

## **Beyond cuisine and traditional dress: creating true cultural connections for transracial adoptees**

by Anti-Racist Parent columnist Ji In

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Some months ago, I was quoted in a newsletter article about an adult adoptee panel I participated in last summer, regarding the importance of adoptive parents helping transracially adopted children make connections to their heritage and birth culture. I just came across the article recently for the first time, and as I read part of my quote, I had to wonder if what I said about "persisting [to encourage cultural connections] if children resist" came out the wrong way.

I hope that all those newsletter readers and panel audience members out there don't think I make a habit of advising adoptive parents to drag their kids kicking and screaming into the Indian restaurant to tube-feed them curry, or otherwise thrust cultural interaction upon their wildly flailing children. Obviously, if your kid is howling like a banshee until she barfs up her rice cakes at the Chuseok picnic, she isn't going to get much out of the experience.

I think it's important to let adoptees ultimately determine their own comfort zone, both developmentally as children and as adults — and everywhere in between.

At the same time, I believe it's up to parents to introduce cultural connections to young adoptees early on, and to see that the kids have a variety of mentors and role models — people of color, people of their shared heritage, older transracial adoptees — in a way that's presented as the norm, rather than as a way of underscoring how "special" they are to be adopted.

(I've never been sure what this accomplishes anyway — pushing the "special" agenda. I think it seems like overcompensation for some underlying insecurities, or a pre-emptive attempt to head off any chance of resentment on the adoptee's part. Even though my parents favored equal treatment in our family, I would occasionally encounter somebody who tried to whip out the "You're special/lucky to be chosen/different" routine when I was young. I thank those people for giving me the opportunity to perfect my blank stare, which continues to come in handy in bars and other bar-like scenarios.)

Parents of transracially adopted kids might not be able to teach their children about their identities and heritage firsthand, but they can help give their children the means to learn about it through "firsthand" sources.

Many of my fellow transracially adopted friends and I have frequently emphasized the importance of having appropriate role models in young adoptees' lives, and living in racially diverse communities or in neighborhoods that reflect their ethnicity. I strongly feel that it's not enough to just know that racial diversity exists ... somewhere else. I think young transracial adoptees need to see it for themselves, on a regular, normal basis, to better make the connection between "seeing race" in others, and seeing it in themselves.

Transracial adoptees need live-action examples, not just storybook characters and tales of faraway places where people look like them. Culture and race aren't things that should be visited only on special occasions, or tried on as costumes that are then folded back up and stored behind glass — literally or figuratively.

Cultural connection doesn't need to be a "special occasion," at all, nor does it need to involve traditional dress or folk festivals to be considered "culture." In fact, when I was growing up, it was Korean traditional folk culture that I was most familiar with — through storybooks and folk tales. It was an understanding of contemporary Korean culture and a comfort level and sense of ownership of the Asian-American community that I struggled to come by in adulthood. Practical skills (that shouldn't even qualify as "skills!") such as sitting down at a table full of Korean cuisine and knowing what I was looking at, being able to confidently approach another Asian person without having palpitations, and knowing how to handle racist comments eluded me.

Children can develop these "practical skills" long before they turn into unscalable mountains. How about: choosing schools and classes with teachers and fellow students of color; choosing babysitters who share their ethnic background; enrolling in ethnic dance, art and music classes; enrolling in language school; integrating ethnic cuisines at home in addition to visiting restaurants; choosing doctors and other professionals of color; traveling.

Making the connection might involve uncomfortable moments — both for the child and the parent. But if the parent finds making cultural connections uncomfortable mostly for herself or himself, it's not fair to the child to quit on the first or second try. As a transracially adopted person, the adoptee has already inherited a lifetime supply of uncomfortable situations. Being adopted was not the adoptee's choice, but that of the parents.

Adoptive parents have the ability, however, to make another very powerful choice: Choose to feel uncomfortable now, and perhaps help spare their children a world of discomfort later on. At the very least, making this choice will help equip your children with the self-awareness that will serve as a foundation for many years to come. After all, isn't this supposed to be about what's best for the child?

And if you've started late, and the young adoptee resists, I do believe it's wise to try again — maybe not that day or the next day, but again, nonetheless. If you give up after one or two tries, it's almost as if you're admitting that cultural connections and heritage aren't important enough to merit a repeat performance. If it's not worth it to you, it will have very little worth in your child's eyes.

Children learn and absorb so much through the spoken and unspoken cues their parents give. If they see that their parents are uncomfortable or uninterested in weaving their heritage into the family fabric, and weaving the family into the greater (Asian-American/African-American/Latin-American) community, why would they feel any differently?

I'm aware that this borders dangerously on that dreaded "advice," which I often recoil from giving. But in the interest of fair representation and for my younger TRA sisters and brothers, I felt that it was important to make this clarification. After all, this isn't so much about "advice" as it is about

practicality.

Adoptive parents and adult transracial adoptees, what ideas do you have for making cultural connections the norm, rather than the exception?

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