

Self Esteem in Children of Color: Developmental, Adoption and Racial Issues

by Jan McFarlane



Self-esteem: what it is, why we need it, how to get it

Self-image is how we imagine ourselves to be, and self-esteem is how we feel about that image, say Drs. Darlene Powell Hopson and Derek S. Hopson. The Hopsons are an African-American husband and wife team, both clinical psychologists, who have written a book that is a treasure for parents raising children of color, or for that matter any parent: *Different and Wonderful: Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society*.

The Hopsons and others working in the field of human development believe that self-esteem can be taught. It is not something magic that you either have or you don't. Furthermore, even though self-esteem is one of those warm and fuzzy concepts, not something more concrete like nutritious eating, helping our children acquire it is critical for their development. With high self-esteem, children have the courage to take risks in learning about the world, to develop their skills and abilities, and to make friends with peers and adults. They can stay tuned to their inner, unique selves and can set a path that is right for themselves. With low self-esteem, children are much more fearful in taking the risks necessary to learn new skills and form new relationships, and are much more vulnerable to manipulation by authoritarian figures and peer pressure. They may find it harder to stay tuned to their inner selves, and may stray from a path that is right for themselves.

Self-Esteem Seminars is a Los Angeles-based consulting group that trains educators in how to nurture self-esteem in themselves and in their students. The program shows teachers how to create for children, and help children to create for themselves, the following five building blocks of self-esteem:

- a safe environment, physically and psychologically
- identity, knowing "who I am"
- belonging, knowing "who I am a part of"
- competence, gaining skill in tasks
- purpose, having goals for using skills that contribute to individual and group needs

With very young children, infancy through preschool, we, as parents, can think about how we might work with these concepts to help our children build self-esteem on several levels--developmental, adoption, racial and cultural. Transracially adopted children of color will have many more issues to resolve about who they are than children growing up in their biological families. Our children must learn not only basic developmental tasks, but also the following:

- what it means to be adopted
- what it means to be a member of a minority
- what it means to be a minority growing up with parents of the "majority" race and culture
- and, finally, what it means to integrate pieces of the biological heritage--the birth family and its culture--with the culture of the adoptive family.

Building self-esteem

Let's look at the basic developmental issues and see how we can provide the opportunity for our young children to build the five components of self-esteem.

Safety. We know we need to provide our children with physical space that is safe and encourages exploration. But we also must create space that is safe psychologically. We must shield our children from anyone who might harm them with ridicule, and we must support their learning with praise. "Good job," said with much enthusiasm and vigor, and "good choice" are two one-liners that parents can use to praise children, says child therapist Claudia Jewett Jarratt.

Identity and belonging. Little children must learn many basic aspects of their identity--their name, gender, and race. They are also learning that these characteristics entitle them to belong to certain groups--a particular family, sex, and racial/cultural group. They are also learning what is expected of members of these groups, and how these groups are evaluated by others. For example, children are learning what behaviors are "expected" of boys or girls. Parents can help children feel free to explore the full range of their physical and emotional capabilities, and not restrict them to rigid sexual roles. Parents can provide encouragement for little girls to engage in vigorous physical activity and little boys to express warmth and affection in playing with cuddly dolls. We are therefore helping our children feel good about expressing all of who they are, and not making them feel bad if they step out of the rigid expectations our culture projects for male or female behavior.

Competence and purpose. Young children are also learning competence in basic physical skills--feeding, toileting, bathing--and social skills with peers and adults. And they are learning how to use these skills for a purpose: to be functioning members of their social groups--their families and play groups. We can encourage our children's growing competence and contributions to the

group by finding little jobs they can do. Even at 16 months, Miguel has staked out a job for himself: He likes to help Daddy and Mommy unload the dishwasher. He solemnly hands up the dishes, one by one, to the waiting adult hand. "Good job, Miguel, good job," we say.

Individual talents. Even at a very young age, children also begin to exhibit a predilection for their own special talents and ways of relating to their environment. We can be on the lookout for these individual gifts and encourage them. They may be a clue for guiding them to fulfilling school and job options many years later. As adoptive parents we may have only sketchy information about the educational, professional, and vocational interests of the birth families of our children. So we need to be very observant for clues as to our children's strengths and abilities. For example, Miguel is exhibiting a talent for very fine manual dexterity, and makes a beeline for anything mechanical. He loves to turn any knob, push any button, jiggle any lever. Perhaps Miguel will grow up to be an engineer some day, perhaps not. But we are already thinking about how he might use this ability.

Parental self-esteem. As we build our children's self-esteem and find joy in their accomplishments, we are building our own self-esteem as parents. We develop confidence that we know what to do to nurture our children and are accomplishing results, and we can feel good about ourselves as parents.

Building self-esteem about adoption

Children of color growing up with parents who look different from them will notice this difference early on and remark on it. Law professor Elizabeth Bartholet remembers her 3-year-old son from Peru saying sadly, "I wish you looked like me...I wish we were the same color."

All children need to feel that they are like their parents, who are their primary role models. As parents of adopted children, we need to identify for our children ways that they are like us, while not denying differences or the way being different from us makes our children feel. Habits, tastes in food, talents, likes and dislikes can all be traits our children share with us; remarking that "you laugh just like your dad" or "you and I both love books, don't we?" can help children feel a part of us. By the age of 3, children notice differences in skin tone and wonder what they mean. At that point we must have some answers about adoption for our children that make sense to them. We must also teach our children how to deal with the questions they will hear from their playmates. Their peers will, of course, notice obvious physical differences and want an explanation. "Is that your mommy? She doesn't look like your mommy." These kinds of questions can tear at the child's sense of belonging and attachment to the family.

As parents who have adopted transracially, adoption will be in our faces, and in the faces of our children, from the get-go, whether we, or they, like it or not. We have two choices: We can ignore

the importance of teaching our children how to deal with adoption and racial issues, and put them at risk of not understanding this vital part of their being. Or we can decide to deal with these issues proactively and empower our children with coping strategies that build their self-esteem.

Let's look at how we might use the building blocks of self-esteem in helping our young children understand what adoption is, how it relates to them, and how to feel good about it.

Psychological safety. One of the best ways to open communication about a subject with young children is through an indirect medium, such as a book. One of my favorite adoption books is *I Am Adopted*, by Susan Lapsley. Sitting on my lap right before bedtime, Miguel can drink his bottle while we rock together and are swept along with the beautiful story. In this safe setting, we can talk about our feelings.

Identification. Illustrated with soft watercolors, the Lapsley story opens with a little boy sitting with his pajamas in bed. "My name is Charles," he says calmly. "I am adopted." Right away, the listeners can identify with a child like themselves and hear him talking matter-of-factly about something called "adoption." Adoption is not scary or strange or something to be embarrassed about. Charles says it's okay.

Competence. Next we see little Charles playing with his tractor and his friend, and going through his normal day. Then he asks, "Do you know what adopted means? I do." Here Charles signals to his listeners that he is a competent little boy who understands what this big word means, and he's going to share it with them.

Purpose. Charles then explains the basic process and purpose of adoption, and how he relates to that abstraction: "It means we were given to Mummy and Daddy when we were little. And they brought us home to make us a family."

Belonging. As the story continues we see Charles and his sister Sophie feeding their bunny, painting, cooking, and helping Daddy and Mummy. Frames show warm family life--tea time and bedtime--sending an underlying feeling of belonging. Then to underscore the message, Charles snuggles into bed with his teddy bear and puts the feeling into words: "Adoption means belonging." Then Charles feels so happy and good about adoption, he goes quietly off to sleep.

Using books and tapes. Reading adoption books with our children can be a door-opener for discussing personal adoption stories. What we are doing is laying the groundwork for helping our children understand that adoption is a normal, natural experience that can be talked about and must not be buried. We're saying, "Adoption is okay, and you're okay, too."

Lois Ruskai Melina's book *Making Sense of Adoption* includes an annotated bibliography of children's books to use in talking about adoption. This book, and also her *Raising Adopted Children*, offer practical guidance in helping parents discuss the particular details of their own child's adoption story with them, and other adoption issues that may arise at different ages.

Songs on cassette tapes are another tool for opening the door to talk about adoption in a positive and lighthearted way. One tape is "My Forever Family," with catchy songs produced by Lisa Silver and Wendy Spira. Silver, who wrote the songs, is a country-western musician waiting in the wings to become an adoptive mother.

Empowering our children. Even as little tots, our children will have to answer questions from peers to explain their identity in ways that children in biological families, or children adopted interracially, will probably not face. We must prepare them for this task.

The Hopsons discuss three behaviors we can emphasize in working with our children: communication, modeling, and reinforcement. With communication we become aware of what our children are feeling, with modeling we show some ways to behave appropriately, and with reinforcement we encourage their efforts to be competent. To open communication with our children, we can start by being observant and aware as they interact in their play groups and nursery schools. If a child comes home crying, we can call or visit the teacher to find out what happened. We can also be aware of body language. If the child seems dejected, we can say, "What happened at school today? Can you tell me about it?" We can ask how he felt, and perhaps offer appropriate vocabulary, such as "glad," or "mad," or "sad." We can venture some guesses: "I bet that hurt your feelings."

We need to help our children learn to recognize and identify their feelings. It is important to validate your child's feelings even if you don't approve of how they are feeling or don't think you would feel the same way. It's not helpful to your child for you to say the things many of us first think of saying such as: "Don't be mad; I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt your feelings," or "It doesn't matter what other people think." This only teaches our children to repress their feelings. For healthy self-esteem, children must be able to express their feelings, whatever they are.

Modeling appropriate responses comes next. We can role-play some "smart remarks." For example, a child might hear, "Is that your real mommy? She doesn't look like your real mommy."

Then we can figure out--with the child--some short easy words that the child could use the next time the situation arises. For example, "She is too my real mommy. We are a family." Or, "She is my real mother. Not everybody in a family has to look alike, you know." When a little child understands the concept of adoption, he could say, "I am adopted." An older child might offer

further explanation: "I look like my birth mother." If the playmate asks what a "birthmother" is, something like "my other mother who had me" may work.

When we hear that our child has handled a social situation well, we can reinforce his efforts with, "Good job, good choice of words!"

Building self-esteem about racial issues

Perhaps one of the key things we will have to recognize as white parents who have adopted children of color is that they will have to face prejudice and racism that we most likely have never experienced, and may not even believe exists. And we, as a family, have forever changed our own classification. We are no longer a white family, or even a white family with a child of color. We have become a family of color.

"When you adopt a child of color, you become a family of color. You have changed your gene pool forever," therapist Sharon Kaplan, Executive Director of Parenting Resources in Tustin, CA, tells prospective parents in her classes on transracial adoption.

So, as adoptive parents of children of color, we ourselves are at risk to experience racism and we must prepare ourselves and our children to deal with these realities. Perhaps even more important, we must learn how to help our child develop a positive racial identity in a society that devalues people of color.

Development of racism. The move from an understanding of racial identity to racism can be very fast. Racism is an attitude that places higher value on people of certain races, and lower value on others.

Children as young as four can understand racial stereotyping and the political consequences. White children, for example, may learn a false sense of "white superiority" and downgrade anyone who looks different from what they perceive to be the white norm.

Medoree Feldman, an adopted adult from Korea married to a Caucasian, remembers her little boy coming home crying from kindergarten. "Some little boy told him he looked Black and didn't want to play with him." The racial slurs and actions do not stop with children. One mother from Japan reported the following incident in her daughter's preschool. To quiet some Asian children and aide said, "Now all you be quiet," and she pulled the corners of her eyes up with her forefingers in a mocking gesture.

As parents of children of color we have to do battle on two fronts: building positive racial identity in our children and combatting racism that may attack that identity. We can do this in our homes and by becoming advocates for cultural diversity and pride in our schools and communities.

Celebrate diversity. As we introduce our children to the world, we can encourage them to experience many different kinds of people, and what they each may contribute.

A first step is frequenting playgrounds where families of different backgrounds go. One park near us draws families of all kinds--White, Hispanic, Asian-American, African-American, and recent immigrants from India, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Miguel is learning that the world is not all "lily white," and we can all play together in the sandbox. Miguel also sees me chatting with the other parents. We must model our enjoyment of people of many backgrounds. Our actions speak louder than our words.

If families live in areas where there are few minorities or residents from other countries, then the stretch to create a multicultural environment will be greater. Indirect methods will have to do on an everyday basis. Bring into your children's awareness anything positive featuring cultural diversity: books, magazines, television programming such as "Sesame Street" and "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood." Then on holidays or vacations, plan to drive to a college town or larger urban area for special events or dinner in an ethnic restaurant. Have a foreign student to dinner for Thanksgiving, or an exchange student to spend the summer.

Build racial and cultural identity.

We need to help our children begin to answer the question: "Who am I?"

With young children, we can find small ways that help them understand where they come from and to and feel proud about it. For example, on Miguel's bedroom window there is a map of Peru, with a small Peruvian flag. Sometimes I hold him up and point out the country where he was born, and the town where his birthmother is from. He does not understand this yet, but he is getting used to hearing the word "Peru." When he gets a little older, we will take out some children's books about Peru bought especially for him. In them he can see many people who look like him, and who are going about their daily life doing interesting things. We have also met a young Peruvian couple with a little son who have been here a year. *Mestizo* (Spanish/Indian) in appearance, just like Miguel, they have been a link with Peru. We hope they will become a part of our extended family.

These ideas can be a springboard for parents of children from other backgrounds. Parents of African-American children can refer to the Hopson's book for many more excellent ideas in building pride in identity as Black children.

Belonging. African-American children's author Mildred Pitts Walter says in Black culture children are taught to understand not only "Who am I?" but also "Who are my people?" Black children and other children of color need this support to combat future hostility they may experience. Children of color need to know other children and adults who look like themselves and begin to

experience the strengths and richness of black heritage. Adoptive families can seek out activities and organizations in the ethnic communities where the whole family can feel comfortable and participate.

We must make this effort to put our children in contact with those who are of a similar background. Otherwise, they will be psychologically vulnerable for not understanding--and being proud of--a vital part of who they are, says social work professor Ruth McRoy, whose research specialty is transracial adoptions. Instead of feeling "different and wonderful," they may feel "different and awful."

Competence and purpose. As children master a positive understanding of their racial and cultural identity, they will develop a sense of social competence. With this competence, they will feel confident in who they are and how they can participate in different groups.

There is another darker purpose for building this social competence: We need to give them the skills to protect themselves against racism, even as toddlers. We can hold them up to the mirror, smile, and say, "You are beautiful. Be-you-tee-ful dark eyes and hair. Be-you-tee-ful skin." We can hold them close and say, "You are perfect just the way you are," just like Mr. Rogers does on T.V. Then if another child says, "I can't play with you because you're Black," our child will have a response ready: "My skin is beautiful," or "I'm perfect just the way I am." A somewhat older child primed to deal with just such a situation might respond, "That's not a reason not to play with me. Look, ya' gonna' play or not!"

With preparation, children will be ready to handle discriminatory comments. They may be hurt and angry, but hopefully they will not be emotionally devastated or permanently wounded.

Become an advocate. Look for a preschool where your children will find other playmates of color. Then become active in the parent group and work to bring in dolls, books, resource people, and cultural activities that celebrate cultural diversity in general, and your child's own heritage in particular. Introduce the teacher to anti-bias curriculum materials. Deal directly and firmly with incidents of overt or covert racism. Remember, your child's spirit is at stake.

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Low Self-Esteem in Children. It should be noted that on average self-esteem during childhood is found to be relatively high. However, there are individual differences and some children are unfortunate to experience feelings of low self-esteem. Children with low self-esteem rely on coping strategies that are counterproductive such as bullying, quitting, cheating, avoiding etc. Although all children will display some of these behaviors at times, low self-esteem is strongly indicated when these behaviors appear with regularity. Socially children with low self-esteem can be withdrawn or shy, and find it difficult to have fun. Beyond Self-Esteem: The Neglected Issues in Self-concept Research .Paper presented at the annual meetings of the ASA. Rosenberg, M. (1979). Conceiving the Self . The development of children's self-esteem is heavily influenced by their environment, that is, their homes, neighborhoods, and schools. Children with damaged self-esteem are at risk of developing psychological and social problems, which hinders recovery from low self-esteem. Self-esteem is the "feeling of self-appreciation" and is an indispensable emotion for people to adapt to society and live their lives. These results imply, however, that even children with many different issues can show improvement without necessarily improving self-esteem in all areas of life, that is, if their self-evaluations are augmented by acceptance by someone at home, school, or elsewhere.