though these things can certainly be associated with loving someone).

When we consider adopting a child, regardless of his or her race, we must begin with love. We should be asking ourselves at every opportunity, “What does it look like to truly love this child as God would have me love her?”

### **There are two challenges to loving this way:**

- ▶ Recognizing the loving thing to do.
- ▶ Actually doing it.

**But knowing the loving thing to do isn't always easy.** When it comes to transracial adoption, some passionately assert that the loving thing to do for a child is to give him or her a family regardless of that family's race. Others are equally as adamant that the most loving thing is to see a child raised by a parent or parents of the same race, who can best prepare that child for the realities he or she will encounter in our world.

Many people feel pretty strongly about one of those positions. But what if there is another point of view that's worth considering?

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## **THREE SCENARIOS FOR TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION**

While each of the following stories is fictional, the experiences and perspectives they reflect are very relevant for those considering transracial adoption:

### **SCENARIO 1:**

#### **Transracial adoption should be avoided if possible**

When Tim and Cindy started pursuing adoption, they also began to explore the implications of adopting transracially. They approached an African-American neighbor, a retired social worker, and asked for her perspective.

The neighbor explained some of the complexities involved and told the couple that she felt an African-American child raised in their home would likely not be adequately prepared to handle many issues the child would encounter related to race. It wasn't that the neighbor didn't like white people; rather, she genuinely felt that the long-term emotional implications for a child of color were simply too great. This conversation was both challenging and confusing for Tim and Cindy, who were trying to understand these implications and wanted to make the best decision for any child they would adopt.

### **SCENARIO 2:**

#### **Race should not matter when it comes to giving a child a home**

Blake and Tina always wanted to adopt. Ever since she was young, Tina imagined adopting children and someday having a "rainbow family." One night at dinner, some close friends asked the couple why having a rainbow family was so important to them, and if they felt prepared to address some of the racial issues that might come up while raising children from other cultures. Blake and Tina were surprised by this question. "We really don't see race when it comes to these things," they replied. "All kids basically need the same thing: a family. That's what really matters, and that is what we want to give them." Still, her friends' questions made Tina wonder if there were some issues she was missing and if her motives were really in the right place.

### **SCENARIO 3:**

#### **Race is an important consideration, but shouldn't prevent a child from having a family**

Rob and Ashley were in the process of adopting transracially and spent several months discussing the implications with their friends, family and

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professionals. Yet the more people they talked to, the more they realized how little they understood about matters of race. They had trouble identifying with most of the struggles their friends of color experienced, and this made them question whether they could adequately help a child navigate those experiences. As the day approached that their child would be coming home, it became clear to Rob and Ashley that understanding these race-related realities would be a lifelong journey of learning. They would need to continually evaluate their parenting and consider adjustments along the way in order to truly love the child coming into their home. They committed themselves to learning and growing in this area as their child grew. They were also committed to making changes to their lifestyle if that's what it meant to love this child well.

All three of these couples explored transracial adoption, and all three were forced to grapple with **some tough decisions** along the way. Perhaps you have faced a similar crossroads in your journey. If so, our hope is that you will find a way forward that both honors God's calling in your life and helps you to understand what it means to love well when it comes to adopting a child of a different race.

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## THE REALITIES OF TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

Why does race even matter when it comes to adoption? Here are **two main areas** to consider:

# 01 RACIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Almost all children who are adopted wonder at some point where they came from—and what the answer to that question means about them, who they are and who they will become. These discussions can become even more personal when race is involved. **Here are just a few examples from kids we know:**

*“My friend told me at lunch that it's the white part of me that gets good grades and the black part of me that is good at basketball.”*

*“Someone told me that my hair looks funny. I don't want to wear it like that anymore.”*

*“It was made very clear that some parents at our school were OK with their daughters being my friend, but that dating me would be unacceptable.”*

**These and other similar encounters raise some important questions:**

- ▶ To what extent can parents of one race effectively raise a child of another race?
- ▶ Can these parents adequately understand how their child will be treated by others?
- ▶ Will that child be equipped to respond to racism and overcome social biases that could limit certain opportunities and privileges?
- ▶ Will a child raised by parents of another race be able to comfortably interact with others of his or her own race?

## 02 INCREASED VISIBILITY AS AN ADOPTEE AND AN ADOPTIVE FAMILY

Children adopted by same-race parents typically deal with fewer questions about their birth family history than transracially adopted children. The transracially adopted child is easily identified as adopted, which often means facing a multitude of questions about his or her adoption and family of origin. As one of our teenagers said to us,

“PEOPLE IMMEDIATELY KNOW SOMETHING VERY PERSONAL ABOUT ME THAT I DID NOT HAVE THE CHOICE TO TELL THEM.”

Loving your children well in these situations means preparing them to respond to sometimes uncomfortable questions, as well as helping them develop appropriate responses regarding information they would rather not share.

The issue of increased visibility presents a challenge not only for the child, but for parents as well. Some adoptive parents are comfortable answering the questions (which are sometimes insensitive or even rude) that acquaintances and strangers ask about adoption. Other adoptive parents struggle, perhaps due to shyness or embarrassment. Still other parents secretly crave the attention. These are all matters of the heart, and recognizing our motives is the first step toward moving to a healthier place.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24 ESV).

## NAVIGATING CHOPPY WATERS

One common argument against transracial adoption is that parents are not able to adequately equip children of a different race for the culture in which we live. Now, some may try to dismiss this notion as exaggerated or frivolous, but it is extremely important that we consider this perspective seriously.

**People of different races are still treated differently in this country—in all parts of this country.** We understand that some might read this and firmly believe it's not true, or that it's not true where they live. We strongly encourage those who believe this to have a conversation with friends of other races regarding the racism they've experienced.

At my (Jason) 20-year class reunion, I discussed with an African-American friend a presentation I remembered her giving on the civil rights movement. I told her that, years later, I realized how much courage that must have taken for her to talk about that topic in front of an almost-entirely white class. Tears filled her eyes as she recounted cruel acts of racism that she experienced at our school, and how lonely it made her feel. I had no idea.

If you decide to have such a conversation, be ready to listen without arguing or dismissing your friends as “over sensitive.” In fact, the fear of such a response may have kept them from sharing these things with you in the first place.

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## TAKE INVENTORY OF YOUR SURROUNDINGS WHEN CONSIDERING TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION

One friend told us how they were challenged early on in their transracial adoption journey by one critical question: If everyone your children are exposed to is the same race as you, what are you subtly communicating to them about the value of their race?

When you consider the relationships in your life, and the various environments in which those relationships occur, it's important to ask . . .

- ▶ Is your child always in the minority in the environments in which you place him or her?
- ▶ Are there people in your life who look like your child—people who can serve both as friends and as role models?
- ▶ Are there people in your life who will help you understand some of the things your child might experience?
- ▶ If these people are not currently in your life, can you demonstrate love toward your child by seeking out these relationships?

While you don't need to run out and change everything about your life, here are some relationships and environments to at least think about:

### CHURCH

One of the most important things to us as a family is that our children are regularly exposed to people who look like them and love Jesus. We never want them to

get the impression that following Jesus is something that people of “other” races do. That's why we've always sought out multiethnic or transracial worship environments. This is not to say that you must follow our example and leave your current church. However, church is one environment you should consider when trying to help your child build relationships with people of the same race.

### FRIENDS

It is safe to say that our cultural competence was stunted until we developed meaningful and honest relationships with people of other races with whom we could talk openly and candidly. These kinds of relationships obviously didn't happen overnight. It takes time and often a bit of risk to venture into areas that are uncomfortable. One of the most freeing things you can do is accept in advance that you might say something offensive. Ask your friends to be honest with you and extend you lots of grace.

### EXTENDED FAMILY

This can be one of the most difficult areas to navigate regarding transracial adoption. Pre-existing attitudes and perspectives among extended family members—particularly grandparents and great-grandparents—about race can make transracial adoption especially hard. On one hand, prospective adoptive parents don't want their desire to give a child a home to be undermined by the negative attitudes of family members. On the other hand, these same parents are well aware that negative racial attitudes can be extremely hurtful to a child. The best time to have the conversation about this issue is before you bring a child home. Yes, it might be the most uncomfortable conversation you've ever had with some family members, but it is a vital and sacrificial way for you to love your

child. (In some cases, there may be family gatherings you won't be able to attend until this issue is handled.) Remember that if God has called you to adopt a child of another race, you need to trust Him to transform the hearts of your extended family.

## NEIGHBORHOODS AND SCHOOLS

Whenever we consider a family move, we always pay close attention to the racial demographics of a new area and its schools. As we said earlier, in our family we have adopted children of three different races, and we want them to grow up in a diverse environment. Keep in mind that it's not always just about being with kids of their own race. We also value them having friendships with people from a variety of backgrounds.

We want to again say that transracial adoption is not about changing all of your family's surroundings. However, keep in mind that you are looking for meaningful relationships for both your child and yourself—relationships that will help you all learn and grow as you navigate the challenges of life together.

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## YOU COULD BE THE BEST PARENT EVER AND IT'S STILL GOING TO BE HARD

One adult adoptee we spoke with recalled school classmates who made racially offensive comments and jokes. Though his relationship with his adoptive parents was very strong, this man said he never felt comfortable talking about

these experiences with his parents because they probably wouldn't be able to understand what he was going through.

He recounted that it wasn't until he got a little older and was able to build relationships with some adult African-American men (one was a coach and the other a member of his family's church) that he was able to talk openly about these issues. I (Jason) asked if his parents could have said or done anything to make it easier for him to talk to them about race. The man said his parents did all the right things and left that door wide open, but, at the end of the day, he needed relationships with adults who had "been there."

This is a critical point: You might say and do all the right things, but if your child is a different race, he or she is likely going to struggle at times with issues related to identity and how to respond to what others say and do. And that's OK. We were not put on the planet to remove all the struggles from the lives of our children. We were put here to love them in the midst of their struggles. God does not remove our struggles; He loves us through them.

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## A REFLECTION OF LOVE

For those called to transracial adoption, it is an invitation to a lifetime of learning and—if done well—a life full of rich relationships that might never have been forged otherwise. Adopting transracially provides an opportunity to view the world in new and exciting ways. Sometimes that view is beautiful; other times it is not. And if you accept the invitation, always pray that your relationship with your child is a reflection to the world of God's amazing love.

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