TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION*

Adoption has been known to exist for thousands of years; but there have been changes in its concepts and purpose through the years, especially during the past quarter century. Adoptive practices must be flexible, and they must adapt to current needs, as well as to changes in philosophy. However, the basic aim of adoption must still remain the welfare of the child.

In the late 1930s, when there were many children but not many available homes, stress was placed on finding a perfect infant, and one who would most closely fit the physical characteristics of the adopting family. An effort was made to match ethnic background, skin color, and intellectual potential.

When the economy improved after World War II, more people were adopting children, and the supply of infants decreased. Emphasis was then shifted to the “perfect” adoptive home: white parents (almost exclusively), legally married, devout, respected in the community, and prosperous, but childless. Thus, the adoption stereotype remained—the “perfect” baby going to the “perfect” home.

The widespread use of contraceptive measures, liberalized abortion laws, and the decision by more white mothers to keep their out-of-wedlock infants caused the supply of “perfect,” adoptable babies to decrease further. At the same time, there was a rapid increase in so-called “hard to place” children: those who are nonwhite, those who are beyond infancy, and those who are physically or emotionally handicapped. Some children fall into two or more of these categories.

Agencies were not properly staffed to handle this large number of less wanted children, by far the greatest number of whom were nonwhite; the nonwhite children conservatively are estimated to be in the range of 40,000. Nonwhite means any child known not to have two Caucasian parents; it includes Negro, Indian, and Oriental. In this country black people are the largest group of nonwhites, and the term generally is interpreted to mean black. In this context, the child is considered black if he has any Negro ancestors. Many descriptive terms are used to indicate the child is black: Negro, black, part black, biracial, or racially mixed. These terms will be used interchangeably.

Because the largest number of transracial adoptions involve a black child and white parents, this discussion will center on the black-white adoptions, although the problems inherent in any transracial adoption are similar.

In some areas biracial children may comprise 50% of the nonwhite children needing adoptive homes. These children should not be considered the sole responsibility of the black community because the white parent of the biracial child up for adoption frequently is the one who has refused to accept him.

In response to the need for adoptive homes for black children, many methods have been tried: recruiting more black adoptive parents, single parent adoptions, permanent foster home care, and subsidized adoptions. But the most controversial, probably the most publicized, and soon to be the most studied method is transracial adoption.

ORGANIZED INTEREST IN TRANSRACIAL ADOPTIONS

A number of organizations have been formed because of concern for children who need adoption. These organizations are active in recruitment, in urging flexible alternatives which may be more appropriate, taking into account local situations and all other relevant facts.

* This statement has been reviewed and approved by the Council on Child Health, American Academy of Pediatrics.

The statements presented herein do not preclude

Executive Board, AAP

Pediatrics, Vol. 51, No. 1, January 1973
practices, and in supporting legislation to aid adoptive families.

The Open Door Society, formed in Montreal in 1959 by three families who had crossed racial lines in adoption, became a pioneering organization in this field. The aim of the Society is to promote the finding of homes for all children needing parents without regard to "racial background of either child or adoptive parents." The Open Door Society attempts to create a general interest in nonwhite children who are in need of homes through the use of news media, lectures, informative pamphlets, and stickers. The Society has many branches and affiliates throughout the United States and Canada. There are similar organizations dealing primarily with transracial adoptions, such as, Inter-Racial Adoptive Council, Transracially Adopting Parents, and Parents Who Have Adopted Transracially. Three international conferences on transracial adoption have been held: May 1969 in Montreal, November 1970 in Boston, and April 1972 in St. Louis. Homes for Black Children was one of the organizations created to stimulate interest in recruiting black parents for black children. The Council on Parents of Adoptable Children largely deals with any hard to place child. Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon (Opportunity) has a program whose aim is to broaden adoption opportunities for children of black ancestry. In addition, they compile comprehensive statistics on the number of black children adopted.

Boys and Girls Aid Society of Oregon figures for 1970 show that 2,300 black children were placed with white families; this was 35% of the black children adopted that year. As a comparison, in 1968 only 733 black children were placed with white families; this was 23% of the black children adopted that year. The number of black children adopted has increased by more than 50% in the past 2 years; and, the number of black children adopted by white parents has nearly tripled during this period. There are more than 10,000 families in the United States and Canada who have adopted transracially. Some families have more than one adopted child.

STUDIES OF TRANSRACIALLY ADOPTING FAMILIES

Numerous sociologic and psychologic studies of transracially adopting (TRA) families have been done. Falk compared 186 TRA parents with 170 inracially adopting (IRA) ones. His conclusions were that parents who adopt children of another race frequently do so for humanitarian reasons, while those adopting one of their own race do so to have a first or other child. Seventy percent of TRA couples already had a child in the home, compared with 32% of IRA parents. His study further showed TRA parents to be more educated and from a higher socioeconomic level than the IRA. The IRA parents had closer ties with families, while TRA parents were more detached from their families and involved in community and civic work.

Gerald St. Dennis reported on a study of 147 couples and two single women who adopted transracially. The adoptive fathers had a high degree of ego strength and the mother had liberal child-rearing attitudes. Priddy and Kirgan studied characteristics of 24 white couples in the San Francisco Bay area who adopted black-white children. Most of the fathers were professionals and most of the mothers concentrated on child rearing and did not work outside the home. Psychologically, transracially adopting families are likely to be self-confident and self-aware, and they tend to judge people as individuals. Most transracially adopted children are too young to express their view; and, the length of time of their adoption has been too short for comprehensive sociologic or psychologic study and reporting.

ADJUSTMENT OF THE TRA CHILD

The emotional, social, and psychologic effects on the black child in the white family are perhaps the most difficult to predict.
and certainly cause the most controversy. Comments range from those who deny any problems and try to ignore the fact that skin color makes a difference in this country, to those who adamantly argue that there can never be a coexistence of black and white in a parent-child relationship without destroying the identity of the child and sacrificing his ability to adjust in a society that is so distinctly polarized into black and white.

Persons who have adopted transracially or are in close association with transracially adopting families tend to approve of the practice; those who have had no contact with transracially adopting families usually disapprove.

Indeed, there are many special problems in transracial adoptions. Although teaching the child black history and black culture and emphasizing the contributions of black people is important, the attitudes of the child's daily contacts will probably have more bearing on his adjustment than pictures of nationally known blacks hanging in his room. The parents' unspoken attitudes and feelings toward black people may be the critical component in determining how the child will develop his identity as he matures into adulthood.

Numerous questions arise in the minds of all adopted children, but the following are peculiar to the black child growing up in a white family:
1. Is he a substitute for an unavailable white child?
2. Do both parents have unqualified agreement in accepting him as a member of their family?
3. Is there a difference in the way their friends and associates treat him?
4. If there are biologic children or white adopted children, do the parents make a difference in their demands and rewards?
5. Do his parents consider his adoption as their way of meeting a need of society, or of relieving their guilt for past inequities against his ancestors?

These questions will be answered differently by each child in the black-white family relationship.

CONCLUSIONS

Transracial adoption must allow the child a chance to grow up confident that, though he was not born into this family and may have external features that are different—as well as a different cultural heritage—he is loved and accepted for what he is, an individual.

In our haste to get black children out of institutions and into adoptive homes, we must not lose sight of the primary goal of any adoption—the welfare of the child. This goal must receive the highest priority. Placement must be made to provide the child with an opportunity to grow up in a wholesome family setting that will offer the affection, security, and understanding needed for his best development. Unless we adhere to this goal, rather than to a social, humanitarian, psychologic, or other ego-strengthening motive of the parents, the child will surely be sacrificed to the popular movement of his day.

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