

## Transcultural Adoptees: The Development of Cultural Awareness

We live in a society that remains plagued by prejudices, discrimination and the stereotyping of various groups of peoples based on their race, religion, sexual preference, citizenship and their socio-economic status. It shouldn't be surprising, then, that adopting transculturally adds another complex layer to the experience of adoption.

What do we mean by the word transcultural? An adoption is considered to be transcultural when any of the family members are of a different race than the others. This is often referred to as transracial or interracial adoption. Adoptions are also considered transcultural if older children and their adoptive parents and/or siblings come from different countries but are of the same race. For example, if a white American couple adopts a white toddler from Eastern Europe or an African American family adopts an Ethiopian child, these adoptions are not transracial, but they are transcultural. Nearly all international adoptions are transcultural, then, while it is estimated that about 15% of domestic U.S. adoptions are transcultural because they are transracial.

Children develop awareness of cultural differences, and their identity as a transcultural adopted person via a series of stages. Following is a brief overview of this cultural development. "Reading and Resources" on this topic (right) is packed with books, movies and websites to help parents and professionals develop a depth of knowledge about this important topic.

*Birth—Age Three\**: Toddlers become aware of physical race and skin color differences, and they learn the names of specific groups. They do not comprehend the real meaning of these labels, and may be puzzled by the use of colors to describe both people and objects. Adoption issues at this point are primarily those of the parents. Transcultural and transracial adoptive parents quickly experience reactions – positive, neutral, and negative – from extended family and community.

*Preschoolers*: can usually identify their own racial or ethnic groups and may place a positive or negative value on their own and other groups. Children notice their own racial and cultural differences from their parents and may express a desire to be the same race or culture as their parents. Some children may act on this desire:

*Five-year-old Aidan was adopted as an infant. He is Hispanic while his parents and siblings are Caucasian. One day, Ian, his dad, found Aidan in the laundry room dousing himself with Clorox®. He grabbed the Clorox® and asked, "What are you doing?"*

*Aidan said, "I wanted to look like you."*

*Ian found his heart breaking in response to his son's statements and actions.*

*Grade School—Pre-Adolescence*: This age group usually has a firmer understanding of their own cultural identity and—given the opportunity—will explore what it means to be a member of this group. The transracial or transcultural adoptee will question why her birthparents did not parent her. Internationally adopted children will also question why their country did not figure out a way for them to remain there. Most children are comfortable with their transcultural status during these ages, particularly if parents have provided open communication regarding adoption, race and related issues. These children are usually accepted by their dominant culture peers with whom they want to fit in—the importance of peer relationships has its root in pre-

adolescence. Some assume a sort of celebrity status, especially if he or she is the one-and-only child of a particular race or culture.

However, not all transcultural adoption experiences will be positive. By the age of six, children notice that most of their peers are of the same race as at least one parent and that most of their playmates are not adopted. Peers question the birth/previously adopted and newly adopted children about the cultural composition of their family.

“Is that your sister?”

“Who is that with your mom?”

“What is adoption?”

“Why did your family adopt?”

“China? Where’s that?”

Publically, the entire family receives stares and gets asked insensitive questions such as:

“Where’d you get that one?”

“How much did she cost?”

“What happened to her real mother?”

“What color is your dad?”

“Well, she looks like she could be yours.”

The adoptee’s loss of culture, and the family’s cultural discontinuity with families around them, cause different-ness and being “different” results in grief. This public scrutiny, and the racism and discrimination that comes with it, continue through grade school and sometimes well into adulthood.

*Adolescence:* This developmental stage actually extends through the early 20’s. It is a time of exploration, including determining the significance of race and culture, and examining how these apply to the individual as the adolescent attempts to form a personal identity. An adolescent’s past experiences with his or her racial or cultural group are important as they determine whether the adolescent’s identity will be positive, negative or in transition. Adolescents who have had little or no contact with members of their own group may model themselves after media images, which may be exaggerated and negative. Some teens form same race or culture friendships, while others may experience rejection from dominant culture peers who were previously friends. This may particularly occur with respect to dating. Some teens who are adopted may meet others of the same racial or cultural group for the first time in school, and may not be accepted by these individuals as they do not “act their race or culture.”