

# *White Siblings in Transracial Families: Inside Transracial Adoption*

*By Arleta James, PCC*

This post is taken, with permission, from *Inside Transracial Adoption*. The authors, Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall are our “guest authors” for this article. Gail and Beth wrote *Inside Transracial Adoption* in 2000, and in 2001 it won a Skipping Stones Magazine Honor Award for its exceptional contribution to multicultural awareness in children’s literature. It is currently a [Jessica-Kingsley Publication](#). Together Beth and Gail are founders and were co-directors of [Pact. An Adoption Alliance](#).



In Section 3, Family Matters, Gail and Beth write,

*“Look, here’s the reality,” Seth said recently. He grew up as the only white child in our (Gail’s) family with three siblings of color. “Overall, it was positive. We had great times and what I’ve realized about growing up in our family is that because we were all so different from each other, I was constantly encouraged to go with my strengths. I just got my education earlier than other kids do. I learned how to be more sensitive to and less threatened by differences than most people I know. I can be non-judgmental and that means I can get along with more people. My whole world is better because of that. When you’re a kid, you want to be a part of everything and I always felt different. I thought everyone expected me to be the ‘All American’ boy.*

*On the outside you’re white and all of a sudden, you’re not. What you look like doesn’t match what’s inside. I worried if the white kids would still like me when they found out. I was different but I also knew my friends had to be open to difference. Anyone who thinks one race is worth more than another one could never be my friend. It was easier to trust black friends. I felt like I had more in common with them. What I think parents should do is just talk about it. Let*

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*your white kids know that people don't expect you to be a certain thing. Who you are is okay. Help them build a strategy to know how to introduce themselves instead of winging it all the time. Let them know they don't have to carry a flag for the home team or screen people based on their approval of the family model. What kids like me need is to know the family understands how it is for them..."*

Many parents who already have white children (either by birth or adoption) wonder if it is fair to bring children of color into the family. Will it create too great a burden? Seth's story points out the incredible gift of having siblings of color can be for children who might not otherwise have experience with the struggles against bias that can make them strong and proud.

White siblings of children of color face unique challenges that are not often addressed. Few white people in the world understand that challenges of racism more directly than children who see their brothers and sisters being targeted and who face bias themselves but not when they're on their own, nor when people they meet don't know about their family. As siblings, they need support for their unique experiences. Imagine that you are a white child with a sister who is a Latina and a brother who is black. How do you think you might feel in each of the following situations?

- You are sitting at a table in the school cafeteria with a group of white kids when someone makes a racist joke.
- You are thrilled when you are invited to the big party of the year at your school. When you get home you find out that your brother and sister are not invited. When the family talks about it around the dinner table you all acknowledge that it is probably because they are of color and you are white.
- Your sister, who is not as good a student as you are and who has a lower grade point average than you do, is admitted to the college you were hoping for; her acceptance is in part because of their commitment to diversity in the student body.
- You are not as good a student as your sister. Your grade point average is lower than hers. A local community group gives you a scholarship but not your sister, even though you both applied.

When there is conflict between a person's hopes for himself and the world's responses to his siblings, white siblings of children of color are likely to come face to face with loyalty struggles. Are they required to spend their lives up on a soapbox, protecting and supporting their siblings? If they don't speak up every single time a racial issue arises, are they being disloyal to their family? If they consciously use the white privilege that society grants them, are they betraying their brothers and sisters?

Children do not choose their family structure, nor do they necessarily understand or hold their parents' philosophical attitudes. They may feel a myriad of emotions when challenged by racism, ranging from confusion, surprise, rage or depression to a developing desire to act as an agent of change.

#### How Can You Help?

- Help your white child understand that it is very natural to feel a mixture of emotions toward siblings, both to like them a lot and to resent them a lot. Help them understand that because our families involve extra issues relating to race, it is likely that the normal mix of feelings about siblings will reflect their issues of race and ethnicity.
- Clarify the distinction between feelings and actions. It's useful for your white children to be able to name their feelings and to voice their politically incorrect wishes like, "Why don't you get rid of them?" but it's not okay for them to hurt their siblings by participating in racist activities. Our task as parents is to help them voice their anger and to help them see that these restrictions are as the same as those their siblings face regularly because of our society's racism.

- Let your children know that you understand she may be having negative feelings. Use direct and sympathetic phrases to keep the conversational door open. “I can see how rough this situation is for you,” or “It must be very hard for you, having to deal with this issue when your other white friends don’t have to,” or “Please let me know how you feel, because I care about your feelings.”
- Give your child the opportunity to become an ally of people of color in the fight against racism and bias. This can be a powerful and proud place for them to explore their ability to stand up for what they believe in and who they see themselves to be as members of a multiracial family.

For more information about issues in transracial and transcultural adoption, visit my articles, *Transcultural and Transracial Adoptees: The Development of Racial and Cultural Identity* and *Transcultural Adoptees: The Development of Cultural Awareness*.