

RACIAL IDENTITY information and education leaflet

All children need to be helped to develop a strong and positive sense of who they are. *The* child's ethnic identity, race and culture are, therefore, important issues to consider in adoptive placements.

Research by Crumbley (1999) has shown that *pre-school* children very quickly learn who the dominant group in society is, i.e. the group with power over the distribution of goods, services, privileges, entitlements and status. The child also becomes aware from very early on whether people from this dominant group are like him or her, e.g. in race, religion or gender. Similarly, small children learn from very young, through language, media images, and non-verbal social conditioning, that 'white' and other 'dominant group' characteristics are generally considered to be superior in every way.

How adoptive parents value their own and their child's ethnicity and culture will, therefore, strongly influence how their child grows up to view herself. In order to promote a secure attachment between the child and parent, positive values from the child's racial and cultural background need to be integrated into the family's everyday life. These will lay a solid foundation for her positive identity formation. However, if issues of race and culture are denied or minimised, these will impact negatively on the child's self-esteem, confidence and how she sees her place in society.

Trans-racial adoption adds further complexity to an already highly-charged emotional situation for the adopted child who feels on the outside of her family. The ever-present awareness of not being like her adoptive parents creates deep feelings of difference and insecurity, both internally and externally, for the child. In order for the trans-racially adopted child to develop a positive racial and cultural identity, adopters need to undertake additional parenting tasks: these include

- claiming and valuing the child's birth heritage;
- acknowledging that prejudice and discrimination are prevalent at all levels in society;
- helping the child to build or maintain links which positively reinforce her cultural heritage.

Adoption raises issues that must be handled with great sensitivity to, and awareness of the child's thoughts and feelings. If adoptive parents are culturally sensitive and become knowledgeable about the child's heritage, they can help her to develop a positive sense of identity in a multi-cultural and multi-racial society.

See Esther Ina-Egbe's article on "Developing a positive racial identity ..." (2010) as published in the UKCP journal, *The Psychotherapist*, *ADOPTION: transmuting losses into gains through grief work*. Pages 10-12. Issue 44, Spring 2010.

We offer training to professionals on BME issues. For further information, please contact ASART at www.adoptioncounselling.com

Reference

Crumbley, J. (1999) *Transracial Adoption and Foster Care: Practice issues for professionals*. CWLA Press, Washington, DC.