Self Awareness Tool

Transracial Parenting Project

The North American Council on Adoptable Children

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Dear Prospective Adoptive/Foster Parent:

Thank you for your interest in becoming a Missouri State Licensed Foster Care Provider and/or Adoptive Resource. The Division of Family Services (DFS) looks forward to assisting you as you work toward your goal.

DFS hopes to encourage families to foster and adopt who reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children for whom homes are needed. It is imperative that parents and families are well prepared to meet the needs of the children that may be placed in their home. To assist in this effort, the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC) has developed this *Self Awareness Tool.* The *Tool* was designed to further educate individuals on what it truly means to parent a child of another race, culture, or ethnicity.

Please consider the following material carefully. Upon completion of the *Tool*, you may decide to attend a one-day group session, which is held monthly in your area. The intent of the session is to enhance understanding of the issues faced by parents and families when a child of another race, culture, or ethnicity is placed with them. Participation in the group session allows individuals to make their own judgement of their abilities to meet all of the needs of the child(ren) they may decide to bring into their home.

Completion of the *Self Awareness Tool* and participation in the one-day group session is **voluntary**. The *Tool* is not a part of the assessment process you will be completing in order to become a foster/adoptive resource. This information is provided only to assist you in making the best decisions possible for your family and the children who will be adopted or placed in foster care homes.

Again, thank you for your interest in Foster Care and Adoption. For more information, or if you have any questions, please contact your local county DFS office.

Sincerely,

Denise Cross
Director

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY/AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EMPLOYER
services provided on a nondiscriminatory basis

Self Awareness Tool

Are You Ready to Parent
a Child of Another
Race, Culture
or Ethnicity?

February 1998

Jeanette Wiedemeier Bower, M.P.A.

Transracial Parenting Project

The North American Council on Adoptable Children

Congratulations on your decision to bring a child into your home! We applaud your commitment to children. Today families are bringing increasing numbers of children of different races and cultures into their homes through foster care and adoption. Some parents, as they begin the process, have a clear picture in their mind of the perfect child for their family. Others do not have a specific image; any waiting child who needs a home is the right child. This tool is offered as just one of the building blocks to help you evaluate your personal capability or potential to provide appropriate care for a child of another race, culture, or ethnicity.

If you are interested in adoption, we hope you will use this tool as a guide as you begin your journey to find the right child. More than anything else, we want to reinforce to parents that adoption is a two-way street; both you as a parent, as well as the child, have certain needs and expectations. A successful adoption is where the needs and expectations of both are met.

Although foster parents may have less of an opportunity to "select" a child—especially in emergency care situations—the material in the following pages is useful because foster parents can have a tremendous impact upon a young person's development, self-esteem, ties to their community-of-origin, and general well-being. And, more and more foster parents become attached to (and eventually adopt) the children in their home.

Enclosed in the pages of this *Self Awareness Tool* are tough questions for you to think about and answer. When parents consider transracial or transcultural placements, most do not fully understand the day-to-day challenges or the lifelong commitment required. Therefore, we want you to evaluate your life-style, neighborhood, and the values you hold toward people of different backgrounds to determine your readiness to parent a child of a different race, culture, or ethnicity.

When you bring a child of a different background into your home, your family immediately becomes a diverse family in the eyes of your neighbors, colleagues, and those whom you have never met. In the pages that follow, we have included scenarios that will be typical for diverse families. We want you to search your soul and make certain that you are fully prepared for the journey to come. Some parents have educated themselves and are—or can become—prepared to care for a child of a different background; others have not or should not. It is far better to decide NOT to care for a child than to try and fail.

The more time and attention you spend on this *Self Awareness Tool*, the better aware and more confident you will be if you ultimately choose to bring a child of another race, culture, or ethnicity into your home. Good Luck!

Sincerely,

The North American Council on Adoptable Children

Contents

Acknowledgments

When the North American Council on Adoptable Children approached this important project, we looked to the "experts" to help us set the agenda and develop the materials; we convened a focus group of young adults who were adopted as youngsters or adolescents. Some of the volunteers were adopted from other countries, some experienced same-race placements, and others were adopted transracially. One individual grew up in the foster care system, recently turned eighteen, and "aged out" of the system. In all, we worked with fourteen focus group members from six different states. Their individual stories of laughter and tears shape the pages that make up this *Self Awareness Tool.* We dedicate this project to our focus group members and other children throughout the country who have had similar experiences.

In addition, NACAC teamed with a group of professionals who have worked extensively with issues of transracial and transcultural placements. Some of these volunteers were seasoned parents who adopted a child of another race. Some were therapists who counsel families through the tough issues involving identity, culture, racism, etc. Others were social workers who have placed children of one race, culture, or ethnicity with families who did not share this background. We gained tremendously from their feedback and appreciate their input. A list of both our focus group and advisory committee members is provided in the Appendix.

During the middle stages of project development, we took a step back to determine if the materials were effective and useful for prospective parents. With the assistance of Jennifer Geipe of the Adoptive Family Network (Columbia, Maryland), we convened a focus group of parents to evaluate the materials and get a sense of whether we were on the right track. We appreciate Jennifer's energy and commitment. In addition, workers in Pennsylvania and Michigan were given an opportunity to examine the materials and provide comments. We also received valuable feedback—both verbal and written—from veteran parents and professionals during evening focus group meetings at NACAC's 1997 Annual Training Conference.

NACAC's Transracial Parenting Project was envisioned and discussed by several members of our staff—Charlotte Vick, Joe Kroll and Jackie Kidd. Their wisdom as transracial adoptive parents and concerned advocates was key to developing these materials. Special thanks to NACAC staff Mary Boo, Alicia Groh, Diane Riggs and Susan Cunningham for their editing wizardry.

Finally, we want to acknowledge that NACAC's *Transracial Parenting Project* was made possible through an Adoption Opportunities grant (#90-CO-0795) from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families. We appreciate the opportunity to put together these important materials for the foster care and adoption community, and hope that they ultimately benefit children and their families.

Introduction

In our early years, NACAC was an organization comprised primarily of White parents who adopted transracially or transculturally. We know that transracial placements can work, but we also know the hardships and heartaches that come with raising a child of another culture or ethnicity. An important reason we chose to develop this Transracial Parenting Project was to share our knowledge with new parents.

Therefore, this *Self Awareness Tool* is not intended to frustrate or discourage parents from getting involved in foster care or the adoption process. Rather, its purpose is to educate parents on what it truly means to parent a child who is from another race or culture. Some of the material in the pages that follow may be eye-opening, alarming, intimidating, or may make you a bit defensive. This *Tool* is written with the best interests of children as our ultimate focus.

Our primary concern is educating parents so that if they choose to raise a child of a diverse race, culture, or ethnicity, they do so with the utmost degree of respect for the child. Contrary to many viewpoints, this *Self Awareness Tool* is written for parents of all backgrounds—not just White parents who raise children of color. Any parent who is faced with the task of raising a child of another race can use this material—a Latino couple raising an African American child or a Native or Korean-American woman raising a White baby.

The stories in this *Self Awareness Tool* were told to us by adults who were adopted as children and by families who adopted transracially or transculturally. We have altered the names of the people, as well as certain details of their stories to ensure their confidentiality.

Throughout this *Tool*, we have identified individuals by their race—African American, Native American, Chicano, White, etc. In no way do we want to portray an image that all Native Americans act a certain way or that all Latino people have similar characteristics. The examples we use are merely stories of a particular family or situation.

What we haven't done in the *Self Awareness Tool* is bring to light the incredible diversity of different types of people. In the pages that follow, we refer to Latino people in a general way. In reality, however, this group includes: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Latin Americans, Chicanos, etc. Similarly, the African American group includes Afrikans—descendents from individual countries in Africa—people from Jamaica, the Caribbean, etc. Even White people illustrated here are not identified by ethnic background—Irish, English, Italian, etc. Although we have not included this information, please recognize that the diversity of individual groups of people is much greater than we have highlighted.

Purpose

To give parents an opportunity—in the confidentiality of their own home—to determine if fostering or adopting children of another race or culture is appropriate for their family.

Directions

This is a confidential *Self Awareness Tool.* You do not have to share your answers with your agency. Please take enough time to honestly and thoughtfully evaluate your response to each question. It may take several hours to complete. Be sure to write out the answers to each question. If you and your spouse or partner are taking this assessment, fill it out individually before discussing it together.

For parents working through an agency or a parent support group, we developed a *Training Curriculum* to accompany this *Self Awareness Tool.* Some of the content material in the curriculum is similar to these materials, but the information you provide in this *Tool* is confidential. You may choose to reveal information, but you are not required to do so. In addition, NACAC developed a *Parenting Manual* for families who choose to raise a child of different race, culture, or ethnicity. Please call us at (612) 644-3036 for more information.

First Step

NACAC understands that the decision to bring a child into your home is a tough one. Parents and children must adapt to a new life-style, with new expectations. It is truly an exciting time, but one that can be very frightening too. The decision is made more difficult when parents bring into their home a child of a different background. Not only do parents have to consider meeting the child's basic needs for love, shelter, and food, but they have additional issues. For instance, are the child's medical issues influenced by race, ethnicity, or culture? How do you develop a sense of racial pride in the child when you and the child do not share the same race? How do you deal with biases held by your extended family members?

In addition, people tend to hold prejudices toward specific groups of people. Holding stereotypical beliefs is common human behavior. However, it is only in acknowledging these beliefs and feelings that we grow as human beings—and that we serve as better examples for our children. As a prospective parent, you need to carefully identify your biases and prejudices toward others before you bring a child into your home. You owe it to yourself, as well as your child.

As a first step, we ask you to take the time to put pen to paper on this *Self Awareness Tool.* We hope the process gives you an opportunity to honestly evaluate your readiness to parent a child of another race or culture. Each exercise in this assessment is based on real, day-to-day experiences of transracial adoptees and their families.

Personal Motivations To Foster/Adopt

Caroline is a White social worker; her husband David is African American and a professor of history. Caroline has been in the field of social work for nearly sixteen years. Although she is now at the supervisory level and sees fewer clients, she remembers the numbers and types of children trapped within the system. Caroline and David's first adopted child was an infant, a victim of sexual abuse. Subsequent children adopted by the family had emotional and psychological conditions and were exposed to drugs during pregnancy.

In all, they have adopted three children from the U.S.—Christina, age 6, African American; Timothy, age 7, biracial; and Stephanie, age 9, White. David loves each of the children that he and his wife have taken in. However, Caroline (not David) started the ball rolling on each of the three adoptions. "Caroline gets an idea into her head and there's no talking her out of it," David states. "As long as there are children in trouble and we have an extra bedroom, Caroline fills out an application to adopt another child." Caroline's mission is to do good on behalf of children! "I love children; it's as simple as that," Caroline explains. "I want each of our children to know a better life. In a way, I feel like I'm rescuing them."

- Caroline has a number of personal reasons to adopt children. Are her reasons appropriate? Can you identify with any of her reasons?

- It is clear from the story above that Caroline is very involved in the adoption process. Describe David's role.

- Is it okay for Caroline to take an active role, while David's role is more passive? Explain.

- If Caroline or David were to adopt another child, they would need to tell the other children about their decision. If you were the parent, how would you do this?

- How do you suppose the newly adopted child will react to siblings of diverse backgrounds?

- Raising several children with different racial backgrounds may be very difficult for Caroline and David. Think about and write down some of the challenges that they may face.

- What are some of the challenges that the children may face?

Exercise #1

Think about the reasons you want to adopt or foster a child of a different background. In some cases, there may be several reasons. Mark all that apply.

- ☐ You have an interracial marriage, so adopting a child of your spouse's (or your) race seems natural.
- ☐ You have adopted a child of a different race and want to add similar children to your family.
- ☐ You want children, but cannot get pregnant.
- ☐ In order to adopt a healthy infant, you need to adopt a child of another race or culture.
- ☐ You love children and can provide a good home.
- ☐ You feel you should adopt for moral or religious reasons.
- ☐ You feel sorry for children who are abused as youngsters.
- ☐ You want to foster a child because you have heard that going ahead with an adoption is easier if the child is first in your home as a foster child.
- ☐ Too many children are trapped in the foster care system, and you feel it is your duty to help.
- ☐ The system of adoption in the U.S. is too difficult, so an international placement is preferable.
- ☐ You have become attached to a particular foster child placed in your home.
- ☐ You think babies with darker complexions are cute.
- ☐ The agency told you that in order to adopt you first had to become a foster parent.
- ☐ You love children and want to extend your family through adoption.
- ☐ You want to improve "race relations" by raising a child of another race or culture.
- ☐ You were once a foster child and want to give something back to another child.

Discussion

People have many different reasons for bringing a child into their home. Some of the examples listed on the previous page are appropriate reasons to foster or adopt transracially. Others are not. In the story above, Caroline adopted children out of love, but also because she felt she was doing something good for society. Although she and David provide a good home and care for the children, they have a *responsibility* to appreciate and celebrate each child's individual strengths and needs.

Statements like, "we're providing a better life," can be very hurtful to a child—especially a child who has memories of biological relatives. Even youngsters placed as infants can be hurt by these remarks. Children need to be loved for who they are, and shown over and over that their biological family and community-of-origin has not abandoned them. It is a tragedy when children mistakenly believe (or are told) that their community did not want them.

Further, the placement of a child should never happen simply because you feel sorry for a child or a child's background. Rather, it should happen because you truly want the child. If you bring a young person into your life because you pity them, you may unintentionally say or do things that tell the child his culture is bad. Although you may not intend to paint a negative picture of your child's culture, the child may take your comments seriously. The child may feel self-conscious about his background and avoid people from his culture.

Some people believe it is their moral or religious duty to take in children from other countries who are less fortunate. The media often depicts other countries as unpleasant places—dirty, violent, uncivilized, backward. If an adoptive parent sees only these messages, their conclusion is that they are "rescuing the child" from a horrible life.

Young adults who were adopted from other countries urge prospective parents to visit the country ahead of time, before the paperwork is finalized. Interact with the people, view the landscape, and experience the beauty of the country. Parents who go the extra mile to see the child's country in a positive light do a much better job of parenting that child.

Wanting a healthy infant is another reason parents have for adopting. When looking for a child of the same race, White parents realize that few of these children are available in the system today. In response, parents expand their search to children of other races or ethnicities. "We're open to any child," they tell their social worker. "We don't have any problems raising a child of color." However, the problem with these statements is that the parents are only considering *their* abilities and *their* desires. Rather than asking "*Am I willing* to raise a child of another background?" the more appropriate question is: "*Do I have what it takes* to raise a child of a different background?" There's a difference.

Parents who choose to foster or adopt out of love and respect for a child will ultimately be better suited for the role of parenting that child. Look again at your reasons to foster or adopt. Are they focused on yourself or the child? Are they based on respect or pity?

Personal Values

Ramon was adopted from Bolivia by the Cossanto family when he was only two. His Italian American adoptive father, Tony, is part owner of a restaurant with his brother Ted. Although the business takes much of his time, he loves spending Sunday afternoons playing catch with Ramon and watching the ball games on television. Ramon plays little league baseball and is proud when his dad attends his games. Tony has the loudest cheering voice of all the other fathers—his nickname for Ramon is "Slugger."

At times, Ramon feels uncomfortable when his father and Uncle Ted get together to watch ball games. Often, they criticize certain players. "Why did the team release Wilson and draft Sanchez? Couldn't they find an American 3rd baseman!" Tony remarks. "They're lazy; everyone knows that!" Ted adds. Although Ramon loves his father and uncle, he questions whether they feel the same way about him. "I'm from South America," he thinks. "Am I lazy, too?"

- How did Ramon react to his father's and uncle's comments?
- How do you think Ramon will react to similar comments as he gets older? Will this behavior affect the father-son relationship in a negative way?
- If you were Tony, how would you answer Ramon's question of "Am I lazy, too?"
- What qualities do you see in yourself that would make you a successful parent of a child of another race or culture? What weaknesses do you have that might make it more difficult?
- At what age did you become aware of racial or cultural differences and similarities?
- As a child, did you have playmates of different races or ethnicities? Did you know people who spoke other languages?
- As a child, how did your parents view relationships with people from different backgrounds? Did your parents encourage or discourage these relationships? How did you react to your parent's views?
- Describe both positive and negative perceptions of the group from which you hope to foster or adopt.
- What personal experiences have exposed you to people who are different from you?
- What steps have you taken to increase your knowledge of the racial or ethnic group from which you intend to foster or adopt?
- How would you describe your cultural identity to someone new to you?

Discussion

As a young child, Ramon thought his dad was the greatest. They enjoyed sports, both as spectators and participants. Like most children, Ramon was proud of his father. But as Ramon got older, he began to understand what his father meant when he referred to certain ball players. Ramon was caught in the middle—he loved his father, but hated his father's comments.

What Tony did not understand was that every negative comment he made about "foreign" ball players was unintentionally lowering his son's self-esteem. Tony viewed players like Sanchez as "outsiders." Although he did not consider his son part of this group, Tony's comments clearly told Ramon that he was different. As a result, Ramon took his father's comments personally.

To the question, "Am I lazy?" Tony probably would have responded by saying, "Of course not, I don't feel that way about you—you're part of our family now. I love you." However, Tony's personal values toward people from other countries served to isolate his son, causing Ramon to doubt both himself and his relationship with his father.

To make things worse, Tony did not try to learn about or appreciate his son's background or heritage. In fact, he worked to "Americanize" his son—avoiding Ramon's cultural roots altogether. Using a nickname (like "Slugger") instead of the child's ethnic name served to do this effectively.

As a prospective adoptive parent, it is important to take a deep, hard look at the values that define who you are, as well as how you think and behave. As a primary caregiver, you have the ability to build up or break down a young person's sense of identity.

Tony is by no means a bad person because he didn't understand the cultural dynamics between him and his son. In fact, Tony loves Ramon deeply. But as a parent, Tony must be more sensitive to the things Ramon says and does, and more in touch with the way his son feels. Tony must also become more aware of what he says and does in order to get in touch with his own feelings.

By doing so, Tony can tell Ramon exactly how much he cares for him as a person, and respond to his son's concerns as they come up.

Exercise #2

On a scale of 1 to 5, how likely are you to:

1	2	3	4	5
Very Likely	**Likely**	**Not Sure**	**Probably Not**	**Definitely Not**

___ Learn about current issues—i.e., what's a hot issue in the Korean-American community? What's the latest Pan-American current event?

___ Decorate your child's room to celebrate his cultural background?

___ Move to a culturally diverse neighborhood?

___ Read a local ethnic newspaper to learn the values and current issues of that community?

___ Subscribe to culturally diverse magazines?

___ Watch television shows with your child that positively reflect her culture?

___ Seek out a specialty store and purchase the traditional clothes worn by people in the child's community—for Kwanzaa, the Chinese New Year, Tribal celebrations?

___ Learn a new language for your child?

___ Regularly take your child to an all Black/ Latino/Asian church where you—not the child—are in the minority? Or, take your child to a religious institution with a culturally diverse population?

___ Attend a workshop on personal hair care/ grooming to be held in your child's community-of-origin?

___ Become a member of a community center that provides a wide variety of diverse programming?

___ Volunteer to be on the planning committee at a community center that serves your child's race and/or culture?

___ Actively participate in community celebrations that highlight your child's culture?

___ Host a slumber party for your child's friends even if all of the children are of a different race than your family?

___ Take cooking classes to learn how to prepare foods associated with your child's culture?

___ Establish friendships with people who share the same background with your child?

___ Regularly discuss race and racism as a family?

___ Allow your teenage daughter to date African American boys, and bring them home to meet the family?

Home

Anna is a beautiful eight year old Latina girl who has been placed as a foster child in your African American family for the last year and a half. She has little contact with her biological family. As soon as Anna's parental rights are terminated, you hope to adopt her. One afternoon, an elderly neighbor, Thelma, stops by to drop off some things for an upcoming church fund-raiser. Thelma is the "eyes and ears" of the neighborhood, and always seems to make <u>your</u> business <u>her</u> business. Your three children, including Anna, are playing in the room across the hall.

After a rather lengthy visit, Thelma stops by the front hallway on her way out to admire each of the newly hung school pictures. In her usual booming voice, she says, "What lovely photos. But why is Anna's here among all your family portraits?" She's not a real member of your family." As soon as Thelma's words are spoken, the playful noises from across the hall are quieted. Every ear is listening for your response.

- How would you respond to Thelma's question?
- What do you suppose Anna is thinking when she hears her neighbor?
- Explain how you would feel if you were Anna.
- What are the most important things in your home that show a child she is welcome and part of the family?
- Describe the decorations on the walls of your home. What types of books do you display in your living or family room? Do they celebrate different cultures?
- What type of magazines do you have in your home? Name a few magazines written for and by your child's racial or cultural community.
- What types of food do you serve to your family? How willing would you be to prepare the cuisine of your child's background (for instance, fry bread, greens, Kim Chee, etc.)? Who can help you learn to cook the specialties of your child's culture?
- What bedtime stories will you read to your child? Are these books reflective of your child's culture?
- Think about the music a child would hear in your home. Is it able to help them learn about their culture-of-origin?

In addition to the items that decorate your home—multicultural wall hangings, artwork, and sculptures—the language that is spoken can have a tremendous effect on a child. If you are an African American family and a Spanish-speaking child is placed with you, how well are you able to communicate with her if you do not speak Spanish? How will she feel if she and her siblings are placed together and are forbidden to speak their native language?

Think about the ways that language influences a child's life.

- Does your child or his community speak a language or dialect different than the primary language spoken in your home?

- Do you or other members of your immediate or extended family speak the language of your child?

- Are there ways to guarantee that the child's heritage is preserved through his language?

- What community resources are available to help preserve the child's language?

- Describe how you might access these resources. Who can you ask for assistance?

In some families, adopted and foster children are unintentionally isolated from their biological siblings or other family members. The language that we use to refer to our children (i.e., my "real" children) makes a world of difference in the way they see and feel about themselves.

For instance, if you were in the grocery store with your child—and you and the child are of a different race—how would you respond to questions from another shopper, "Where did you get him?" "Why is her hair that way?" Is she... [pause]...yours?

You may feel awkward about answering these questions. However, you will be put in these situations. The answers you give influence the way the child will ultimately see himself fitting into your family.

- Will you refer to your biological child as "my real child," and isolate the adopted or foster child by referring to him as "my adopted child" or "my foster child?"

- Will you refer to your birth children as your "natural-born" children? Does that mean foster or adopted children are unnatural?

- In your opinion, what are the most respectful terms to use?

Discussion

Becoming a diverse family means a lot more than bringing the child home, unpacking toys, and setting up a bedroom. It means understanding what would make your child feel more comfortable in her new surroundings, and working to put her needs before yours.

As in Anna's story, displaying photos of the child clearly tells the youngster she is now a valued and important part of your family. But parents need to go further by showing and telling their children (and others) that their culture is valued and respected at home and in the family.

One important way to do this is to put yourself in awkward situations. For instance, many parents bring their families to special events in the child's community. If you and your Native American child attend a traditional tribal celebration together, your child sees his culture in action—he is an *insider*. If you are the only African American person there, you may receive some odd stares and feel uncomfortable at first. However, your child sees that you are appreciating and learning about his culture. The benefits that children get from these experience cannot be measured.

List several ways that you can face a personal challenge on behalf of your child.

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Parents must also think about the labels they use for their children. Be careful with the language you use to talk about your family. Below are some hints.

Birth Children

Preferred—birth child, biological, or simply use the child's first name

Discouraged—"This is my real child."
"This is my natural child."

Adopted Children

Preferred—adopted, "my child," or simply use the child's first name

Discouraged—"my little China doll"
"little brown bottom"
"little Eskimo Pie"

Foster Children

Preferred—foster, or simply use the child's first name

Discouraged—"He's just a foster child."
"He's not mine."

Cultural Exposure

Doug and Samantha Walker have five biological teen and pre-teenage children—Denise, Steven, Charlie, Mandy, and Leslie. The Walkers are a White family living in a large Midwestern city. Last year, they added a new family member—Anita, an African American infant. Samantha is a teacher's aide and volunteers at a local high school. In her work, she provides tutoring to teenage girls who, for one reason or another, are falling behind in school. Samantha met Anita's mother, Sonia, a year ago. After seeing Samantha's family and realizing that neither she nor her family could care for the child, Sonia wanted Samantha to adopt the child. After discussing the matter with the family, Doug and Samantha proceeded with and finalized the adoption. They promised to teach the child her heritage and expose her to her culture-of-origin.

Traditionally, the Walker family attends the Nutcracker Ballet at the Civic Center each Christmas season. The event is a very special occasion for everyone in the family. After the performance, the entire family has dinner at their favorite restaurant and enjoys an evening of fellowship and laughter. This year, however, Samantha suggests to the group that they attend Black Nativity—both events fall on the same evening. The children loudly voice their opinions: "Why would we want to do that?" "We always see the Nutcracker!" "I'm not going; you can't force me!" Later that evening, Doug expresses his concern to his wife on breaking family tradition—"I don't understand why we need to go this year. Anita's not old enough to understand anyway."

- What would you do if you were Anita's adopted parent?
- After hearing the older children's views, what should Samantha do? What should she say to her children?
- How should Samantha respond to her husband's concerns?
- What should Samantha and Doug do to prepare their teenage children for the addition of Anita into their family?
- How likely are you and your child to visit a local exhibit or discussion on African, Latino, or Native American art, or Asian or Eastern European customs?
- What books have you read on your child's culture? How recent are these books? Are they written by authors from that culture? Are these authors respected by the members of that community?
- How willing are you to make time in your schedule to bring your child to hear a speech by a prominent community business or political leader of the same ethnicity as your child?
- Are you familiar with the cultural resources in your community—playhouse or theater, museums? Which of these provide multicultural exhibits?

Discussion

Samantha had made a promise to Anita's biological mother that she would expose the child to the culture. Although Samantha knew that attending the cultural event was important for the youngster, she didn't expect such a negative reaction from her husband and children. If she forces the family to attend the Black Nativity, they may resent her and, unfortunately, they may act negatively toward Anita.

After much thought and anxiety, Samantha announced to the group that they would attend the Nutcracker Ballet as a family, like they do every year. Because Black Nativity fell on the same evening, the family would not attend this year. However, Samantha did some research and learned that another event, a traditional African American Gospel, was being held the following week. The Walker family would go to both events, and would try to work the Black Nativity into their schedule the following year.

Samantha chose to compromise this year in order to maintain family traditions, and reinforce to the older children that they were just as important to Samantha and Doug as Anita. Had the family decided to break their holiday tradition, the teenage children may have felt jealousy toward their African American sibling. In the future, the older children may have been resistant to accepting Anita and participating in other African American activities.

However, Samantha and Doug must help their older children realize that the entire family is now a part of the African American community due to the adoption of Anita. In time, they must come to terms with this and learn to appreciate their extended community.

Samantha and Doug took on a hard task when they agreed to raise Anita as their own. But the choice they made this year will help to pave the road for future decisions. Not only will they be able to maintain an important family tradition, they will be able to show their older children the strength of their commitment to Anita.

Family

Rochelle and Steve Whitman, a Caucasian couple, have five children, two of whom are teenagers adopted as infants. Three years ago, a Native/African American sibling group of three was placed as foster children with them—Jamal, age 4; Trinda, age 5; and Ryan, age 13. The children experienced severe abuse and neglect in their biological home. As a result, the children have many problems, but Rochelle and Steve have come to love the children despite their challenges. After three years in their home, the social worker encouraged the family to see that adoption was the best plan for the children. The adoptions were finalized three months ago.

At the last holiday gathering, Grandmother Whitman gathered each of her eleven grandchildren in the living room to distribute their Easter gifts. Each of the children received a card, a chocolate bunny, and a hug. The three Native/African American siblings received $5, while the other eight White children (including the other adopted children) were given $10. Although the siblings did not say anything, they were hurt and confused as to why they did not receive the same amount. Later, Steve cornered his mother for an explanation. Grandmother Whitman replied, "They aren't my real grandchildren, are they?"

- If you were Ryan (age 13), how would you have reacted to your grandmother's gift? What would you have thought? What would you have said to her?

- Explain the difference in status between biological, foster, and adoptive children. Is there a difference? Should there be?

- As a parent, what would you do about the unequal treatment?

- How would you answer your child's question: "Why did I get $5 when they got $10? Was I bad?"

Think about your extended family—grandparents, aunts, cousins. These individuals could have a tremendously positive or negative attitude toward your decision to bring a child of color into "their family." They could welcome and support the child, or snub the child.

- What role does extended family play in your immediate family? In your daily life?

- If relationships were strained with members of your extended family, how would you react?

- Are you willing to end relationships with relatives if they react negatively toward your children?
- Can you educate your relatives? Are they willing learners? How likely are you to make the effort?
- How do you plan to tell your extended family about your decision to foster or adopt a child of another race? What will you do if they react negatively—continue or stop the process?
- If you expect someone in your extended family to act negatively, are there ways to participate in family events that prevent negative situations for your children?
- What are your extended family members' relationships with persons of a different race or culture?

Dealing With Relatives

List the members of your extended family (Column 1). Try to anticipate their reaction to your decision to raise a child of another background (Columns 2-4), and guess what their "likely response" would be toward you or your children (Column 5).

	Names	*Supportive*	*Negative*	*Unknown*	*Likely Response*
Ex:	Aunt Sandy	X			Welcome the child to our family
Ex:	Cousin Bill		X		Closed minded—racist jokes

Developing a Plan

It would be wonderful if all our relatives accepted our decision to raise a child of color. However, don't count on it! Even open-minded people sometimes do not understand or accept the bridging of different races or cultures. For the child's sake, don't expect your love to cure lifelong prejudices. Instead, you need to develop a plan to effectively deal with these relatives. In the spaces below, list creative ways you would deal with awkward situations or handle difficult relatives.

Ex: Cousin Bill makes racist jokes. Take the time to write a long letter to Bill. Explain in the letter that you want him to accept your two Nigerian-born children as part of the family.

Ex: If Grandma Renee is a relative you believe will have a hard time dealing with your news, choose to tell her one-on-one, instead of in a large family gathering.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Discussion

If you bring a child into your family, the youngster is not only *your* child. The child is also a cousin, a grandchild, a sister, and a niece. Your extended family may hold strong positive or negative feelings about certain groups of people. For instance, "people from the South are slow learners," or "people from New York City are rude." You may be fully aware of these prejudices, or they may be hidden away. Either way, these feelings are sure come up when the child comes and lives with your family.

In talking with several adults who were adopted as children, they reported being "affectionately" referred to by their relatives as "my little China doll," or "my little migrant worker." As children, they heard these words, took them to heart and felt "put down" by their relatives.

The adults who made the negative comments were unaware of how hurtful their words were to the children. If they had known how upset the children became, most probably would have apologized and tried to change their behavior. However, in these situations, the foster or adoptive parents did not want to confront their relatives, so they ignored the comments. As a result, the children were hurt and didn't know how to respond. They were defenseless.

For your child's sake, you need to learn how to deal with negative comments toward the child or the child's background, and learn how to effectively talk about your concerns with your loved ones. In some families, adoptive parents and their children lose contact with certain relatives. In some cases, relationships are strained.

Parents must readily protect their child from racist comments. If during a family gathering Grandpa Jones tells a racist joke that incites laughter from your family, but also insults your child, what should you do?

For your child's sake, you must put aside your pride and your desire to get along with the family. You must defend your child in order to: (1) show your family you will not tolerate the behavior, and (2) increase the child's self-esteem. Your child's need for security and acceptance must come before your needs for harmony within your extended family.

Below are a few suggestions on how to encourage positive responses from your relatives when you tell them about your decision.

- If you feel that one of your relatives is going to react negatively, ask another relative to join the conversation and help you out.

- Have a one-on-one conversation; this shows the person you care about their opinions and feelings.

- Clip articles from magazines or the newspaper on foster care, adoption, international issues, etc.

- Invite the relative to an adoption or foster care event.

Exercise #3

Parents who bring a racially or culturally diverse child into their world often forget the challenges the child must face. Consider the exercise below:

Child's Challenges:	Are You Willing To:
☐ Transplanted from his biological home and placed with your family—a new home, new family, new neighborhood, etc.	☐ Visit your child's old neighborhood or extended relatives? ☐ Move to a neighborhood that reflects the child's background?
☐ Expected to make friends with the children of your friends.	☐ Develop close, positive relationships with persons of your child's race or culture?
☐ Expected to attend your place of worship.	☐ Regularly attend a religious institution familiar to your child? ☐ Join a religious institution with a diverse population?
☐ Attend school, daycare, or a community center in your neighborhood.	☐ Participate in activities at a community center in a neighborhood that reflects the child background? ☐ Drive your child to a daycare center in the child's neighborhood?
☐ Asked to eat food common to your culture.	☐ Include your child in the choice and preparation of ethnic foods for your family?
☐ Endure prejudiced comments from neighbors, classmates, and relatives.	☐ Respond constructively when you hear prejudiced comments from colleagues, acquaintances, and loved ones?
☐ Expected to fit in and be grateful for being adopted.	☐ Incorporate the child's culture into your family?
☐ Asked to take vacations with your immediate or extended family.	☐ Plan trips to places that reflect the child's heritage, or are familiar to the child?

Relationships

Cheryl and Dave Freider adopted Nikki Sou, a bright-eyed toddler from Korea ten years ago. The Freider family lives in an almost exclusively White neighborhood in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area. Cheryl and Dave are White and knew when they adopted Nikki Sou that they would need help raising a child of another culture. However, they have not yet exposed their daughter to many people from her culture.

Nikki Sou is now eleven. Although she does well in school and has many friends, she only selects White friends. In addition, she avoids Asian food, will not talk about being Korean, and refuses to attend the summer Korean culture camp at the local community college. Lately, she talks about wanting to dye and curl her hair.

- What do you think Nikki Sou's behavior means?
- Can a White parent ignore the racial or cultural differences of the child and expect love to cure all?
- Do you have ethnically diverse friends? How often do you socialize with these friends—weekly? monthly?
- Think of all the people you know from your child's culture. How many of them would you consider to be close friends? Would you feel comfortable asking tough, personal questions of these friends?
- How many daily/weekly opportunities do you have to associate with peers of the child's culture?
- Which of these peers would be willing to serve as a mentor/advisor to your child to answer personal questions, provide advice, acknowledgment and praise? Which one does the child trust or feel comfortable around?
- How comfortable would you be asking for help?
- Did you have same-race mentors and role models throughout your childhood and adolescence? Who? How did your parents (or you) find or get connected with them?
- At what age should parents begin exposing their child to his community-of-origin?
- Can you identify someone who would be willing to be your mentor? If you cannot identify someone to help, do you know any community resources available to you?

- If your community does not have appropriate mentors, how will you cope? Will you move to a more diverse neighborhood?
- Does your neighborhood provide day care services, after-school programs, or weekend activities that would allow your child to interact with playmates of the same race or culture?

Discussion

It hurt Cheryl to see her daughter having so much trouble accepting and "fitting in" to her culture. Cheryl decided to do three things. First, she talked with her daughter about her attitudes and behaviors. Instead of assuming anything, Cheryl encouraged Nikki Sou to talk openly and freely about the things that were bothering her. She tried to listen to her daughter's comments, complaints, and questions. She did her best to be sensitive to Nikki Sou and acknowledge the child's issues as important.

During one of these mother-daughter talks, Nikki Sou said, "I'm trying so desperately to fit into your family, and all you do is focus on my past!" Cheryl had not thought of her attempts to expose her daughter to Korean culture as backward looking—Nikki Sou's behavior now started to make sense. Unfortunately, Cheryl learned the hard way that families should expose children to their culture-of-origin from the beginning. Starting at the age of eleven is difficult and a bit unfair to the child.

The second strategy Cheryl used was to ask a colleague at work, Soo Young, if she would spend time with Nikki Sou. Soo Young is Korean and well connected to her community. She lives in a Korean neighborhood—about 45 minutes from the Freider family—and agreed to meet with and teach Nikki Sou about her culture. In time, Nikki Sou viewed Soo Young as a trusted friend—someone to help her understand the awkward and confusing feelings she was experiencing.

The Freider's saw to it that Nikki Sou was exposed to Korean culture, and helped her to appreciate her culture-of-origin. In time, the child even requested to attend the summer Korean camp she previously refused to acknowledge. They learned that although children need to be exposed to their culture, kids need to work at their own pace. At some points in their life, they may reject their culture. At others, they may accept it. Parents need to be patient and work with (not against) their children.

Third, Cheryl and Dave realized that they needed mentors to help them deal with racist comments they experienced, for direction on how to answer their child's tough questions, and to know what skin products to use on their child. If families successfully integrate into the child's community, mentors become natural and automatic. Although they waited too long to become connected to the community, they are now taking the first steps to effectively raise an Asian child in a White community.

Community

Bekka, a single White adoptive mother, took her four month old African American daughter Alexis to the local mall. The child was recently placed with Bekka. Although she was proud of her daughter and thrilled about her new role as a mom, Bekka experienced a great deal of anger at the mall. At one store, two African American women loudly commented how horrible it was for a White woman to have one of their children. "Why does she think she could raise a Black child?" Other comments included, "Just look at that baby's hair," and "The child will surely be confused and resentful as she grows up."

Bekka not only heard ugly comments from African American people during her day out with Alexis, but felt the stares and glares of White families as well. One man muttered under his breath, "Why don't you people stay on your own part of town!" [assuming that the child's father and Bekka's mate was also African American]. "I bet you're on welfare." Bekka thought to herself, "Why are they so mean? Alexis is my daughter now!"

- Describe how you think Bekka felt. How would you feel in her situation?
- What would your response be to the African American women making the negative comments? To the White man?
- How should Bekka respond to comments in front of her child? How should her responses differ as Alexis gets older?
- How frequently will your child see another person of her racial or ethnic group in your neighborhood? Is your neighborhood representative of the race/culture of the child?
- Do you live in an area where your child can make same-race friends? Is this important to you?
- Do you live in a neighborhood where you would be able to find a same-race baby-sitter? Child care provider? Is this important to your family?
- Does your community have an ethnic grocery store? Hair salon? Church/synagogue/mosque? Community center?
- What resources in your community have you used—cultural centers? Ethnic celebrations? [If you have not gotten involved, how will you learn about them?]
- How do you feel about joining an ethnic or transracial parent group? Is there one in your community? If not, are you willing to start one?
- Should families move to diverse communities to meet the needs of their children? To another city?

- Have you considered regularly bringing your child to a place of worship where you—not the child—would be the only person from your racial or cultural background?

- Does your community celebrate the rituals and holidays that your child's culture celebrates—Kwanzaa? Cinco de Mayo? Pow Wows? Chinese New Year? Will your child see a Black Santa in your community?

- In your local pharmacy or drugstore, can you purchase greeting cards, toys, or magazines that depict people of your child's heritage in a positive light? Or do they only depict majority culture?

- How willing are you to explore diverse neighborhoods to help your child learn about her culture?

Discussion

Families who foster or adopt children from different backgrounds may hear the types of comments that Bekka heard. In today's society, there is a great deal of anger and ill feelings directed toward White families who raise children of color. Some groups believe that White families are "stealing" their children. Some feel that races should not mix (i.e., interracial marriage, transracial adoption).

Some of the anger is due to the fact that African American families traditionally have had many problems adopting infants from their own community. The agencies that handle the adoptions are typically not staffed by individuals of color—especially not in proportion to the numbers of children of color in care—and few are managed by people of color. In these circumstances, workers are less able to effectively recruit Latino or African American families to foster or adopt the children. Therefore, these children are placed transracially. Many people who favor same-race placements think that if families of color did not have to face the current barriers to fostering or adoption, transracial adoption would not exist.

Until that happens, however, Bekka's experiences with her daughter are likely to be more often the rule than the exception. Transracial adoption, especially when White parents adopt Black infants, often brings about mean-spirited comments from other people—in the grocery store, the local mall, and neighborhood functions.

In addition, society's negative ideas about the color of your skin and the amount of money you earn go hand-in-hand. Some people will always believe that Black or Latino (pick a group) families live on welfare and government assistance. When you bring a child of color into your home, these same stereotypes will follow your family. You must deal with these beliefs and help your child cope with them.

This section is not intended to scare you or put you on the defensive. Rather, we want you to have a realistic expectation of what life may be like if you bring a child of a difference race, culture, or ethnicity into your home. If parents cannot face and deal with racism, they will not be prepared to teach their child how to deal with it when it happens, or be able to support the child when the tears begin to fall or the fists clench in rage.

If you are prepared for what may lie ahead and committed to raising the child not only as your own but as a member of another culture, your chances for success as a transracial family will be substantially increased. Ultimately, that's our main goal.

Cultural Identity

Brenda and Patrick decided to become foster parents in hopes of adopting a child. Patrick is Sioux and Brenda is White. Recently, a nine month old Native American child named Axel was placed in their home. One afternoon, Brenda invited her 22 year old niece, Kendra, over for a visit. When changing a diaper, Kendra noticed a bruise on Axel's tail bone. In a panic, she mentioned it to Brenda. Kendra was cautious with her remarks—she was not sure when the child received the marks. Had the child fallen? Was it child abuse?

Brenda could tell that Kendra seemed uncomfortable with the situation. She casually picked up the child, lowered his diaper and pointed out the marks. Brenda explained that most Native American children have a spot located anywhere between the nape of the neck and the base of their spine at birth. The birth mark— called a Mongolian spot—will fade as Axel gets older; it is definitely not a sign of abuse.

- Were you aware of such birth marks on Native American children? Are there similar marks on African American children? Latino children? Asian children?

- Think of the racial group(s) from which you expect to foster or adopt. List below any medical conditions or issues that affect this group more than others.

- How familiar are you with the significance of sickle cell anemia, hypertension, tuberculosis, Tay Sachs disease, diabetes, and lactose intolerance for certain groups of children?

- What does the phrase "ashy skin" mean? How do you care for it?

- Why do some people need to add oil to their hair and scalp? How can curly hair be made manageable and attractive?

- What community resources are available in your area to help you address special medical or cosmetic issues of children of color?

Discussion

When parents bring children from different racial or cultural backgrounds into their home, they may not be familiar with terms like "Mongolian spots." In fact, they may not be aware of many of the medical or personal needs of these children. For instance, African American children have a much greater chance of being born with sickle cell anemia. Latino children and adults are more prone to hypertension. Tay Sachs disease is common in children who are Jewish. Asian, Latino, Native, Mediterranean, and African American people are often lactose intolerant.

Similar to the special medical concerns of children of color are the personal or grooming needs. Typically, African American and Latino individuals need to replenish the oil in their skin. By contrast, many White children try to eliminate excess oil. Additionally, many children of color have much different hair care needs than White children. The grooming of an African American child is often viewed as a bonding experience between parent and child because a greater amount of time is required; children often need special cream or oils to be applied daily. If the hair is left unattended for a time and then combed through, there is a great deal of pain for a child.

The hair care of children adopted or placed transracially is often a source of much concern for the members of the child's community-of-origin. Often, it is painfully evident if a child is raised outside her community—simply by looking at her hair. Children gain a great deal of positive self-esteem when they are well dressed and groomed. If parents neglect or throw up their hands in frustration while trying to comb through thick and curly hair—or end up cutting the hair because it is easier to manage—what message does the child receive? "I'm not pretty?" "I'm not worth the extra attention?"

One of the best solutions is to start reading as much as you can about the specific group from which you expect to foster or adopt. Parents who have computers and Internet capabilities are connected to a world of resources in their own home. You may also ask your agency if they have a resource library, or go to your local library. Be sure that the resources are current and written by authors from within the culture. If they are not, the authors may not be speaking from a perspective of expertise.

Also, seek out the advice of an ethnic beauty salon or ask the opinions of women from your child's ethnic group.

Another helpful hint is to find a mentor from your child's racial or cultural group. There is no better expert than someone who lives the experience. Also, consider finding a parent support group in your area if you have not already done so. Often, other parents can provide first hand knowledge of what it's like to be a transracial family, how to get connected to services, how to care for a child with specific needs, etc.

Race

Deedra, now fourteen, is a biracial child who was adopted into a White family at the age of seven. The family lives in a primarily White neighborhood an hour from a metropolitan area. Her parents do not have any friends of color, nor do they attend integrated functions. Although Deedra loves her family dearly, her behavior has deteriorated significantly in the last six months. She constantly yells and frequently makes statements like, "I only love my birth family," "Why did they place me with you White people?" and "I hate my nappy hair."

Deedra's mother, Alice, is having difficulty determining what behaviors are normal adolescence, what are due to early neglect or lack of attachment, and what is part of Deedra's racial identity needs. Alice does not know what to do for her daughter.

- How should Alice talk with Deedra about Deedra's concerns? What should Alice say?
- How should Alice handle her daughter's behavior? What form of discipline would you suggest?
- What do Deedra's statements—"I only love my birth family" and "I hate my nappy hair"—mean to you?
- How can a parent like Alice deal with multiple issues at the same time?
- What would you do with a fourteen year old dealing with racial identity issues? How do you distinguish between adolescent and adoption issues?
- Do you know where to find a therapist who understands race issues? Adoption-specific issues? Attachment issues?
- What is your experience in dealing with racism?
- When you hear a racist joke or comment, how do you respond—laughter? Nervous giggle? Straight face? Confront the comment?
- What are the similarities and differences in the formation of racial identity between children from the majority and minority population cultures?
- What does a child of color need in order to counter negative racial identities and inferiority complexes? How can a parent develop a strong racial identity in their child?

Discussion

Race and identity are two of the most important issues related to transracial foster care and adoption. Many of the people who dislike transracial placements argue that families with different racial or cultural backgrounds from the child cannot raise the child to understand or be proud of his heritage. White families do not know what it means to be African American, Latino, Asian, or Native American. They have never experienced the racism that exists in this society. People who are in favor of same-race placements argue that these families cannot raise a child of color to appreciate their culture, and cannot help their child develop a strong sense of cultural identity.

The reality of living in today's society is that we live in a race-conscious world. People are judged every day by the color of their skin. Individuals are "trailed" through department stores or shopping centers simply because they have darker complexions or because they dress a certain way. People receive glares because of a certain inflection in their voice. Although you and your family may be open-minded and might strongly despise the thought of racism, racism still exists. Your child will be exposed to various forms of racism throughout her life—both directly and indirectly. As a parent, you cannot always be there to shelter her from unpleasant comments, or protect her from abusive situations.

Children of color need to learn what racism is in order to protect themselves—both physically and emotionally. Children need to appreciate their culture and understand the positive and proud traditions of their heritage. While it is possible for White parents to teach their Native American child about tribal customs, it is more difficult for a White parent than a Native American parent to do so. The same is true for Latino children being raised in African American homes. The education is possible, but it is much harder.

If you choose to foster or adopt transracially, you are making a lifelong commitment to integrating your life—not just the child's life. If you don't make these efforts early on, the child may suffer the pain of low self-esteem and have identity problems. Some children may lack the coping skills to deal well with their community-of-origin. If you choose to proceed with a transracial placement, think about the skills you can teach your child to help him deal with prejudice and discrimination. In your opinion, are you up to the challenge?

Conclusion

As you likely understood from the pages of this *Self Awareness Tool*, raising a child from a different background is hard work. It is challenging, frustrating, humbling, and must be faced thoughtfully and honestly. It can also be a delightful chore. But not every parent is ready for the task. As we stated in the opening section: It is far better to decide NOT to raise a child of a different race or culture than to try and fail.

The purpose of the *Tool* is to allow parents an opportunity to start thinking about what it takes to raise a child who has a completely different background than your family. NACAC encourages parents to talk with social workers at their agency and other parents who have adopted, and go through training on transracial parenting. Prospective parents often find it helpful to talk with other individuals interested in transracial parenting, and discuss these issues in large and small group setting with qualified professionals. Parents or professionals should contact NACAC for more information on our *Transracial Parenting Training Curriculum.*

Think about the different sections of this *Self Awareness Tool*:

Personal Motivations	Cultural Exposure	Community
Personal Values	Family	Cultural Identity
Home	Relationships	Race

- In which areas do you have the most hesitation about proceeding with a transracial placement?

- In which areas do you feel most capable of raising a child of another race or culture?

- Identify those areas that you need to address in order to become competent.

In general:

☐ I do not think I am ready to raise a child of a different background.

☐ I am not sure if I can raise a child of a different race, culture, or ethnicity. I need more information on the following subjects:

☐ I believe that I am up to the challenge of raising a child of another race, and am proceeding for the right reasons.

☐ I would like to ask _____ to serve as my mentor/advisor.

☐ I would like to ask _____ to serve as a mentor/advisor to my prospective child.

☐ I believe I can become competent and I'm willing to engage in training/mentoring.

The *Self Awareness Tool* should not be the sole factor in a family's decision to adopt or provide a foster care home to a waiting child.