



*PREPARING FOR*

# **transracial foster care and adoption**

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When considering a transracial placement, there are many questions that arise. This thoughtful booklet by Jason and Trisha Weber was created to help parents think through some of these questions and to point out practical ways to find the answers.

Talking about matters of race can be uncomfortable. We fear saying the wrong things or being misunderstood. *These worries can make it difficult for those preparing for transracial foster and adoptive placements to seek answers to their questions.* Moreover, some might wonder if race really matters when giving a child a loving family. Others wonder how extended family may treat a child of another race. It's tempting to dismiss these thoughts entirely or allow them to paralyze us. But it doesn't have to be this way...

If you are in the process of becoming foster or adoptive parents of a child of another race, there are some *questions you'll want to consider*:

How might growing up in my culture and my community affect my child – both positively and negatively?

Am I able to teach a child in my home how to interact with a world that will treat him differently because of the color of his skin?

Am I prepared to help a child in my home respond to the extra attention and curiosity that comes from “standing out” as a transracial foster or adoptive family?

### **Transracial placement is a complex issue**

In our family, we foster-parented for ten years and have adopted children of three different races. Our goal here is not to provide all the answers as much as to help you ask the right questions. The three questions above are a good place to start.

So, what are the things one should understand about parenting a child of a different race, and what are some of the best ways to gain that understanding?



# first things first

While there are a number of issues to consider in a transracial foster and adoptive placement, the best starting place is the same place we start whenever we are talking about complex issues involving relationships with others. *We begin with love.*

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”** And he said to him, **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.** This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.** On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

— MATTHEW 22:34-40, ESV

## Loving God and Loving Your Neighbor Is the Starting Place

It is important to define what we mean when we use the word “love.” Plenty of watered-down or counterfeit versions are prevalent in our culture today, but when we talk about love, we talk about biblical love. It is action-oriented, sacrificial, and unconditional. We are not simply talking about warm feelings and affection (though these things can certainly be associated with loving someone).

When we talk about parenting a child, regardless of their race, we should be asking ourselves at every opportunity, “What does it look like to truly love this child as God would have me love her?”

## There are two challenges to loving this way:

- › Recognizing the loving thing to do.
- › Actually doing it.

*But knowing the loving thing to do isn't always easy.* When it comes to transracial placement, some people would passionately assert that the loving thing to do for a child is to give them a family regardless of that family's race. Others are equally adamant that the most loving thing is to see a child raised by a parent or parents of the same race who can best prepare that child for the realities he or she will encounter in our world.

Many people feel strongly about one of those positions. But what if there is another point of view that's worth considering?

## Three Perspectives on Transracial Placement

While each of the following stories is fictional, the experiences and perspectives they reflect are very real for those preparing to care for children of another race.

### **PERSPECTIVE 1: Transracial placement should be avoided if possible**

When Tim and Cindy started to explore foster parenting, they began to think about the implications of having children of different races in their home. They approached an African-American neighbor, a retired social worker, and asked for her perspective.



The neighbor explained some of the complexities involved and told the couple that she felt they would not be able to adequately handle issues related to race if an African-American child were placed in their home. It wasn't that the neighbor didn't like white people or thought that Tim and Cindy would be bad foster parents; rather, she genuinely felt that the long-term emotional implications for a child of color were too great. This conversation was challenging and confusing for Tim and Cindy, who were trying to understand these implications and wanted to make the best decision for any child they would bring into their home.

### **PERSPECTIVE 2: Race should not matter when it comes to giving a child a home**

Blake and Tina have always wanted to adopt. Since she was young, Tina imagined adopting children and someday having a "rainbow family." One night at dinner, some close friends asked the couple why having a rainbow family was so important to them and if they felt ready to address some of the racial issues that might arise while raising children from other cultures. Blake and Tina were surprised by this question. "We really don't see race when it comes to these things," they replied. "All kids basically need the same thing — a family. That's what really matters, and that is what we want to give them." Still, her friend's questions made Tina wonder if there were some issues she was missing and if her motives were really in the right place.

### **PERSPECTIVE 3: Race is an important consideration but shouldn't prevent a child from getting a family**

Rob and Ashley were in the process of becoming foster parents and spent several months discussing the implications with their friends, family, and professionals. Yet the more people they talked to, the more they realized how little they understood about matters of race. They had trouble identifying with most of the struggles their friends of color had experienced, and this made them question whether they could adequately help a child navigate those experiences. As the day approached for their foster home to open, it became clear to Rob and Ashley that understanding these race-related realities would be a lifelong learning journey. They would need to continually evaluate their



parenting and consider adjustments along the way to truly love any child coming into their home. They committed to learning and growing in this area as their child grew. They were also committed to changing their lifestyle along the way if that's what it meant to love this child well.

All three of these couples were forced to grapple with **some tough decisions**. Perhaps you have faced a similar crossroads in your journey. If so, we hope that you will find a way forward that both honors God's calling in your life and helps you to understand what it means to love well when it comes to bringing a child of a different race into your family.

## The Realities of Transracial Foster and Adoptive Placement

Why does race even matter when it comes to foster and adoptive placement? Here are **two main areas** to consider:

### Racial and Cultural Identity

Almost all children wonder at some point where they came from — and what the answer to that question means about them, who they are, and who they will become. These questions can become even more personal when race is involved. **Here are just a few examples from kids we know:**

- › "My friend told me at lunch that it's the white part of me that gets good grades and the black part of me that is good at basketball."
- › "Someone told me that my hair looks funny. I don't want to wear it like that anymore."
- › "It was made very clear that some parents at our school were okay with their daughters being my friend but that dating me would be unacceptable."

### These and other similar encounters raise some important questions:

- › To what extent can parents of one race effectively parent a child of another race?
- › Can these parents adequately understand how their child will be treated by others?
- › Will that child be equipped to respond to racism and overcome social biases that will limit certain opportunities and privileges?
- › Will a child raised by parents of another race be able to interact with others of his or her own race comfortably?

## Increased visibility as a foster or adoptive family

Children placed with same-race parents typically deal with fewer questions about their birth family history than children who are placed transracially. A child in a transracial placement will immediately be identified as being in foster care or as an adoptee. This often means facing many questions about his or her story and family of origin. As one of our teenagers said to us,

*"People immediately know something very personal about me that I did not have the choice to tell them."*

Loving a child well in these situations means preparing them to respond to sometimes uncomfortable questions, as well as helping them develop appropriate responses regarding information they would rather not share.

This issue of increased visibility presents a challenge not only for the child but for the parents as well. Some parents are comfortable answering the questions (which sometimes are insensitive or even rude) that acquaintances and strangers ask. Other parents struggle, perhaps due to shyness or embarrassment. Still other parents secretly crave the attention. These are all matters of the heart, and recognizing our motives is the first step toward moving to a healthier place.

**Search me, God, and know my heart!** Test me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

— PSALM 139:23-24, ESV



When we consider fostering or adopting a child, regardless of his or her race, **we must begin with love.**





# navigating choppy waters

One common argument against transracial foster and adoptive placement is that parents are not able to adequately equip children of a different race for the culture in which we live. Now, some may try to dismiss this notion as exaggerated or frivolous, but it is extremely important that we consider this perspective seriously.

**People of different races are still treated differently in this country** – in all parts of this country. We understand that some might read this and firmly believe it's not true or that it's not true where they live. We would strongly encourage those who believe this to have a conversation with friends of other races regarding the racism they have experienced.

At my (Jason) 20-year class reunion, I mentioned to an African-American friend a presentation I remember her giving on the civil rights movement. I told her that, years later, I realized how much courage it must have taken for her to talk about that topic in front of an almost entirely white class. Tears filled her eyes as she recounted cruel acts of racism that she experienced at our school and how lonely it made her feel. I had no idea.

If you decide to have such a conversation, be ready to listen without arguing or dismissing your friends as "over-sensitive." Fear of such a response may have kept them from sharing these things with you in the first place.



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## A Note About Culturally Specific Issues

While our purpose here is to provide general guidance, it is worth noting that your learning journey will need to include culturally specific exploration depending on the children you may be potentially bringing into your home. Here are a couple of important issues that fall into culturally specific categories:

### Skin and Hair

There are numerous resources and people that can assist further in this area, but the issue of skin and hair care, especially for African-American children, is incredibly important. It is a whole different world, and navigating it can feel overwhelming. You'll want to find a trusted guide or two. When we received our first foster placement of an African-American little girl, we were relieved and grateful that the wife of one of our pastors (who is African-American) showed up on our doorstep with a basketful of hair care products and a grace-filled willingness to walk us through some basics.

### Celebrations and Milestones

Different cultures have celebrations and milestones that may be incredibly important to a child placed in your home. You will want to explore what those might be for the children in your home. One of many possible examples is the quinceañera, celebrated across many Latin American and Caribbean cultures. It is a rite of passage for young women turning 15 years old. Remember, your goal is not to try and replace all the things that the children in your home might have had in their families of origin (and it may be extremely insensitive or offensive for you to try and do so). Open conversations with your children about these things can lead to some great places. Two of our daughters are Mexican-American, and as we discussed this with them, we learned that they were much more interested in visiting Mexico for their 15th birthday than having a quinceañera.

## Take Inventory of Your Surroundings

One friend told us how they were challenged early on in their journey by one critical question: If everyone your child is exposed to is the same race as you, what are you subtly communicating to them about the value of their race?

When you consider the relationships in your life and the various environments in which those relationships occur, it's important to ask . . .

- › Is my child always in the minority in the environments where you place him or her?
- › Are there people in your life who look like your child – people who can serve both as friends and as role models?
- › Are there people in your life who will help you understand some of the things your child might experience?
- › If these people are not currently in your life, can you demonstrate love toward your child by seeking out these relationships?

While you don't need to run out and change everything about your life, here are some relationships and environments to consider:

### Church

One of the most important things to our family is that our children are regularly exposed to people who look like them and love Jesus. We never want them to get the impression that following Jesus is something that people of "other" races do. That's why we've always sought out multiethnic or transracial worship environments. That is not to say that you must follow our example and leave your current church. However, church is one environment you should consider when trying to help your children build relationships with people of the same race.

### Friends

It is safe to say that our cultural competence was stunted until we developed meaningful and honest relationships with people of other races with whom we could talk openly and candidly. These kinds of relationships didn't happen overnight. It takes time and a bit of risk to venture into uncomfortable areas of conversation. One of the most freeing things you can do is accept in advance that you might say something offensive. Ask these friends to be honest with you and extend you lots of grace.

## Family

This can be one of the most difficult things to navigate regarding transracial placement. Pre-existing attitudes and perspectives of extended family members — particularly grandparents and great-grandparents — about race can make this especially hard. On the one hand, parents don't want their desire to give a child a home to be undermined by the negative attitudes of family members. On the other hand, these same parents are well aware that negative racial attitudes can be extremely hurtful to a child. The best time to have a conversation about this issue is before you bring a child into your home. Yes, it might be the most uncomfortable conversation you've ever had with some family members, but it is a vital and sacrificial way for you to love your child. (In some cases, there may be family gatherings you won't be able to attend until this issue is handled.) Remember that if God has called you to parent a child of another race through foster care or adoption, you need to trust Him to transform the hearts of your extended family.

## Neighborhood and Schools

Whenever we consider a family move, we pay close attention to the racial demographics of a new area and its schools. As we said earlier, in our family we have adopted children of three different races, and we want them to grow up in a diverse environment. Remember that it's not always just about being with kids of their own race. We also value them having friendships with people from a variety of backgrounds.

We want to say again that parenting transracially is not about changing all of your family's surroundings. However, keep in mind that you are looking for meaningful relationships for both your children and for yourself — relationships that will help you all learn and grow as you navigate the challenges of life together.

## You Could Be the Best Parent Ever, and It's Still Going to Be Hard

One adult adoptee we spoke with recalled school classmates who made racially offensive comments and jokes. Though his relationship with his adoptive parents was very strong, he shared that he never felt comfortable talking about these experiences with his parents because they probably wouldn't be able to understand what he was going through.

He recounted that it wasn't until he got a little older and could build relationships with adult African-American men (one was a coach and the other a member of his family's church) that he could talk openly about these issues. I (Jason) asked if his parents could have done anything to make it easier for him to talk to them about race. The man said his parents did all the right things and opened that door wide open, but, at the end of the day, he needed relationships with adults who had "been there."

This is a critical point. You might say and do all the right things, but if your child is of a different race, he or she is likely going to struggle at times with issues related to their identity and how to respond to what others say and do. And that's OK. We were not put on the planet to remove all the struggles from the lives of our children. We were put here to love them in the midst of their struggles. God does not remove our struggles; He loves us through them.

### A Reflection of Love

For those becoming foster or adoptive parents, it is an invitation to a lifetime of learning and — if done well — a life full of rich relationships that might never have been forged otherwise. Parenting transracially provides an opportunity to view the world in new and exciting ways. Sometimes, that view is beautiful; other times, it is not. And if you accept the invitation, always pray that your relationship with the child in your home will be a reflection to the world of God's amazing love.



Transracial foster care and adoption is an invitation to a **life full of rich relationships** that might never have been forged otherwise.



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