

11. The Importance of Your Child's Cultural and Racial Heritage

Whether or not a child's ethnicity matches that of his family, knowing something about where he came from is important to his figuring out who he is, and to his self-esteem. Those of us who adopt internationally have the dual responsibility of teaching our sons and daughters about their adopted country while also helping them to retain roots in their country of birth.

In most cases, our adoptions of foreign-born children will be apparent to others because the racial or ethnic differences between the parents and child will be visible. To paraphrase Cheri Register's excellent book, *Are Those Kids Yours?*, this will raise the question, "What are you?" Our children should know enough about Vietnam, China, Russia, or Guatemala to answer comfortably and with pride, even in the face of an insensitive question or comment.

Now's the time

During the wait for a referral, the time is ripe to learn about our children's place of birth. Learning about another country is as easy as reading, watching movies and television shows, exploring the Internet, experimenting with the country's cuisine, and participating in cultural events that highlight our child's birthplace.

We can buy many items that become a living treasury of his or her birth culture: books, music, videotapes, dolls, toys, clothing, language instruction tapes, and lovely decorative objects for your home. These, along with culture camps and other opportunities for the child to meet others of similar background, foster your child's pride in his origins. (Your child should have two short given names, one from each country, that he can link together or choose between at various times in his life, depending on current preference.)

As our children mature and seek further knowledge of their birth country, we will be able to aid them in their

quest because we will have already traveled the road ahead of them. By providing our children with two cultural foundations – birth and adoptive – we will give them the gifts of knowing where they came from and of belonging to two cultures.

Helpful support groups

There are support groups for adoptive families that either focus on the particular cultural background of our children or "create a rainbow." (See the Resource Guide for information on how to locate a parent support group.)

If you adopt a child of another race, it is essential that you cultivate his or her friendships with other children of color. They certainly need not be of the same nationality, since young children of color are much more conscious of their tan or brown skins (and the "difference" that this represents) than they are of geography.

Any child's difference from most other children becomes less uncomfortable for him, and seems more natural, if he has friendships with others who are different in the same way, whether it be in color or race or nationality, and who may also be adopted like him. (Children become conscious of race around the age of two or three.)

Formal and informal adoption support groups are a natural place for such friendships to flourish. Consider starting (or reviving) such a group in your area with the help of another adoptive parent or couple, if you can't find one that is active enough to make a difference to you and your child. Fern Leslie, who helped revive the Berkshire County Chapter of the Open Door Society of Massachusetts, was amazed at the tremendous boost in self-esteem on the part of her Latin American and Asian Indiana children when they began socializing on a regular basis with other dark-skinned adopted children who also had white parents. Such a group will also help you as parents. Your family will be one of many "different" families, and you'll come to feel less alone.