

Responding to "Invisible" Racism

Daily macroaggressions can take a toll on our children over time. Here's how you can confront them.

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When I told my 27-year-old daughter about the column I was writing, she immediately muttered under her breath, “You don’t look like any Johnson I’ve ever seen before.” Her tone made it clear that she did not see the comment as funny or acceptable. As a [Korean adoptee](#) raised by white parents, I grew up hearing such comments all too frequently. My biracial daughter, though not an adoptee, faces the same. At best, this kind of “funny” or ignorant remark is tiresome; at worst, it’s a microaggression, a way to make someone feel wrong in her own skin.

The *cumulative* effect of such comments often goes unrecognized; after a while, the polite smile and nod, maybe an uncomfortable laugh, gets harder to force. And yet if the target of these comments — whether a transracial adoptee or a person of color — speaks up or appears offended, she’s told she’s “so sensitive” or “too politically correct.”

Balancing Your Worldview

Generally speaking, our society has gotten to the point where most people can agree that overt racism is wrong. Few would argue that segregation or using a racial slur is acceptable. But many more [subtle forms of racism](#) persist, and in fact are so ingrained in our culture and environment that they are often dismissed, or even minimized by blaming the target. White privilege, institutional racism, microaggressions, stereotypes (both negative and “positive”), bias — these behaviors routinely go unchecked due to fear and ignorance. As adoptive parents, fear and ignorance are not options.

So how do you start to dismantle this systemic oppression, this invisible racism? Is it really possible? Begin by looking through your child’s eyes. When your child looks at her environment, school, church, community events, books, toys, TV shows — does she see herself reflected? Does he see a variety of people who look the way he does? How are these people represented?

Begin to fill the gaps you see, discussing with your child what you are adding to or changing in your lives, and why. When you find books, toys, and TV shows that realistically represent people of color, point out the characters’ connections to your child and incorporate them into your life in a deliberate way. Building relationships with people of your child’s race will also help you process and understand these issues that are outside of your own life experience.

This kind of open commentary gives young children the language and permission to notice race and culture and to relate to them. “Colorblindness” is truly just blindness, not acceptance. It

teaches children that, if we don't notice something, it doesn't really matter. The same kind of people who insist on colorblindness may also argue that affirmative action or diversity hiring efforts are "reverse racism" or "unfair to white people."

Providing a balanced worldview is a challenge that all parents need to take on if real change is ever going to take place. Sadly, we live in a world that is riddled with examples of ignorance and racism. When college kids dress up in blackface, or celebrities parody Asian culture through stereotypical clothing, it's obvious we have not made the progress we had hoped for. Each time one of these incidents crops up, we must see it as an opportunity to discuss with our children the reasons why this behavior may be acceptable to some, but not to us. The discussion should include any ideas about what could or should be done in response.

Ensuring That Your Child Is Heard

When I work with adopted children in groups, they often tell me that they do not tell their parents about the daily microaggressions they experience. They are afraid that their parents will either overreact or minimize and dismiss their reality.

If you are fortunate enough to have the kind of relationship in which your child talks to you about these experiences, first and foremost, listen. Often, children will lead with something small to test you, before they confess the big thing that is really hurting them. When your child tells you about something painful, you instinctively want to make the pain stop. For your child, being heard, validated, and supported needs to come first, before any solutions can be found.

When you listen to your children's painful confessions, you will understand that negative comments they have heard are not forgotten, they do not roll off with ease. Instead, they are a multitude of small cuts that casts doubt on their sense of belonging, on their sense of being in the right place at the right time in the right skin. Without minimizing the hurt they feel, we need to remind ourselves, as well as teach our children, that racism is not a personal problem. It's not something that is easily fixable, but it is worth trying to dismantle one piece at a time.

Together, brainstorm responses that don't let offenders off the hook. "Why do you ask?" is often a good response, and it puts the spotlight back on the questioner. Or even more basic, don't laugh when a racist joke is told. Look at the teller quizzically, and say, "I don't get it. Sounds mean/stupid/racist to me." Come up with your own possible responses.

When, for the millionth time, someone remarks on my last name, I have a couple of choice responses. Some days, it's easiest to just say it's my married name. If the person who asks also has the last name Johnson, I might say, "Maybe we're related! There's definitely a family resemblance." (That leaves them puzzled.) My daughter chooses to stare and ask them to repeat what they said. More often than not, they just nervously look away and say nothing. If they persist, she explains that she is half Swedish and has relatives living in Sweden. (That typically throws them for a loop and they trail off.) Having to justify a perceived mismatch between your name and your face is just one of the daily microaggressions and ignorant interactions adoptees contend with from an early age. Sad to say, they won't be going away anytime soon, so let your kids know you're right there with them.

"What You Just Said Is Racist."

Responding to entrenched racism may require you to take a step back and explain to the offender why a comment or policy is, in fact, racist before you can start offering solutions. This is difficult to do without being perceived as a soapbox crusader, dismissed as an overprotective parent, or even labeled a "reverse racist." What you can do:

- **Pick your battles.** Most people of color will tell you that, if you take up the fight on every front, you will wear yourself out and become ineffective.
- **Consider where and when you choose to address the offender.** Calling out someone on a hurtful comment or behavior may cause an uncomfortable response or even an ugly backlash.
- **Don't assume.** Asking about the intention of a comment/behavior is a way to start this hard conversation. Even if the intent was not to hurt, your reaction is valid, so you might make an observation about how it made you feel.
- **Adjust your response as the situation warrants.** If something was said or done out of ignorance, educate rather than just confront. A "let's join together to make things better for all of our children" tone is generally well received. If something is very offensive or appears to be intentionally hurtful, of course, a stronger response may be called for.
- **Address comments head-on and anticipate protests.** "That bothers me" or "That's racist. You may think it's harmless and funny, but it's not. Maybe you think I'm over the top on this and I'm being too sensitive, and maybe I am, but please respect my feelings."
- **Build up your child with a firm foundation of knowledge about her roots, exposing her to people of her race and culture.** Be clear about her absolute right to be treated with respect.
- **Some systems are not fixable, and your child should not be a victim of a broken system.** If your child or family is targeted — either directly, or through exclusion — at school or church and the staff will not work with you to address it, find a new school or church where your child and your family will be accepted and supported.
- **Set limits.** As difficult as it may be, the same solution holds true for relationships. If you have a "repeat offender" in your circle of friends or family, you may need to say, "If you can't respect my feelings and my child's feelings about this, we're going to have to limit the time we spend together." So, whether or not they get it (and they may never "get it"), you can set limits.

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