

Not Like the Other: *Transracial Adoption Stories from Adoptees*

Being a child who was or is in foster care, or who was adopted, is tough enough. Being a child of color fostered by or adopted into a transracial family has even more challenges. We talked to two adult adoptees, both people of color who were raised by Caucasian parents, about their experiences and how their parents helped them navigate being a transracial adoptee.

Troy was adopted by his parents at a very young age and grew up in a rural community just outside Milwaukee. Natasha was adopted at the age of five and grew up in Milwaukee. Both Natasha and Troy shared happy memories of their childhoods and they both credit their parents for being supportive and nurturing and teaching them the life lessons that they needed to learn.

While Troy and Natasha had largely positive and fulfilling childhoods, there were times when race, racism, and racial difference from their parents impacted their lives. Their parents did everything that they could to protect their children, even when that meant helping them through tough situations or initiating some difficult conversations. During the course of our conversations, both Natasha and Troy talked about how their parents had to help them understand what it meant to be a person of color.

Natasha

Hair and skin care is often a challenge for transracial adoptees. Luckily for Natasha, her adoptive family and her birth family remained close even after her adoption. This allowed opportunity for Natasha's birth mother to teach her how to care for her hair and skin. From there, Natasha was able to go on YouTube to further her knowledge and skills. Some adoptive parents may not be so open to this kind of help, but Natasha's mother was grateful that she had Natasha's birth mother for support and assistance.



Natasha's adoptive family did their best to embrace her as part of the family. Sometimes it was hard for her grandparents to accept a child of color as their grandchild. On one hand, Natasha's grandfather did the best he could to keep her connected to her roots

and her culture by introducing her to Motown music and helping her to understand that her love of music and her beautiful singing voice came from her African-American heritage. On the other hand, he would sometimes use derogatory language and refer to her as that "N-word baby." Right away, Natasha's mother nipped such behavior in the bud. Natasha remembers her mother saying, "That's not right; this is our house and Natasha is my child."

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Natasha also remembers a time when she was about seven or eight years old and was playing outside at one of her friend's houses. An adult shouted out to her, "no N-words are allowed on our lawn!" Natasha ran home to her mother with tears flowing down her face. Her mother took that opportunity to sit down and start a conversation about the history of how people of color have been treated. That conversation was one that continued in many ways over the years, with Natasha and her mother frequently talking about the history of racism. They read books together and watched both videos and TV programs on the topics. In the words of Natasha's mother, "we do not stop fighting this battle."

Natasha continues to explore her musical talents and dreams—encouraged and supported by both her birth and adoptive families.

Troy

Troy recalls that, where he grew up, there weren't very many faces that look like his and it took him a while to fit in. He felt like he wasn't quite black enough nor was he quite white enough, either.

In fact, Troy often felt that he was too white for the black kids and too black for the white kids.

He shared about the time his father had to have the infamous "talk" with him—the one that so many black fathers and mothers have to have with their black sons and daughters. This particular talk was on why Troy needed to be careful when wearing caps and hoodies. At first, Troy said, he was confused and didn't understand. But soon, his father helped him to understand that he was black and that he would be profiled, and that wearing a cap or a hoodie at the wrong time or in the wrong place could possibly be unsafe.

Troy's parents also tried to help connect him to both his white and black cultures. He remembers receiving the disk set of the movie *Roots* when he was younger. As a child, he only watched part of this series, but now he says he is watching every single disk.

Troy finally found a place where he feels he fits in while at UW-Whitewater. There he joined the Omega Psi Phi fraternity, first predominately African-American fraternity that came to UW-Whitewater in 1971. It is with this fraternity that Troy finally felt connected to people who looked like him. He calls his fraternity the, "biggest cultural influence in my life." It was also through his attendance at UW Whitewater and his participation as the president of the Mixed Race

Student Union that he finally began to develop a healthy racial identity.

Both Troy's and Natasha's parents tried their best to be allies in the fight against racism for their children. Natasha's mother told her, "no race is better than any other race," and both parents always stood up for their children.



Before ending our conversations, Natasha and Troy had words of wisdom for parents who were thinking about parenting transracially. First and foremost, it is important that you let your kids know that you are there for them, that you have their backs and you will support them, *no matter what*. Secondly, understand that you have to have the difficult conversations and that your kids may say things to you that may be hurtful. Know that it's not about you; rather, it's about their experiences and what they are going through.



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Fielding Questions from Curious Strangers—or Family

Any transracial foster family will tell you that they tend to get noticed when out in public. And curious people will sometimes offer ignorant or insensitive questions or comments. You may have already been stopped by a random stranger in the check-out line who seemed to feel that they were owed an explanation regarding the race or

ethnicity of the child sitting in your cart, or felt it was okay to ask questions like, “Are her real parents on drugs or in prison? What’s her story?” Worse yet, sometimes it’s not a random stranger at all, but a relative.

Whether you see these encounters as an opportunity to educate about transracial fostering/adoption, or you simply quietly seethe and keep moving, one thing is certain—the way you respond will impact the child.

So what is the appropriate way to respond when faced with inappropriate comments or questions regarding your transracial family?

***Protect the child(ren).
First and foremost.
Always.***

Familial niceties and polite conversation don’t obligate you to let anyone say or ask something that is hurtful or damaging to a child, especially in front of the child!

That doesn’t mean we have to be confrontational. Children take cues from significant adults in their lives to know how to feel about things they experience. If you become upset and defensive when confronted with intrusive questions or comments, the child watching you will likely be upset, as well.



You also don’t want to inadvertently send the message that there is something “wrong” with your family (or the child) that requires defending.

Here are some sample responses to common questions that will send a clear message that the

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Tips for Transracial Parenting

- If your child tells you they were treated badly/unfairly because of race, BELIEVE THEM and address it immediately.
- Talk about the hard stuff with your children. Let them know you’re paying attention.
- Infuse your child’s life with his or her culture. Opt for the books, movies, music, images, and roles models that reflect your child’s culture. Make sure your child hears voices and sees images of people of color in your home.
- Educate yourself on white privilege. Take a class. Read a book. Face the discomfort head on, with a sincere desire to understand (not defend, justify, or excuse).
- When you see or hear racism, call it out. EVERY. TIME. Make sure that the people in your life are clear it will not be tolerated in your presence.
- Get to know people of color on a personal level. Volunteer with a community organization. Have meaningful conversations. Ask about things you don’t know or understand.



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intrusion is not okay, without creating a scene that will be upsetting to you and the child:

- “That’s a very personal question to ask.”
- “Her story is her’s to tell.”
- “I’m happy to hear you’re interested in learning more about transracial fostering. There’s lots of great information available . . .”

After responding, it’s important to the process the encounter with the child in your care. For example:

- Offer a reassuring smile or touch as you walk away that says, “I’ve got this and you’re okay.”
- Explain at an age appropriate level that people sometimes say the wrong things when they don’t understand something.
- Let the child know it is safe to share how he or she feels about the encounter.

But what if the comments or questions are coming from a close friend or family member, and you *do* want to take the time to educate and walking away isn’t an option? Ideally, these are conversations you want to have *in preparation for* fostering transracially. Regardless, the same suggestions apply. Your first obligation is to protect the child you are fostering. If you’ve had a sit-down with Uncle Bob and he still makes comments that are hurtful at family gatherings, it may be time to start new family traditions that don’t include him. Taking those steps, while difficult, are sometimes necessary in order to protect the children in your care—as well as model healthy boundaries.

Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Caring for the Hair of Your African American Child](#)
- [Helping Your Child Develop a Healthy & Positive Ethnic Identity](#)
- [Honoring Your Child's Racial and Cultural Identity](#)
- [Twenty Ideas for Keeping Connections to Racial and Cultural Identity](#)

Library Materials

- [Partners, Winter 2016](#)
- [Fostering Across Wisconsin, Winter 2016](#)

Other

- [EmbraceRace](#)
- [Lee & Low Books](#)

We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at info@wifostercareandadoption.org.

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